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THE SHARK GOD'S CHILD

by Jonathan Edelstein

When Mei was six, the island of Dakuwanga awoke and was no more.

She was on the beach collecting driftwood when it happened. One minute there was sand under her feet; the next, there was flesh, moist and slick. It moved, and the land above her also moved, shaking off rocks and trees, fern-leaf houses, boats, people.

There was screaming: it took a moment, but there was screaming, and Mei realized that one of the voices crying out was her own. She was running, too; she didn't remember starting to run, but she was in full flight.

Her village was a quarter-mile further along the shore; her parents were there, and she saw boats putting out to sea. For a brief moment, she thought she should run there. But what had been the island was moving faster, and all the dirt and trees and stones that had stood on higher ground were bearing down on her. She ran in the only direction that offered hope of escape, and when she reached the water, she swam for her life.

There were others in the water, and a noise that sounded like the world ending, but Mei only looked back once. The island was all flesh now; the jagged outcropping that rose from its highest point was a great shark-fin, and the promontory on the far shore had become a narrow head with inset eyes and rows of teeth. And then it jumped.

Dakuwanga's roots had reached deep under the ocean to the fires beneath, but now they rose from the water and made a great arc above it. The shark-god that had been stone for so many years hung hundreds of feet overhead, shaking off the few clumps of earth that remained, and plunged into the depths.

It entered the water the opposite direction from the one in which Mei had fled, and for a second she knew relief as the bow-wave sped away from her. But the wave that came toward her, though not as high, was still immense, and it carried the remains of forests and villages. She wanted to pray for her life, but her god was the one that had visited this on her, so she cried out once to whoever might hear and dove as deep as she could.

The rushing water surrounded her, and she was stung by branches and battered by stones. Her vision came in flashes, and twice she saw bodies in the tangle, already beginning to bloat with death. The branch of a breadfruit tree was in her

hand and she clung to it for dear life, waiting for the tree-trunk or roof-beam that would end her life.

But it never came, and the wave was past her as suddenly as it had come, leaving her afloat in calm waters. Behind her, Dakuwanga was gone as if it—he—had never been.

There were a few other people in the sea, and a few outriggers that had somehow survived the wave. Mei knew she should make for one of the boats, but she felt paralyzed, and besides, she would never be able to catch them. One did come close enough for her to hear a man ask the cause of the catastrophe and a woman's anguished voice answer, "Deleur, Deleur." That was a name she had heard once before, whispered in fear by her mother, but she didn't know if it was place, person, or god, and the boat was past before she could hear anything more.

She drifted for a time as the sun rose toward zenith, and the shark came.

It was a great white, as Dakuwanga had been, and Mei cried out against the unfairness of it all: why had she survived the shark-god's awakening if her fate was only to be eaten by one of his children? But the shark didn't bite. It swam under her and then leaped out of the water, and did the same again. At the edge of her vision, she saw that other sharks had come to the swimmers and the people in the boats, jumping and playing

like porpoises, almost as if they wanted to lead the people away. No, they *were* leading the people away.

Mei, still clinging to the branch, followed after her shark, and as she did, she saw that the others were being led in different directions. The shark-god was showing mercy to those he had spared, but the people of Dakuwanga would exist no more except in memory. She wondered if her parents had survived, but knew she would never learn.

For eleven days the currents carried her. The shark brought fish, and she opened her mouth to catch the warm rain. By day she looked for signs of land, and at night she saw that there was a new constellation in the southern sky; the shark-lord had returned to the stars.

On the twelfth day, Mei came to shore.

* * *

“Wake up, Driftwood Child,” called Maora.

Mei was sleeping, but she stirred at the sound of her foster-mother’s voice. She became conscious of the palm-leaf matting on the floor, the smell of the sea on the morning breeze, the warmth of the sun.

“Wake up, Driftwood Child.” This time the voice belonged to Antsolaoka, her foster-father. “This is your naming day.”

She came fully awake, and realized all at once how high the sun was. A wave of shame washed through her for sleeping so

late, on this of all days. But neither Antsolaoka nor Maora looked displeased, and the feeling left her as soon as it had come.

“Go to the beach and bathe,” her foster-father said. “The *hiragasy* isn’t until sunset.”

“What name will you choose?” Maora asked.

“It’s bad luck to say before the gathering,” said Mei. In truth, she didn’t know. Nothing had come to her during the years she’d worked on the family fishing boat. Nothing had come in dreams; nothing had come when she stood at the edge of Vohitra village and gazed up at the stone face of Antriatonony the Noble Poet, the god who was this island. There were ways that children chose their names, and none of them had found her.

She pulled a plain cotton smock over her head and let Maora give her a strip of dried fish as she walked outside. This late in the morning, the village was alive with activity: pigs and golden chickens rooted between the houses, and people in conical hats and patterned cotton robes went about their business.

The people were golden brown, not black as Mei was, and their eyes were brown where hers were the color of the sea; somehow, in the past six years, she had stopped looking on them as strange. Their clothing was also no longer strange to

Mei, but she still remembered that it once had been. Few on Dakuwanga had been able to afford to buy cotton from the traders, let alone cloth so richly dyed, and few had owned the cowrie-shell necklaces and greenstones that the villagers in Vohitra had. But this island had Andriatonony's flute—the iron deposits that men dug from under the mountain—and it had made them rich.

The beach wasn't far away. The family *lakana* was there amid a row of other fishing boats, and at a distance from them, a merchant outrigger from Deleur moored with an iron chain. It looked like an ordinary chain to Mei, but the stories said that Deleur chains could bind gods.

As it always did, the word "Deleur" came to Mei in the anguished voice she'd heard on the day her homeland was destroyed. She knew now what Deleur was and where: it was an island like any other, the stone shape of a god. But it had caused Dakuwanga's downfall somehow, and she feared what its people might do.

She wasn't the only one who feared. Others on Andriatonony lowered their voices when they spoke of Deleur, or spoke of it not at all. But it was one of the few islands that knew the secret of working iron, and its merchants paid well for the metal their smiths desired. Their fleet was strong, too, and its boats carried many feather-clad warriors. So they were

suffered to come, even when they swaggered through Vohitra like conquerors, even when they claimed that the gods deserved no offerings.

The gods... The thought made Mei gaze upward to where Andriatonony's face looked out from the stone. He was the noble poet, and he had become this island in the distant past as the shark-god had become her birthplace. There were hundreds of stories of the far travels and heroic deeds he had done before he became stone, of the enemies and demons and even gods he had charmed with his *vyantsohy*, his iron flute.

She looked to one side where trees grew from the poet's shoulders and up to where smoke rose from the mountain, the smoke of the furnace where his flute had melted. She would have to add to his songs today. Andriatonony's name meant "noble words," and words were the offering that pleased him. At the end of the song, she would choose her name, and she looked back to his face, willing both to come.

But neither song nor name came to her.

At length she laid her smock down on her family's *lakana* and went into the sea to bathe. Maybe, she thought, she wouldn't choose a name at all. Some people kept their childhood names: her foster-father had been named Antsolaoka, Fish-Caller, at three, and it had suited him so well that he still bore it. But who would want to go through life as

Driftwood Child? She dove, letting the water cleanse her; she broke the surface and shook it off, and then dove again. She was ten feet down, twenty, thirty; the sea surrounded her, and it seemed that the land was far away.

The great white shark came to her then.

Mei knew she should be afraid, but something told her that she had nothing to fear, even as it swam closer. It might have been the shark that guided her to this island or it might have been some other, but she somehow knew it wouldn't devour her, and suddenly it was carrying her.

When she broke the surface again, she was clinging to the shark's back, and it was moving faster than any shark should go. She rode through waters she had come to know in six years of working on her foster-father's *lakana*; she passed islets that had been fish, great ancestors, legendary boats, minor gods. In the distance was the eel-demon that Andriatonony had silenced forever; beyond it was Ambiko, the crab-god where seabirds roosted. She had been there many times with her father and left offerings of fish in exchange for guano to nourish her mother's garden.

The shark said nothing as it brought Mei once around Andriatonony's stone body, and it said nothing when it left her where she began, but she felt that something had passed between them, and when it left a tooth behind, she knew it was

a gift. She swam down and down, catching it in her hand just before she reached the bottom—and suddenly, she was sure of what name she wanted.

When she returned to the house, it was nearly time to go to the *hiragasy*. She donned a robe of blue and black, a hat of woven straw, and a necklace of worked copper wrapped around obsidian from far Maiana; she walked with her foster-parents up the mountain trail, and others sang of Andriatonony as they joined the procession.

Not everyone did. There were young men who listened to the merchants from Deleur and praised no one but themselves; they looked on and whispered darkly. But they did nothing, and the gathering left them behind.

Mei reached the top of the mountain as dusk fell. The islanders had brought torches, but they had no more need of them: the fires within the mountain bathed the scene in an eerie light. The sound of wooden flutes began, and then drums, but there were no more voices; it was an *androanara*, a naming-day, and there could be no words tonight before hers.

As the first star came out, the *mpandaro*, the maker of days, brought her to the very edge and called to her to begin. The song came naturally now. Mei sang a navigation-chant such as merchants or fishermen used, but instead of naming the stars that guided journeys across the sea, she sang of how

Andriatonony used landmarks in the ocean to guide him as he traveled among the stars. In the song, the poet circled the zodiac and faced its perils in turn, and finally, wounded near to death, looked down on the place in the sea where he would come to rest. “And there,” she sang, finishing as all naming-songs did, “is the island of Mei.”

“Mandihi!” cried the maker of days, and the others broke into song and dance. They thought nothing of the name Mei: it was foreign, but so was she, and even her foster-parents had known her only as Driftwood Child. Only she knew she was reclaiming the name she’d been given at birth.

Even that morning, she would never have dared. When an island returned to the stars, when a god spurned his people in anger, their names and their history were to be abandoned. But today, the shark-god had told Mei that she was still one of his children, and her birth-name still had a purpose.

“Deleur,” she heard again, and she clutched the shark-tooth in her hand. But the word faded, and Mei danced down the mountain trail that Driftwood Child had climbed.

* * *

Mei rode into Nanao the Bird-Dragon on the back of a great white. Behind her were the three outriggers of the Saudagar Fleet: eighty feet long with carved dragons on their prows and red stars painted on their sails, laden with iron and

gold and spices and dyed cloth. And around them were others mounted on porpoises and smaller sharks and dwarf whales, armed as Mei was with blowguns and bone javelins and iron-tipped spears.

Her skin was weathered from the sea-spray, and she sat well on her mount. The floating caravans hadn't been her ambition when she was young, but soon after her naming-day, she'd learned that she could call sharks as well as ride them. Shark-callers were rare, and those trained to oratory on Andriatonony even rarer, and the fleets always needed guards. The Saudagars had come the year after her naming and they'd offered apprenticeship and good pay; Antsolaoka told her she could go, so she had gone.

And she had learned. She'd learned to dive when pirates fired their arrows and leap above the water to attack them with javelins. She'd learned to smear poison on her spear and strike at sea-serpents before they could close around the outriggers and crush them. She'd learned to ride through the fierce seasonal storms and navigate the open ocean; she'd learned to buy and sell. And most of all, she'd learned the sea-roads.

The fleet had taken her to Heiau Hiva where Lele's Necklace—gold—was taken from the ground. She'd gone to Leho for copper, and to far Pasik where the upland tribes brought hides to trade for fish and shells. She'd guarded the

fleet when it traded for copra among the atolls of the south: low-lying islands that wound around lagoons, made by eel-gods or sea snakes or the arms of ancient heroes. Some of them, unlike the mountainous islands, still stirred; on Anumea, her fellow guard Kulu had shown her the cave from which a forked tongue, gray as stone but warm to the touch, felt the air. They'd given it a slaughtered pig as a trade-offering; the natives of the island, so they said, offered it their enemies.

The next year, Anumea wasn't there.

"They say that an island wakes once in a hundred years," Kulu said. "Always, more islands have been made than have vanished. But now, in twelve years, nine of them have gone."

"Why are they so angry?" Mei asked, but Kulu had no answer. It was a refugee on the next island, Niatupu, who told them: "The sorcerers learned a spell from Deleur, and they thought they could bind the god, but he woke before they were finished."

The year after, Niatupu too had returned to the stars. Since then, news of islands vanishing had come to the fleets almost constantly; most had disappeared in the wrath of spurned gods, and a few had joined Deleur's growing empire and vanished just as surely. The spirit of Dakuwanga, her lost god and homeland, seemed always to be in front of Mei now as she traveled, and it accompanied her even to Nanao Port.

Nanao seemed like it could never vanish. It was the largest island Mei had ever seen, and the harbor beyond the fringing reef guarded a walled city rather than a village. The breeze carried the acrid smell of smithies and tanneries, and hundreds of longhouses stood among taro fields and rice paddies on the lower slopes of the Bird-Dragon's wings. Above them, under the sandstone beak and plumes, the houses of the dead rose on stilts and the heads of enemy warriors on tall poles. The stories said that the Bird-Dragon was the first of the gods to make a home in the ocean, that her people were the ancestors of all others; the carved wooden chronicles that hung outside the longhouses went back thousands of years. If anyplace in the world was permanent, Nanao was.

And yet, when the fleet made landfall, the vanishings were all that anyone talked about. The black city people with white hair and red-stained teeth; the red-brown, scarred highlanders; foreigners of a hundred shades and shapes—all of them spoke of nothing but gods waking and islands drowning and the boats from Deleur that brought warriors and magicians. “The gods have all tired of us,” said a bearded ancient who sat by a rattan door; inside, others chewed betel nut for mindfulness and warmth. “They’re all waking up, and when the sea is empty again, they’ll start over. They told me this in a dream.”

“Nonsense,” said another voice, and Mei turned to see another of the caravan guards. He’d joined them at the last island and she hadn’t yet learned his name. He carried his weapons as if born to them but was of no nation she knew. His hair was black as hers and his eyes as blue; his skin was lighter than the city-dwellers’ but darker than the people of Andriatonony or the atolls; the scar patterns on his back and face were more intricate than even a highland sorcerer’s. The swirling scars seemed familiar somehow, but she had never seen a person who bore them.

“Why is it nonsense?” Mei’s voice was light, but there was an edge of fear in it. “So many islands have returned to the stars—why not all of them?”

“Because each one had a reason. People didn’t want to submit to their gods, but were too weak to overthrow them.”

“Is anyone strong enough for that?”

“Some are. Some wish they were, and don’t have the patience to wait.”

She looked at his patterns again, and suddenly realized where she’d seen them—one of the young men on Andriatonony had carved them on a whalebone necklace. “You are from...”

“I am Nan Sapwe, of Deleur.”

Something in the name sounded like gods casting off their worshipers, and Mei wanted to recoil from the black magic within it. But she couldn't. No one from Deleur traveled alone, and no one from Deleur served on foreign fleets; what was different about this one, and what secrets might he tell?

They were at the door of a kava-house, and on impulse, she took Nan Sapwe's hand and led him in. There was a smoke inside that made her feel like she was swimming deep underwater, and she felt a numbness on her lips as they drank the kava. She knew these pleasures often led to others.

"They say that you've bound your god," she said, "and that you do things to people's minds so they want to bind theirs. Are you doing that to me?"

"If I were, would you be able to ask?" Nan Sapwe smiled through the smoke, and the patterns of his facial scars stretched and moved. "But we have bound the Turtle-Mother, yes. And we've shared the spell, yes. And some people were impatient, or didn't want to pay our price."

There were many things Mei wanted to say, but her mouth would only form one. "Why?"

"That is how we conquer. And why should we live at the gods' whim? Many of the islands were heroes once, so we all have it in us to be gods. My own family counts a god among its

ancestors—I have stone in my blood, so why should I bow to stone?”

“So people should bow to you instead—or destroy themselves.”

Nan Sapwe said nothing, and the silence hung in the air for a long moment. “Maybe,” he said at last, “that’s why I didn’t sail with the Deleur fleet.”

“Why not?”

“Our sorcerers don’t care if other islands destroy themselves—that’s more power for them to drink. Weak people are fuel for them, or slaves.”

“And you?”

“I want to make people strong—strong as the gods.” He met her eyes. “Do you want a child with a god’s blood?”

Her face moved through the smoke toward his, and she was no more afraid of him than she’d been of the shark. The words of his question echoed in the room, and she willed an answer; even through kava and smoke, she knew the will was hers. Her lips were still numb when they met his, and Mei felt as if she were in another body; what followed passed as in a dream.

The next morning, business done, the Saudagar Fleet sailed from Nanao, Mei among the guards on its left and Nan Sapwe on the right. She wasn’t sure what had happened, or if

anything had; it seemed to have been long ago in another place. It had vanished almost as her homeland had.

That day they met pirates. These came in four long, single-trunk canoes, and they attacked the caravan from two sides, shooting flaming arrows at its sails. Mei had been in a hundred such battles, and her response came on a level below the conscious. She guided her shark down and down, where the pirates' missiles couldn't reach her, and then, as it leaped up and over their boats, she rained javelins on them from above. She and the other guards attacked again and again; if the pirates kept shooting at the men on the fleet, they were defenseless against her, and if they cast aside their bows to deal with the mounted guards, the outrigger crews rained arrows and stones on them. If the pirates could close, they could storm the trading ships, but they couldn't close quickly enough, and they fled.

But that night, the fleet stopped at Sitang-Sitang, where it would trade for feathers on the morrow, and that night the pirates attacked again. Mei awakened to torchlight and shouting and the clash of weapons, and on land she was no warrior. She parried a blow with her spear, but then a pirate knocked it out of her hand and she felt something heavy hit her on the head. Another pirate stabbed down with a sword, and Mei—who hadn't realized she had fallen—twisted desperately

to avoid it. The pirate stabbed again, and this time he would have killed her had not someone taken the blow. He fell on her heavily, dead as he hit the ground, and with the little capacity for surprise that was left in her, she realized that he was Nan Sapwe.

“More men are coming from the village,” said a voice.

“Take the prisoners we have,” said another. “The Deleur will pay for them.”

And so, in her nineteenth year, Mei came as a captive to Deleur, and so—although she didn’t yet know it—did the daughter she carried.

* * *

From where Mei stood on the peninsula called the Turtle-Mother’s Head, she could see all of Temwen. In the distance, the Sentinels—the line of standing stones that bore the shapes of the warriors they had been—rose from the sea. Just inside them was the fringing reef, and inside *that*, the stone islets of the city.

There had been seventy islets when Mei came to Deleur six years ago. There were more than eighty now. The *aliki*, the nobles of Deleur, would never be done building their city: they always wanted more platforms for their palaces, more storehouses for tribute, more training grounds for the

feathered warriors, more stone pyramids to house their dead. And that meant they would always want more slaves.

“Get moving, get moving!” shouted an overseer; he wore the turtle-shell badge of his rank, but like all taskmasters, he was nameless. He spoke in Yalam, the trading language, which was the only one the slaves had in common. “You’ve had long enough to eat. Get down there!”

The voice brought Mei out of her contemplation, and she went to join the line of workers walking down to the shore. Kelek, her daughter, ran to her side. At five, Kelek had eyes the color of basalt and subtle patterns on her skin that might almost have been marble; she sang at odd moments, and she noticed everything.

At the beach, there was stone to be placed, stone to be cut. Mei joined the gang that would float the stones on logs to the foundations where they would rest. Kelek went to help the stone-shapers. It was still a game to her, but she did the work of someone three times her age; she had an instinct for where the stone would fracture and how the cuts should be made. “She has stone in her blood,” the ghost of Nan Sapwe seemed to say.

Mei could dive deep and stay under the sea long; that was what made *her* a valued slave. The log raft reached its destination, and the gang took away some of the logs so the

stone would sink; she swam underneath and guided it so that when the other logs were untied, it would fit in its underwater place precisely. She stayed a moment among the colorful fish and the innermost bunches of coral, but only a moment; there would be many more stones to place before the platform was finished.

When she came up, her eyes fell on the Sentinels. She had learned early that they were more than what they seemed. In her first month on Deleur, she had called a shark and tried to ride it away, but the Sentinels had stirred and the stone and reef moved to bar her way. “They have the Turtle-Mother’s power,” an old slave had told her that night. “When the sorcerers bound the god, they bound the Sentinels too—they took the fire that fed the Turtle-Mother and gave it to them.”

“They made the Sentinels into gods?”

“No. They made them slaves, as we are. The Sentinels serve the *aliki* as the soldiers and war-dogs do.”

Mei remembered as she went to guide another piece of shaped stone, and another after that.

That afternoon, there was a new man in the gang. He’d built a *maneaba*, a gathering-house, on one of the platforms, but it was finished and he wasn’t needed there anymore.

“Do you have a name?” the foreman asked.

“Rakotomalala.”

Mei's heart skipped a beat, because that was a name from Andriatonony. When she could, she whispered to him in that language, and when he answered, she asked "how are you a slave?"

"I was part of the sorcerers' price for their spell. Fifty men."

"Did the young ones cast the spell? Did the poet wake?"

"No. There was a great *hiragasy*, and some sang against the poet and others sang in his praise. The rebels were outnumbered, even among the youth, and when the *hiragasy* became a battle, they were beaten. The sorcerers took them too."

"All of them are slaves?"

"That's what the lords of Deleur do. They make slaves—what they do to gods, they do to people. It's as the maker of days said in his song: others' sacrifice is their power."

Others' sacrifice. Suddenly, what Mei had always felt about Temwen became clear. The gods, the beasts, the heroes that had made themselves into islands had all made a sacrifice; in return for their power and the offerings they were given, they had to accept the form of stone. All the homelands were made of sacrifice. All except Temwen, which had never been god or hero. The Deleur made no offerings for their homeland

and gave nothing of themselves for it; instead, they wrung it from enslaved people and chained gods.

“Maybe the old man on Nanao was right,” she thought. “Maybe the gods *will* tire of us, if this is what we do.”

The thought carried her to the day’s ending, as the dying sun’s light shone through the rippling water and the last stone was set in place. She let go of the log and swam to the beach, to collect Kelek and go up to where the communal meal was waiting. But Kelek wasn’t with the stonemasons, and no one knew where she’d gone. Mei shouted her name and, when there was no answer, began to search. With growing anxiety, she looked around the yards and houses and the clumps of bush around the shoreline, and finally the water.

No sooner had Mei dove into the lagoon than she saw Kelek in the distance. A great white shark was with her, and it was playing around her as another of its kind had done with Mei long ago.

Mei swam to her daughter and pulled her to the surface. “Have you seen the shark before?” she asked.

“He comes to play with me sometimes.”

“Have you told anyone?” But even as Mei asked the question, she realized how little it mattered. The sorcerers would find out soon enough, and when they learned that Kelek was a shark-caller as well as a stoneblood, they would kill her.

There were valuable slaves, and then there were dangerous ones.

She had no thought other than that she must protect her daughter. She took Kelek in her arms, set her eyes on the Turtle-Mother's mountain, and ran.

* * *

Mei ran through taro fields. Nohnowei, the Turtle-Mother's shell, rose before her. No Sentinels stood in her way; they guarded the sea, not the land. The Deleur hadn't thought that any of their slaves might escape by land. The warriors and the dogs would chase them, and where would they go?

The peasants in the fields watched her pass, but they also did nothing. They weren't slaves, but their lot was little better, and the tribute-houses in Temwen groaned with their produce. And no one, except one cursed, would run as Mei did, and a fugitive under a curse was beyond the reach of the taro farmers. She belonged to the *aliki* and the sorcerers, and they wouldn't be far behind. The farmers feared the summit of the Nohnowei—even with the god bound, they feared it—so she might find sanctuary there, but first she would have to reach it.

The fields were gone and the rainforest enclosed her. The light that filtered through the canopy was a lush green, softening the sharper green of the leaves and undergrowth. There were no paths, and the way was impassable; only the

fast-moving streams provided a way onward. The stones of the streambeds cut her feet, and she feared with every step that she would fall, but maybe the water would mask her scent from the war-dogs and maybe the bird-calls would cover her cries.

Nan Sapwe had told her of this country, and it was as beautiful and fearful as he had related; the forest seemed ethereal, but it was filled with the terror that followed wherever slavery went, the fear of the hunted. She wondered which of the *aliki* would lead the pursuit. There were seven in the stone city, and no doubt they were donning their turtle-shell armor and feather plumes. They were rivals for glory, and that might delay the chase, but what glory was there in recapturing a runaway slave?

She climbed higher, and her head was light with exhaustion, but then she heard the war-dogs' barking. The living *ounmatakai*, the watchmen of the land, and they had found her scent. There was more barking, and the sounds of pursuit, and now human voices had joined them.

Mei was frozen for an instant, but she looked at her daughter and saw Nan Sapwe's face in hers. "Run," he seemed to say, so she scooped Kelek in her arms and ran.

The gullies were steep and the footing treacherous, and her breath came heavy as she fled uphill with her daughter's weight on her shoulders, but she knew that if she stopped for

an instant, she would fall. The dogs were barking behind her, their voices closer and closer; they were surer-footed on the mountains than she, and the sorcerer had cast his spells over them.

She tripped. There was an outcropping in the rock that she hadn't seen, and she fell and tumbled. She felt the rock cut her, but it hardly mattered. She would never get up before the dogs were on her. She cradled Kelek, protecting her from the fall. "Run!" she whispered, pointing up the mountain, but her daughter stood rooted, refusing to leave her.

She rolled onto her side to place herself between the oncoming hounds and Kelek and saw the first of the dogs, his coat gleaming and his eyes intent. Out of nowhere, she remembered a song that the farmers had sung when they brought food to the slaves' camp, a song about the Turtle-Mother's dogs who had protected their people. With no weapon left other than her voice, she sang, and waited for the dog to spring and bite.

But he didn't. He listened to the song, and he keened strangely.

The other dogs were there too, though she hadn't seen them come, and they were ranged in silence about the first one. Maybe he was their king: the Sopukidi, the Lord of Dogs! The

farmers' song said that the dogs had a king, as humans did; could she hope that he had become the sorcerers' enemy?

She heard voices below, human voices, full of consternation over the sudden silence. "Go north, Sopukidi," she said. "Lead them north, away from me. The sorcerers will never know."

The dog looked at her. Its jaws hung open, and its teeth were inches from her face. It would bite her now, surely, and she closed her eyes. But then the hot breath on her face was gone. She opened her eyes and the dogs were gone too. She could hear them running and barking, headed down the mountain.

She and Kelek stayed the night where they lay, where the warriors could not see, and the next morning, they reached the summit.

How like a turtle the island looked from these heights: even the forests and fields were like the patches on its shell. Mei tried to remember the peasants' stories of the Turtle-Mother; there were tales of others who had found sanctuary on the peak, and they were said to have spoken to the god and become prophets.

But what the stories hadn't said was how those heroes had survived their journey. There was water up here, but Mei had no wood-lore; she was a child of the sea, and she didn't know

how to hunt or what plants might poison her. Surely she and Kelek hadn't survived the chase only to be forced back down by starvation.

"Can you ask her?" Mei said to Kelek on the third day.

"She is bound."

"But she lives. You have stone in your blood—maybe she'll listen if you talk to her."

"What should I ask?"

Mei remembered that Kelek was only five years old, but maybe the best question was one that might come from a child.

"Ask how we can be free."

Kelek walked to a spring that emerged from the mountainside and murmured something to it as she sat. A few minutes later, she returned.

"Did the Turtle-Mother say anything?"

"She said we can be free, if everyone is." Kelek looked back at the spring, as if she'd expected the god to say more. "What does that mean?"

Something came together in Mei at her daughter's words—not realization but the feeling that she'd known this all along. They could only be free if everyone was freed—the slaves, the Turtle-Mother, the Deleur. And if that were to happen, she would have to return to Temwen. There would have to be a

great *hiragasy*, as there had been on Andriatonony, and there would be a war.

Mei looked down again to where the Turtle-Mother's head faced the harbor, and it held no more fear for her. Nan Sapwe's face came to her again. *I want to make people strong*, she remembered him saying, *strong as the gods*. He could have sailed with the Deleur fleets and been a great warrior, but he'd fought for something else instead: for people who would be slaves of neither gods nor men. He had died for that—he'd died for *her*—and if need be, she could die for the slaves and for her stone-blooded daughter.

The summit hadn't made her a prophet, but maybe it had given her the courage to do what she'd always known she must. As she made the first steps down, she was already composing her song.

She returned at nightfall, slipping into the village easily. There were guards, but they were keeping watch against escape and not return, and a gathering storm in the west drew their attention and their fear. She appeared by the fire as if she were a ghost, and she sang as Driftwood Child had been trained to do. She sang of sacrifices made and gifts returned, and of the sorcerers who made no sacrifice of their own but stole that of others. She sang of reparation for the theft, and of the heroes they would be if they seized that reparation—heroes who would

have the strength of the gods, as heroes had since time immemorial.

One by one, the slaves came to hear, and because any who returned from Nohnowei were prophets, they listened. And as the *hiragasy* ended, and as lightning flashed in the western sky, there was war.

They were slaves, but some of them had been soldiers, and there were things they could use as weapons: stone chisels, hammers, knives. There were also many more of them than there were guards. The men standing watch over the village were dispatched without a word.

“Go now!” Mei urged, pointing down the slope to the water. “We must be like pirates. We have to be quick, or the warriors will slaughter us.” As she spoke, she ran. She looked back just once to where Kelek stood holding an old woman’s hand, and she plunged into the lagoon to join the assault on the city.

She swam, heedless of rain and lightning, and willed a shark to come. Suddenly, one was underneath, and she seized it and leaped over the nearest of the stone platforms. There were two feathered warriors standing there, and though she had no javelins, she had sharpened sticks which had been hardened in the fire. She threw one and then two, and as she

entered the water again, other slaves scrambled up to take the islet.

She leaped again to carry the battle further, and then a third time. But behind her, the assault was faltering. There was little shelter on the islets, and closer to the center of the city, the *aliki* were organizing a defense. They shot arrows and slings through the rain, and put down wooden bridges to retake the outer platforms. From the *maneaba*, Mei heard sonorous words: the wizards were preparing a spell.

The slaves fought back. They attacked the bridges and sought the islets that were left undefended, and they seized the fallen warriors' weapons and shields. But Mei saw that it wouldn't be enough. Too many of them were falling, and the wizards' magic was building.

She broke the surface where the oldest of the slaves was rallying the fight, and found Kelek there. "We need the Turtle-Mother," she said. "Go back to her head. Speak to her. I will go to the Sentinels and unbind her."

"But if she wakes, the island will go, and all of us with it."

"Speak to her. Her freedom for ours, her sacrifice for ours. A gift given and a gift returned. You have stone in your blood, Kelek. With this, all of us will."

Kelek looked back to the Turtle-Mother's Head where the slaves' camp had been. Without another word, she dove into

the water, and the others followed. Mei turned her face once to the storm, and then she went deep.

The great white carried her down, further than she had ever been, where the fading colors were strange and the waters threatened to crush her. The reef was in front of her, and then it was behind her, and she saw: she saw the places where the Sentinels had blocked the Turtle-Mother's liquid fire and taken it for themselves. And now the shark dove into the rock itself. The Sentinels were far apart, and surely she could never reach all of them, but suddenly she could, and the fire flowed again as it had before the wizards had stopped it.

On shore, the Turtle-Mother's head stirred: first an inch, then a foot, and suddenly it was flesh. Her great beak stretched over the stone city and swallowed it whole: the feather-clad warriors, the *aliki*, the wizards and their spell. And then—as Mei somehow saw from under the world—it came back to the shore, and was stone again.

On the island, above the lagoon where the city was no more, the slaves watched for Mei's return. As the lightning struck again, they saw.

* * *

The way to Deleur harbor is guarded by a stone archway that stands between the Sentinels. It has the appearance of a shark leaping between waves, and the outcropping at its

highest point looks remarkably like a young woman. It should be barren, but hardy wildflowers have already taken root in its hollows and seabirds come to nest. The outriggers that come to trade leave offerings of soil.

To Mei, in her stone form, a year passes as a day. She sees those who were the slaves of Deleur, and who are now free, as they farm and fish and work the forges. She sees her daughter as queen, and her granddaughter after, and sees the gifts they give to the Turtle-Mother and the Turtle-Mother to them. She guards and waits, and with their freedom as her offering, it is no sacrifice.

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NIGHTSHADE

by J.W. Halicks

At sunset in that corner of the world, the daylight unravels thread by thread. The hills darken. Great rafts of fog come to roost in the pine trees, like old birds.

It's at this time that a hatch opens in a hillside just past a bend in the road and Ezekiel Nightshade climbs from his home in the earth, dusting off his neat black cloak. His hair fans out in dark waves from his skull. The cuffs of his trousers and sleeves are fashionably ragged, their borders as vague as the shapes of trees in the gloaming. A keenness sparks in the dark wells of his eyes.

Behind him, the hatch closes without the aid of any lever: fading to an outline, then a surmise, then to nothing.

The black cloth satchel is where he left it the night before, in the nook of a lightning-blasted oak. He shakes its contents onto the ground: a pile of delicate bones. He doesn't wait to see them start to dance upon the earth, to rise into a stuttering construction of limbs and hitching motion. But soon, Ezekiel's bone-hound trots by his side, restored after a long day's rest,

nuzzling its skull into his palm until he scratches its phantom ears.

“Nocturne,” Ezekiel whispers. The hound wiggles its bony stump of a tail, its vertebrae rattling with excitement. He leans down to speak into the ghost-gap of its ear: “Go on, boy. Go fetch them all.”

Nocturne bounds into a joyous gallop. He has no ears to perk, so it’s up to the forceful clamor of his barking to show his ecstasy as he speeds through the hollows.

Nocturne barks, and the shadows rise, obeying their summons. They claw up the banks of creek beds and leach from the trees, pooling on the earth. Some unfold from the branches of the firs to clamber, spider-like, through the grass. Nocturne races among them, urging them from all the crevices where they wait out the daylight, the stones and shrubs and snarls where they take their shade.

Ezekiel waits for them on the stony brow of a hill near the road. Shadow-bears clomp alongside shadow giants. Shadow-men stride forth from the gravel pits, their great hammers swinging at their sides. And above them all, the night dragons in their splendor: wreathed in towers of black flame, consuming and replenishing themselves endlessly.

“Shadowfolk and shadowbeasts and all in the deep of the dark!” Ezekiel Nightshade booms, and the host falls silent. His

voice is deep, and earthy as a fresh-turned grave. “Night falls, and we rise. Every dread-knight, every dragon, every wisp of smoke—stretch our shadow dark and strong from this realm to the next!”

He calls out the night’s work. The night-trolls will shore up the slopes where the firs grow, to strengthen their shade for the long days of summer to come. The giants will repair the wall to the south for the next battle with the Paladins. The dragons are dispatched in great swooping arcs across the sky, to terrify late travelers on the twilight road.

The shadow army stomps and slithers and slides away to its various assignments, calling in low hoots one to the next, thumping battered cudgels in the palms of clawed hands. They flow outward from the meadow until there is only Nocturne sniffing the air in their wake, looking up at Ezekiel with his ever-smiling jaws.

“Come, Nocturne,” Ezekiel says, patting the hard dome of Nocturne’s skull. “Tonight, you and I have special business to attend. A visit I have long awaited.”

Nocturne cocks his head. In his master’s voice, he detects a rare emotion: anticipation. Ezekiel wafts down the hillside, his cloak flowing like a plume of smoke. Nocturne, barking, follows.

* * *

In the house at the top of the creek, Lyla sits awake in her bed. Mother is still coughing. An ugly sound, deep in her chest. Lyla's heart thumps harder every time she hears it. It's been this way for a week: the closed bedroom door, the raw, explosive fits. The doctor has been by twice, all the way from town. Mother hates him for his cold hands and tremulous voice. But she has endured him without complaint, her face thin, the light in her eyes far-off and muffled.

Lyla is seven. Every night, Mother sings her a lullaby until she falls asleep. But Mother cannot sing to her now. Lyla hears her cough again—chuff, chuff—low and deep and painful, and it is worse, she thinks. She should go down the hall to Mother's room. *Lyla* should sing a lullaby, to help Mother sleep, perching on the rocking chair by her bed, just out of the fever's reach.

But she is afraid to walk the darkened hallway, to step into the fever-steam of the room with its desperate smell. Besides, Mother has forbidden it. When Lyla goes to the door, she hears Mother call out in her hoarse, hurt voice: "Stay away." The doctor, on his last visit, squeezed Lyla's hand before he left.

Lyla slips out of bed for a drink of water. The kitchen downstairs is hush-quiet-dark, the feeling of a fitful sleep. Mother's lullaby rises to Lyla's lips as she crosses the room. A soft, warm hum. Like the rumble of a friendly dog. Lyla

pictures it in her mind. A little dog, white, with keen ears and a happy grin, whose yipping barks sound nothing like her mother's coughing.

Lyla can almost hear it, that friendlier dog. She *does* hear it. A real sound, crossing the threshold of her mind into her ears, coming closer up the lane. And in that same moment, she notices the shadows.

The moon is in the kitchen window, casting long, black bars of shade onto the floor: the humped shape of the breadbox, the hook of the faucet rising like a curve-necked swan from the sink. The shadows aren't behaving normally. They're bending, as though magnetized, toward the man at the door.

He is so tall that he must bend to peer in at Lyla. He makes a sound like a soft cough, and then the man is *in* the room, stretching to his full height, his boots big and black and trailing dark soil on the linoleum.

Lyla drops her water glass. The man tracks its descent with his eyes. It freezes an inch before it hits the floor; then it rises, slowly, the man gazing in concentration, until it nuzzles back into Lyla's hand. A scream dies on her lips.

"Good evening," the man says. "I'm sorry that I startled you."

Lyla is young enough to know fear, but she has the bright bloom of boldness in her.

She tosses her head. “You didn’t startle me,” she says. Forcing herself to sound brave even as her heartbeat goes like a rabbit in her chest. “I can’t sleep. You shouldn’t be sneaking up on people without permission.”

“I apologize. I did not intend to sneak.”

The man’s black cloak rustles, and a little white dog runs out from underneath it. It’s a dog made all of bones—no soft fur, no pink tongue, like all the other dogs in town. She knows it should frighten her. But the bone-hound nuzzles her palm so gently, and his skeleton’s teeth are bared in such a happy smile, that Lyla isn’t afraid of him at all.

“This is Nocturne,” says the tall man. Lyla sits and takes the hound into her lap, where he settles into a contented pile. She likes the comforting weight of him, the wriggling tremor of his stubby tail as it wags. She doesn’t mind his bony paws that poke at her ribs.

“Hello, Nocturne.”

“And I am Ezekiel Nightshade. What is your name?”

“Lyla.”

Mr. Ezekiel sinks to one knee and shakes her hand gravely. His skin is tight and colorless, his grip without a trace of

warmth. But his touch feels dry and honest and somehow reassuring.

Mr. Ezekiel's eyes are a startling violet color. Little spots wink in the depths of them, like summer fireflies. This close, staring into his hawkish face, feeling the musty darkness that boils in a breeze from the edges of his cloak, Lyla imagines she should feel a great terror gripping her body, cutting off her breath. But she feels curiously calm.

Upstairs, her mother gives a thunderous cough, a mossy sound in her chest. Mr. Ezekiel's eyes flick toward the ceiling.

"Mother is sick," Lyla says.

"I know, child. Her illness nears its zenith—its highest point. The pain will be extreme. But not for long."

Lyla's hand, stroking Nocturne's bony flank, freezes.

"Are you here to take her away?"

Mr. Ezekiel gives one slow, solemn nod, and all the fear Lyla hasn't felt yet takes hold of her at once. Hot spikes drive into her eyes. She thrusts Nocturne from her lap and stands up.

"You can't," she says. "You can't take her. She's my mother. She's *mine*."

She's ashamed by the child's whine she hears in her own voice, the note of pleading. But she doesn't look away.

“Child—” Mr. Ezekiel begins. But Lyla flits backward through the room, moth-quick, Nocturne at her heels. She retrieves something heavy from a desk drawer.

“Take this instead,” she says. “It doesn’t work very well. But Mother says it was my father’s.”

The watch’s gold shell is turning black with age. It’s heavy, so Lyla believes it must be very expensive. The hasp is loose. As she hands it to Mr. Ezekiel, the cover flips open, exposing its muddy, clouded face, and Lyla stares. The watch’s hands don’t work. They’ve never moved, no matter how much she winds the dial. But they’re pointed at full midnight now, a thing she’s never seen before.

Mr. Ezekiel’s face, as he regards the watch, has no expression. There is only a brief tightness around his indigo eyes, something gentle and almost wounded. With great care, he closes the watch and hands it back to Lyla.

“I have no need for trinkets,” he says. “The moon and stars tell the time for me.”

He straightens, the tall shock of his hair nearly brushing the ceiling, and drifts toward the staircase. Lyla darts to block his path.

“Please,” she says. “You can’t.”

“I must,” he says.

“Then I challenge you.”

Mr. Ezekiel pauses.

“Challenge?”

“We’ll have a competition, out in the woods. Hide and seek.” Her voice quickens with the force of the idea. “We’ll play, and if you can’t find me, then Mother stays.”

“Hide and seek,” Mr. Ezekiel murmurs in his flat voice, smooth as river rock. “If I win, then she is mine?”

“Yes,” Lyla whispers.

The shadow-man looks at her with keen interest. At her eyes, luminous with pain and determination, tears brimming there. The set of her spine, the stubborn clench of her jaw. He has seen these things before: the same portrait, but in a different frame. He nods.

“We will play,” Mr. Ezekiel says.

He offers his hand, and Lyla takes it, feeling again its dryness, its strange dull comfort. With Nocturne trotting away ahead of them, they walk through the door and into the night.

* * *

The moon is a shining sickle over the hills to the west. Lyla has always seen very well in the dark. Her eyes adjust quickly, picking out the hunched shapes of boulders, the frothy rustling of flowered bushes.

They pass by other things. How to describe them? Like shadows against the bigger shadow of night. What can only be

a black-and-white-striped tiger drinks at the edge of a pond, raising its head to regard them. Lyla presses into the folds of Mr. Ezekiel's cloak. When she looks back, there is no tiger. Seeing this fills her with a feeling like broken glass, something achingly familiar that doesn't quite fade.

They stop in a meadow lit by the moon. Mr. Ezekiel bends and places his hands on his knees to look Lyla in the face. This close, he smells of spices and dry earth. "Are you afraid, child?"

"No," Lyla says. She is surprised to find that she means it.

"Good. The night belongs to me. All the shadows are our friends here. Go and hide."

"You first," Lyla says.

"Very well. Cover your eyes. Nocturne will keep you company."

There is a tree Ezekiel knows, down the path a ways. It was a seedling when he was Lyla's size. Now it has grown wild and tangled and dark, moss-hung, a citadel for bats and bees in the summertime.

Ezekiel chooses a stout lower branch no more than ten feet from the ground. He must be fair. He inverts himself, anchored to the branch by the soles of his worn boots, and hugs his cloak tight around his shoulders until he is a pillar of shade, indiscernible inside the deeper darkness of crisscrossed branches and murmuring leaves.

There is greater magic still he could deploy. He could weave an illusion that would swallow the tree from sight. Or let his heartbeat ease down into a shallow nothing—the stillness of the grave—so no sound or motion could betray him. But he resists. Ezekiel is curious. Lyla was sure-footed on the journey, picking over rocks and gnarled roots with ease in the dark. How long will it take for her to learn his hiding-place?

He hears her coming before he sees her. A little tune on her lips, something that runs a finger across the back of his brain but yields no solid memory. Nocturne's paws scuffle through the dead leaves beside her. Lyla stands for a moment at the edge of the clearing where the great tree lives, scanning its branches. Then she claps her hands.

“I see you!” she calls.

“You have sharp eyes, child,” he says, swinging down. “I counted no more than ten minutes.”

“Now it's your turn,” Lyla says. “Close your eyes.”

He does, as the footsteps of girl and hound recede through the leaf litter until he is alone. Ezekiel counts to a hundred. Then he departs the clearing, out under the dark open sky, the heavens stretching wide above him in a glittering smear of stars.

He checks the hollow logs and shambling rocks, all the nooks where a young girl might hide. He passes the hobgoblins

hauling their timber loads to power his furnaces below the ground. None of the crows have seen her. The grass grows clean and straight on the hillsides, bearing no mark of a child's steps. He is impressed.

As time goes on, it would be wrong to say Ezekiel worries. The night is his; no thing can pass here that he does not wish. But he searches fifteen minutes, and twenty, and he begins to wish he had the watch Lyla tried to give him, so he'd know how much starlight was left before the dawn.

Ezekiel gathers a knot of jet-black hares to him in a glade. None have seen the little girl called Lyla. He sends them away with a smoky sweep of his arm, chiding their bobbing tails.

"Child!" he calls, finally. Imagining her fear out in this darkness; her mother's worry, should she wake to find her gone. "Child, I yield!" His heart a little too much like the fluttering of a bat inside him. "Where are you? Show yourself!"

Ezekiel is standing on a low hill beside the dry bed of the creek. In a gully there grows a strident stand of snapdragons, wild reds and yellows, like frozen fireworks. Lyla stands up from among them. She has Nocturne tucked beneath her arm. Her face is smudged with dirt, but she shines with triumph.

"Mr. Ezekiel!" she calls, running up the slope. "I'm here, don't worry!" Nocturne barks. Ezekiel feels slow, nervous vines uncoiling from inside him, receding into his inner dark.

“I am glad, child,” he says. He reaches out his hand, but Lyla only looks at him.

“Mr. Ezekiel, I won the game.”

“You did.”

“That means you have to leave Mother here with me.”

“I know it,” he says. “A most unexpected turn. But my word is binding. It has kept order in these hills since long before your first birthday.”

“Who are you, Mr. Ezekiel?”

“Merely a shadow. But tonight, I am your shadow, and no one can harm you. Come.”

* * *

Lyla’s steps have grown sluggish by the time they reach the house. Nocturne rumbles beside her in encouragement.

“Child,” Ezekiel says, kneeling. He places his hands on her shoulders. “You are brave. May you sleep peacefully tonight, and all nights.”

Lyla regards him with solemn sleepiness. Then she throws her arms around his neck. She is warm, a small engine of life and feeling and care. Ezekiel feels some of that glow, just a little, pass into him before she releases him.

“Good night, Mr. Ezekiel,” she says.

At the stairs she pauses, one small hand on the Newell post. “Mr. Ezekiel. Will you be lonely?”

“I have my shadows for company, child,” he says. “Good night.”

He waits to hear the click of her door. Then he gathers Nocturne to him, rubbing the hound’s hard skull with the heel of his hand.

“Remain here, Nocturne,” he says. “Be her companion. Keep her safe.” Then he whispers other, older words into the hollow of Nocturne’s ear and sets him free to thud up the stairs into Lyla’s bedroom.

It’s only then that Ezekiel finally climbs the stairs himself. He opens the door to the mother’s bedroom, a hothouse gust blowing out at him in the dark, the smell of pent-up sickness and loam and transformation. The cruelty of that smell, he thinks: of the passage, generally, from this world back into the other. Ezekiel sits at the edge of the bed. He reaches a trembling hand to brush a damp lock of hair from the mother’s brow. She stirs, her eyes still shut.

“Ezekiel?” she murmurs. “Is that you?”

“It is.”

Her eyes struggle open then, shutters lifting from a green light that is lovely and fierce. Just as when Ezekiel first saw her, it both transfixes him and blows him apart, all in one shining instant. He sinks to one knee.

“My queen.”

“Ezekiel, please. There’s no need here. Rise.” Her hands fumble away the covers, to grip his own. They’re hot with fever. “You’ve come.”

She pushes herself into a sitting position, her arms frail beneath the nightgown. The fever has hollowed her cheek, drawing the flesh tight over her fine bones. But her gaze is steady on his. Sickness hasn’t robbed her of that way she has of turning everywhere she sits into a throne.

For seven years—two and a half thousand nights—Ezekiel has gazed across his narrow chamber beneath the ground. Huddled in his empty, overlarge bed; watching the vacant crib of woven birch, where a girl-child used to lie. Their absences so keen to him that they’ve achieved solidity, like shapes, like shadows.

He cups Catherine’s cheek in one hand, knowing the warmth of her at last. It is all as he imagined, everything inside him as free as running wax.

Only such a fool as he could ruin this so quickly.

“My love,” he says, “I know we agreed. But I cannot take you back with me tonight. Lyla found me in the kitchen. I made a wager with her, and she prevailed.” Catherine is silent, so he presses on, with difficulty: “Who will teach her to keep a vow, when her own father crosses the only promise he has ever given her?”

At this news, it seems she shakes with weeping, a thing most unlike her. But then he sees it's only laughter.

"Ezekiel. It doesn't matter. You couldn't take us anyway."

"I don't understand."

"Lyla," Catherine says. "It isn't time."

Ezekiel grips her hands hard, in spite of himself.

"She's not ready?"

"Nearly. She sees in the dark better than the both of us. If my time ended tonight, I think she'd rule most wonderfully. She'd wear the birch crown and care for all the shadow-folk, and walk the hills with Nocturne by her side."

"Good then," Ezekiel whispers. "She's ready. *I'm* ready. God knows I am."

Catherine's smile is beautiful and weary, like the smile of the moon, sending its brightness down across a great distance. "I, too, am ready. I miss my crown and scepter. I miss the tromping of the night-things—even their squabbles and suits. But this is the way, my love. This is the law. A young matriarch must dwell with the living until she knows all she needs to rule the shadow-land."

Ezekiel, shade-born, has known the way of things since birth: how the first Night King married the first matriarch, a living woman, to keep peace between their realms, in a time lost to mortal memory. How each young matriarch must live in

the light until her understanding is complete, until the fever calls her mother home, the old matriarch and the new crossing back into the night to rule once more.

“Putting a flower in the shade too early can damage it, curdle its roots,” Catherine says. “She has grown fond of the mortals she has met. But fondness isn’t enough. She needs belief. When she sees the living at their worst—when she takes up arms against the Paladins—she must know mortals’ capacity for good, so she doesn’t turn on them. It must be in her soul.

“She will rule one day, Ezekiel. As I have ruled, and as you do now. She will lead the Midnight Court with vibrance, with the good heart you have given her.”

“And you,” Ezekiel says. He is thinking of the way Lyla carried Nocturne, cradled under one arm like a doll. Of how she barred Ezekiel from the staircase, without a trace of fear: him, the lord of night, the liege of multitudes. “I am very proud of that girl.”

“I’m proud of you both,” Catherine says.

Inside him, there’s a sensation like a tall wave cresting. Memories, hopes, plans, all swirling in its tide. His tears shame him when they come. But he cannot hold them back.

“How can I rule?” he says. He lays his head on the covers, and she strokes it, her fingers warm against his cheek. “The

shadows stir, and are unhappy. They need their matriarch. They cannot look past your general to see a king.”

“My best general.”

“Still.”

“Hush,” Catherine says. She coughs, a wretched sound, smoldering with decay. “Don’t think my days have been idle here. I’ve conferenced with the crows. They say the Paladins are driven back almost to the Gray Mountainside. Not since my mother’s mother have we seen such peace here for the dark.”

“So the crows say,” Ezekiel mutters. “The night-trolls, on the other hand—”

“Show them the wounds you suffered for them during the Strife. The trolls have hard heads, but their memories are long. They will follow you.”

“I could stay with her,” Ezekiel says. “Let me take your place.”

“And see you crumble in the light of the first morning?” she says. “Where will our people be then, Ezekiel? Where will Lyla be, or I? Now I see how my mother must have felt, during my years in the light.”

They sit for a moment, not saying anything more, letting the knowledge and weight of what they share fill the space between them.

“It’s good to see you, Ezekiel.”

The fondness in her face inflicting ecstasy and agony in equal measure.

“A few more years,” Ezekiel says, with a firmness that he needs but doesn’t feel. “I will come back for you again. Both of you. And we’ll see what power this childhood of love and life has lent.”

“The sun will be up soon,” Catherine says.

She doesn’t need to say it. Ezekiel senses the gray fingers of dawn probing at the curtains. He dreads them, as he always dreads the coming of the day.

They kiss, and he tastes the fever, hot on her lips. Ezekiel breathes it in as one might a smoke, until he has collected it, crushing it away inside him like a candle flame. When Catherine coughs, it’s a human sound, without pain.

“My queen,” Ezekiel says.

“Goodbye,” Catherine whispers.

Ezekiel melts into the shadows, and becomes them, and is gone.

* * *

Cracking the door to Lyla’s room, Ezekiel sees a small, fluffy dog curled up at the foot of the bed, a white dog with soft ears. The spell isn’t perfect. Nocturne will always have a whiff of the earth about him. But he will have a wet pink tongue, and

a real tail to wag, and he will be happy here, and the young queen of the nighttime will be happier, too, for his company.

Leaving the house, Ezekiel strides through the hollows, among the straight stands of pines, and the tears come to him again, salt-cold and black as ebony. He thinks of his lonely home underground. Emptiness gnaws his bones like hunger.

But not forever. What is a year, to one such as he? What is two or three or seven-score? Ezekiel has passed many nights in this place. He will pass many more.

He walks, and the direwolves fall into pace beside him, and make their reports. He consults with the heron, and gives the owls and their tribe some last instruction. And then, as pink dawn rises in the east like smoke, Ezekiel Nightshade flings open the hatch to his castle in the earth, then pulls it firmly shut behind him. And by the time the first light fills the hollow by the road, there is no door in the earth at all; and it looks as though it has always been that way.

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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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