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AFTER BURNING

by Wren Wallis

It's impossible to keep a secret from the Sons, of course, and so Almas is wearily unsurprised when the black huntsmen arrive on the second day.

Sonam comes running up to fetch her, and Almas straightens from the pallet of the girl she's tending and goes tight-lipped down the stairs and out onto the porch, wiping her hands on her sarafan.

There are three of them waiting on horseback in the street in their black surcoats and blackened mail, their hard blank faces. There's a dead man as well, standing slope-shouldered and patient among the horses, his vague gaze fixed on the sky.

One of the huntsmen is the Vigilant himself, Father Vasli, a square-built, square-jawed young man whose eyes have always seemed to Almas a little too small. Everything about him is stiff right angles. Even his frown has corners.

"Sister," he says, and lays his hand over his heart in greeting. His courtesy is a thin skin of ice over a dark depth. "With your leave, we've come to search this place."

Almas folds her arms across her chest. “Well, you can’t have my leave, Father,” she says, her courtesy equally brittle.

He hadn’t expected that and rears his head back to reassess her. She knows how she must look: uncovered hair a frowzy nest, shapeless clothes stained, eyes sunk with exhaustion. She stares him down. Though he looks older—the Sons all look older than their true ages—she knows that the Vigilant of Kharsh is only twenty-eight. Young for his post, the youngest in the oblast.

Lidat comes out quietly onto the porch to stand beside her, shoulder-to-shoulder; Sonam must have gone for her as well. Almas doesn’t glance toward her wife but feels bolstered by her presence, the two of them together forming some stern impasse. She raises her chin and keeps her gaze on the Vigilant.

A season past, neighbors might have come warily out onto their own porches to witness the commotion. There are hardly any neighbors left now, and this hardly counts as commotion any longer.

How different three months make the world.

“Sister, we’re at war,” Father Vasli tells her, as though Almas doesn’t know that, as though it doesn’t pass bloodily through her door every day. “It’s come to our attention that you harbor enemies of Maret’s Ordinary here.”

“It’s a clinic, Father,” Lidat answers, politer and more patient than Almas is ready to be. “We harbor the injured.”

It isn’t properly a clinic. Their old clinic, the true one, was burned to posts weeks ago with the rest of their neighborhood, so they’ve shifted their practice to an abandoned house within the safety of the inner ring-wall, in the shadow of the Watchtower: Kharsh’s last circle of refuge against both daytime raiders and nighttime horrors.

One of the horses sidles in the pitted street. From beyond the wall in the rubble of the old city comes a sudden clatter of foreign weapons and rough shouting, a wafting stink of smoke and blackpowder.

It ends as abruptly as it began. None of the three huntsmen has reacted to it. The dead man continues to gaze absently at the sky.

They are all, Almas thinks, as tired as she is.

She can’t hate these men—these *boys*—here; can’t sustain the flame of anger for them. They’re all so young, behind their weathered faces, not one of them older than their baby Vigilant, and all of them doomed. Death might come for them soonest in the mask of this ugly little border war, but even the ones who don’t fall in this season and this place will be dead in a handful of years. The Sons of Maret are raised for martyrdom.

She can't hate them, but the sheer *waste* of it never ceases to gall her, to chafe her every physician's instinct.

"Are they kin of the Ordinary?" the Vigilant asks. He already knows the answer, else he wouldn't be here.

"They're *children*, is what they are," Almas says.

"Even so, sister. Even the wastelanders' children can be a danger."

"Yes," she snaps, "dangerous children like yourselves."

Lidat intervenes. "We're physicians, Father. It makes no matter to us who a person is. We help the hurt, regardless."

"Even to aid the enemies of your own people?"

Almas scrubs at her brow. "Do you think we bear love for the men who've destroyed our homes and lives? Of course not. But tell me why we shouldn't number you and yours among them."

"Almas," Lidat warns.

Almas knows the tone and knows Lidat is correct. Little as she likes it, she isn't going to argue with her wife in front of these boys, and arguing with the boys themselves will do her no more good. She turns on her heel and stalks back into the house. Her temper wants to bang the door; her concern for her patients' rest won't allow it.

She's kneeling at the pallet of one of the burned boys, swabbing his scarlet-blistered skin with cold tea and the last of

the honey, when Lidat returns. Almas has been stiff with queasy dread, expecting the heavy tread of men's boots, but she only hears her wife come alone into the room behind her to move among mostly-empty cupboards.

“Out of honey,” Almas says, when Lidat says nothing. “And no more fat for liniment.”

“Irinat says the stored rice is going to weevils. Not sure what we'll be feeding them, soon enough.” Lidat comes to set a roll of rough linen beside Almas on the floor. “He's been replaced, Father Vasli has. No doubt he only wanted to strut while he still could.”

“Replaced?” Almas's hands still at her work.

“Yes.” Lidat settles beside her. “The new one should be safely within the wall before sundown. Vasli warned me that we'll have him to contend with in less than a day, and commends us to his good graces.” She hugs her knees.

“And that was all?” Almas knits her brow.

Lidat presses her lips together. “It was a threat, I think. The new one they've sent is the Wolf.”

Almas fumbles, tipping the bowl of tea. She catches it upright again but not in time, and a dark pool spreads. Almas curses the waste as Lidat rises wordlessly to her feet and returns with a rag to mop it up.

When all is dry and tidy again and Almas has finished plastering strips of linen across the boy's burns, she and Lidat go down together to the kitchen. Lidat opens her arms and Almas steps into them, and they hold each other tightly. Almas puts her face in her wife's hair and breathes in: bergamot and coriander, a smell like sunshine, the smell of home.

Before home became someplace foreign to both of them; before home was the rust-rich stink of blood and the singed sulfurous scent of the steppe raiders' blackpowder weapons.

A stone of grief lodges in her throat, and she squeezes Lidat tighter. When she lifts her face, her wife's hair clings like cobweb to her wet cheeks.

"What do they mean by sending that one, do you think?" she asks.

Lidat nestles her head on Almas's shoulder. "To put a hard end to it, I'd guess. You'd think they'd have done it sooner, honestly."

The new patients they've been tending these last days, the injured wastelanders, had been a caravan of refugees. Mostly children—near two dozen of them—and only three adult women, and no men; all of their men and most of their women were dead, trampled into the burned scar of land where the steppe nomads' Choyi trade-camp had been.

They'd come straggling downriver away from blood-blackened earth and singed air that had once smelled of home, aiming for the shelter of another of the grassland camps. And it was their bitter, unblest fortune that they'd limped right into the ugly storm that had once been the Ordinary border-settlement of Kharsh.

It was one of their own people's devices that caught them: a buried blackpowder trap. The raiders had no doubt laid it for a scouting party of the Sons, but its effect was indiscriminate. Almas and Lidat were only able to collect seven little broken bodies from what remained, and one of those died whimpering the first night.

Almas's heart has been breaking slowly for months: a numbing crush rather than a clean shatter. It has been ground so fine by now that sometimes she thinks she'll suffocate under the weight of sand in her chest where her heart used to be.

And now the Sons will come to finish the deaths that the wastelanders started. It's the whole tale of this war. How wretchedly fitting that it should be the Wolf, the man who razed Choyi and drove these children from their home, who will come to drag them from Almas's.

"Do you think?" Lidat asks, and for a moment Almas isn't sure whether she's given voice to her own thoughts, whether

Lidat is answering her. But no, Lidat only wants Almas to confirm what she herself had said.

“That he’s meant to put an end to it? I’d assume so.”

“Do you think he will?”

Almas wants to reassure, to offer words of wine and honey. But she can’t lie to Lidat, and she’s too tired to lie to herself. “I don’t think it matters. What does *an end to it* look like, at this point?”

“Almas,” Lidat says. “Almashka.” She draws back to take Almas’s face in her hands and kiss her, salt and sweet, defiant, and the grief that grips Almas’s heart seems to slacken for a moment at the softness.

* * *

Sonam doesn’t have to fetch her the following morning. Almas sits back on her heels from changing the dressings on one of the burned boys, and when she lifts her tired gaze from the small, raw body, there is a man there.

He stands just within the doorway, and he must have had to duck his head to get through it; he is the tallest person Almas has ever seen. He wears the black mail and surcoat of the Sons, but he wears them without ornament or emblem save for the three iron rings in his ear that mark his rank. His high black boots are scuffed to dullness. One hand rests on the pommel of the curved sword thrust into his black sash; the

graceful dark wing of a lacquered bow rises above his shoulder. His hair is threaded with white, once-black faded to an iron-grey like Almas's own, and he wears it drawn back in a heavy braid, longer than a woman's.

Almas has never seen the Wolf before, but she knows him.

He watches her without expression, and his eyes are the most terrible: they too seem faded, the pale nothing-color of a winter afternoon, bizarre in the hard brown face. It's like being stared at by a ghost.

"You weren't invited in," Almas tells him, despite the taste of ash on her tongue. Did Lidat let him in? Where is Lidat?

"The whole of the Ordinary is Maret's, sister, and I am her Son. I don't require invitation." He offers it like explanation, not rebuke.

Almas pushes herself stiffly to her feet and puts her hands on her hips. "Well, the *house* is mine."

He doesn't answer this but continues to watch her with that uncanny translucent gaze.

"What do you want?" she demands.

"I understand that you're the physician," he says. "And you've stayed. Our kin owe you much. I've come to see your clinic and your work."

"And my patients? To render all my work for naught?"

Again he doesn't answer; only waits.

“Where is my wife?” Almas asks him, and her voice cracks only a little on the last word.

“In your kitchen with your girl, making tea for my brothers. She wanted to fetch you herself, but I told her I could manage.”

When he smiles, Almas can see that one of his front teeth is broken crookedly, leaving a triangular gap. It lends the expression an absurd, childish quality. She doesn't know whether he means to soothe her or to mock her.

“So. These are your latest patients?” he asks, and comes two steps farther into the room.

Almas steps swiftly to intercept him, planting herself between him and the boys on their pallets. She puts one hand into the pocket of her sarafan, touches the reassuring cold edge of the little blade she keeps there. “You can't have them.”

He cants his head at her, an earnest line between his brows. “And I would want them for why?”

Does he not know who they are? Did Father Vasli not mention? No, he must know it; even if Vasli hadn't said, one of the dead would have whispered it in his ear. Still, she balks at giving them away herself, so all she says is, “The other one threatened them, yesterday.”

There's a flicker behind the pale eyes like a change in the weather, and then it's gone; only a passing cloud. He's quiet

longer than Almas likes, but at last he says, “I was sent here to end a fight, not to find more of them. Brother Vasli saw his duty differently, perhaps.” It is the same indifferent, mild courtesy, but Almas catches the insult in it: *Brother* Vasli, not *Father*. She wonders how cold a cut that is within their order.

She doesn’t let go of the knife in her pocket. “Swear to me that you won’t harm them.”

He assesses her in silence. Again it goes on so long that Almas nearly loses her nerve and speaks again just to fill it, but then the Wolf says, “I do not swear, save to God and my brothers, sister. But I have no quarrel with you, nor with these children.”

The gentle way he says *children* loosens Almas’s grip on her secret knife, but she doesn’t let it go. “No? And what was your quarrel with Choyi?”

Nothing in his stance or manner changes. “The quarrel with Choyi wasn’t mine either. I was only charged with ending it.”

“Is that your picture of peace, then? What you did there? Is that what Kharsh should dream of?”

“I don’t make the peace,” he tells her. “I only end the fight. The mending, God entrusts to others. I am no physician, sister.” He shows her a ghost of that gap-toothed smile, and

Almas thinks the shadow that dims it now is something close to sadness.

“We could see the smoke for two days,” she tells him.

“As could the clans, I pray.” Neither hard nor boastful; tired, Almas thinks. He sounds tired too.

She lets go of the knife and takes her hand from her pocket, wipes her palm on her sarafan. “What a cruel hope, when people die to write your messages.”

“As God wills,” is his reply. Only when Almas has turned her back on him does he add, dryly, “It would have been a shame, anyway, to chip your little knife against my mail, ai?”

She stiffens and feels herself flush to the roots of her hair, but the man only moves quietly around her, to the pallet of the boy she was tending, and crouches down as if beside a skittish animal.

“Nasty work,” he says at last. “Blackpowder?”

“Yes. A trap.” She hesitates, then folds her arms and goes to stand at his shoulder. “They drove a caravan straight across it. The ones that survived were lucky to be near the back of the thing. Even so, I’ve got one with half a leg gone.”

He reaches out to touch the boy’s sheened brow. Almas draws breath to snap at him, but his hand lies lightly and the child doesn’t stir beneath it. “A new tactic of Tsomo’s qazaqi.

One of my brothers lost six of his host to one, outside of Akhor.” His voice has a blade’s edge.

Almas wants to say that it’s barbaric, but then so is the whole of it; it would be like observing that a cupful dipped from the sea is salt. And this man has been the author of barbarisms as well, so how should it matter to him? So all she says is, “I’m sorry.” That much is true.

He rises to his feet again and Almas steps back. “You will make a list, sister,” he tells her, and for a moment her gut clenches like a fist, but he goes on: “What supplies you require for your practice, what more you can use. We’ll see you furnished from the Watch’s stores as best we can for now, and when the fighting’s broken and the roads open you’ll get the rest.”

Almas feels a weight of words trapped beneath the sand in her chest. She’s always thought it a strange expression of gratitude to say *I don’t know what to say*, but now she doesn’t. She isn’t even entirely sure it’s gratitude. “I—”

The Wolf nods once at her expression. “Come. Let’s go down to your wife and my brothers, ai? It was a long road; a moment for tea will be pleasant.”

* * *

He is as good as his word: the first load arrives in the late afternoon, borne from the Watchtower’s long shadow by a surly

red mule. The young brother who led the animal carries the crates one at a time up to the porch in silence.

When he's finished unloading the mule, he makes a somber salute to Almas. "Our Father sends his respect, and says to keep well clear of the wall after dark, grandmother. He advises there may be noise."

It has been a season of noise; Almas doesn't point this out. Nor does she ask why she should keep clear of the wall. The boy wouldn't tell her—if he even knows it himself—and anyway it likely means another deployment of the Watch's dead. Almas has no desire to watch the tame dead feed. And then belatedly she hears the words *after dark* and they freeze her, crackling beneath her skin. She stares, uneasy.

No one living goes abroad at night, not even when the world's at peace. Night is the reason for walls and Watchtowers, the reason the Sons of Maret are made and raised as they are, the reason the dead are tamed. Night is when the devils come.

And they've come to Kharsh in numbers; the monsters feed well in the stinking charnel ground. At night the wastelanders withdraw to the safety of their camps and bright ward-lines, the Sons within their walls, and the devils claim the field. Lately they prowl so close to the wall that Almas hears the

snarls and gibbering of the damned in her snatched and restless dreams.

The tame dead are the Watch's surest weapon against devils and raiders both, but there can't be more than a handful of them left. And when they're spent, what then?

When the youth and his mule have gone back up the street, Almas drags the crates into the hall of the house and pries them open. Packed in the sweetly musty rice straw within, she finds honey and beeswax and wool fat, willow bark and vinegar and strong clear liquor, peony root and licorice and salvia. There are also, unasked-for, a sack of clean, carded lambswool, another of millet, a sticky, paper-wrapped brick of dried apricots, and a little jar of poppy tears.

Lidat comes from the front room, Sonam trotting at her heels. She looks worn-through, faded at the edges. Almas can hear a child weeping in the room she's just left.

She halts when she sees the bounty at Almas's feet and slips a flyaway strand of hair behind her ear. "Already?"

"Ai. Sonam, can you help put away?"

The girl nods and slips out from behind Lidat's skirts. She, too, looks drained, a dull-eyed wisp, and Almas's heart of sand threatens to choke her breath again. Ten years ago, when Sonam's mother had died in childbed and her father had turned his back on her—an ill-luck child, a red-cord child—

Almas and Lidat had agreed it would be kindness to keep her. But what kindness raises a child in a place like this? Gives a child this work?

She almost corrects herself and sends the girl to play in the garden instead; then she recalls there is no more garden, and the words turn to ash in her mouth. As Sonam passes, Almas stops her to crouch and hug her fiercely. Sonam leans against her with a soundless sigh. The child is skinny as a hare. “There are apricots, Sonashka,” Almas tells her softly. “He sent apricots. Have some, after you put away.”

When she rises again, Lidat’s eyes are gleaming. To divert the moment, Almas says lamely, “The Father advises to keep well away from the wall tonight.”

“Oh, well, my evening’s plan ruined,” Lidat scoffs gently. Then she does the same arithmetic Almas had and puts fingertips to the taut line of her mouth. “He’s sending the soulless out *in the dark*?”

It seems a mad gamble on the Wolf’s part to commit the Watch’s remaining dead to a night sortie against devils and raiders both, stripping Kharsh of their protection, but Almas supposes he’s tallied his risks. The wastelanders will never expect a night attack, and if any of the Watch’s dead do somehow make it across the devils’ carrion grounds without their huntsmen to keep them leashed, ward-lines won’t protect

the wastelanders tonight. The wards will hold devils at bay, but they won't keep out the dead.

It feels breathtakingly unfair to break such a primal custom as that of shelter against the night. But *fair* is a child's word, and Almas suspects anyway that the Wolf reads from a different book of rules than other people.

"Well," she says. "At least it might be over soon."

What a cold and weary thought.

* * *

What strikes Almas first that night isn't the noise, it's the *stillness*: the held breath. If the devils prowl close, they do it in silence. If the Sons' tame dead advance on the enemy lines, they do it unremarked.

It isn't until the noise begins that she realizes exactly what the Wolf has done.

Even then, she doesn't understand right away. The first devil's wavering hunting-cry seems nearer than she'd expected, lifting the hairs on her neck, but the ones that answer it are farther. She hears a sudden distant clatter of weapons, the shouts of disordered men. But above these rises a snatch of hymn, a Marethi war-song—*the angel with his fiery sword*—a swift drumbeat of hooves racing *toward* the wall, and then all is drowned beneath the ragged and terrified screams of men, the triumphant shrieking of devils.

The living Sons rode with their dead. They've shattered the wastelanders' wards and left them open to the night.

It's hard to bear the whole weight of comprehending such cruelty. It settles like a final, suffocating stone on the fallow sand of her heart.

She and Lidat move the injured who can be moved into the same room as the ones who can't, and pull their own and Sonam's pallets in as well. They take turns holding Sonam and singing over the sounds from outside until both their voices are rusted through.

* * *

She can't read the night's verdict in the empty morning streets. A few molting hens scratch and bluster. The Watchtower wears the sunrise across its shoulders like a victor's banner, but Almas doesn't believe in omens. Both the tower and the ruins and fields beyond the wall are quiet. The chilly air smells sour.

After they've fed their charges, Almas puts on her boots and her old sheepskin jacket, and ties a kerchief over her hair. "I won't be long."

Lidat nods, her mouth pressed pale.

The Watch gate stands open and no guard waits to bar her entry, so Almas stalks through it unchecked. She's never been within the Watch itself before and might have been curious at

one point. Now she notes without surprise how shabbily ordinary a place it is. Not even dawn's kind light flatters the dusty yard and ramshackle outbuildings slumped around the bleak tower's foot. It smells like horseshit and rust and men's sweat.

The Wolf is there, standing in the yard at the center of a knot of men. His arms are folded, head bent to listen to two of the others arguing. He glances up at Almas' approach.

His iron braid is fraying, his black surcoat dusty and mottled with blacker stains, the lines on his face drawn deeper by weariness. The colorless eyes assess Almas impassively. "Sister," he says, and the men around him fall silent and turn to stare. The one at his right shoulder is dead and regards Almas with a strangely identical blandness. She lets her gaze skip away from that one.

"Father. A word?"

His stare bores through her. At last he nods, and gestures courteously to one side. "This way."

She waits until they've walked out of earshot of the living before she speaks. "You rode on them *at night*. Broke their ward-lines, to lead devils down on them."

He nods politely, hands clasped behind his back.

"They were *people*." Her voice is still rusty, and outrage makes it shrill.

He glances sidelong at her. “So are you and yours.”

“You didn’t do this for me and mine,” Almas tells him, biting the words off hard-edged. “None of us would ever have asked such a thing.”

“No,” he agrees. “But I was charged to provide what Kharsh needed, not what it asked. The wastelanders are broken; the fight here is done.”

“At what cost? Their *souls*?”

“As God wills. Their souls aren’t my concern or yours.”

“Don’t you *dare* tell me my concerns.” The God Almas wants to believe in would never have willed such a thing, so many souls tainted and lost; would never have allowed the use of the damned against any of His creations.

He actually laughs at her: a dry and tired sound. He stops walking, so Almas stops with him. “Sister, I do my duty so that others can do theirs. Perhaps theirs is nobler and cleaner work—I don’t begrudge them that. But someone has to burn the field before it can be planted, ai?” He spreads his hands. “As I said—God leaves the mending to others. I have faith that He chooses His instruments well, each to her proper task, and I thank God for those who feel their duty as keenly as I do mine.”

She squares her shoulders, half-smothered with rage. “Are you trying to *flatter* me?”

He laughs again. “You overestimate both my courtesy and my courage, Almas Shah. Your principles are admirable, I’m sure. I pray the work I do allows you to keep them.”

She lets her gaze slide away. The brethren he left gathered behind them await his return. They’re wan and worn-looking, somber boys in battered armor; one lean, dark youth appears half-asleep on his feet and is supported against the shoulder of another. In a nearby corral, a limping man tends to a mare with an ugly, seeping gash in her shoulder. The yard seems unnaturally empty otherwise.

“How many did you lose?” she asks.

“Enough.”

She resists the pull of sympathy. “And I suppose you don’t *begrudge* the cost, either?”

He’s silent for a long time. Almas hears a hoarse voice raised in prayer somewhere nearby. “I’m not sure what you take me for,” he says eventually. “I grieve them, every one. But our souls are secured to Maret for just such a purpose. My brothers knew their duty, too, and what use is sentiment to them now?”

Almas resists a venomous urge to spit. He’s still watching her in that level fashion.

“If that’s all you came for, sister,” he tells her with cool courtesy, “I have work yet to do.”

Almas doesn't realize until he turns away from her that at least one of the stains he wears is his own blood; she hadn't noted the wrapping of bandages around his side at first because they've soaked so dark as to blend with his black clothing and armor in the ruddy early light.

"Father," she calls after him. He turns back.

You have injured men here, Almas meant to say. You're injured. Do you need a physician's help? Once it would have been instinctual, unhesitating—but now in the sand of her chest, the words wither. She won't lend her skill to this. At last she only shakes her head.

His smile is a curved blade. He turns away again.

* * *

As Almas approaches the gate, a black-armored brother on horseback clatters through it. His mare is blown and lathered. The animal halts, head hanging and legs planted square, and the Son half-tumbles from her back. "Father!" he calls; unnecessarily, for the men at the yard's center are fixed on him already. "Tsono Bess begs to treat!"

Almas pauses.

The Wolf steps out again from the group. "Treat? On what grounds? His host is shattered—what more will talk profit us?"

The rider stoops, hands on knees, to catch his breath. “Ai. But he says—’all border hostilities.’ He, his survivors—” The rider shakes his head and points. “Waiting,” he manages.

The Wolf folds his arms. “I am not authorized,” he observes to the yard in general, “to negotiate a general peace with the clans on the Citadel’s behalf.” But the colorless gaze finds Almas and lingers on her for a long moment. She lifts her chin and holds his look steadily.

He steps back. “Matei,” he says, and the dead man comes diffidently forward. The Wolf turns his back on Almas, bends his head to the dead man’s, and begins to confer with him low-voiced.

Almas stuffs her hands into the pockets of her jacket and turns away. There’s a catch in her throat like the promise of rain.

The huddled town has begun to stir. Almas meets Irinat and her grown son Hamash in the street standing dazed like people just woken from a long, unexpected sleep. “The fighting’s done,” she tells them. “He’s broken them.” Irinat’s expression melts, the bound-up grief and fear of the last months flooded out by sick relief. She turns and presses her face into her son’s shoulder, shivering in her threadbare shawl, and he wraps his arms around her and nods at Almas.

More people have emerged into the dusty hollow among the houses that used to hold the afternoon market. The sun hasn't risen high enough above the tiled roofs to illuminate them, and they mill and mutter in the gray half-light. "Doctor!" calls Vikhis, the smith, and folds her broad forearms across her leather apron. "Were you at the Watch?"

"I was," Almas says. "The Father says the fighting's over."

Vikhis nods uneasily and makes a warding sign; the whole town heard the night's horror. "Well. We're blessed in that, at least."

She's nearly at her own porch—she can see Lidat waiting ahead, hands knotted pale-knuckled in the worn embroidery of her skirts—when she hears horses behind her and turns back. A group of Sons is riding out: a few of the tired youths from the yard, and the dead man. The Wolf is there too, though he lingers a moment at the gate to have a word with someone within before urging his horse after the others. A white cloth is tied conspicuously around the hilt of his sword.

Lidat comes down into the street and takes her hand. "Where are they going?"

Almas shrugs wearily. "Tsono himself and a handful of his men remain. They want to talk a general peace."

Lidat stares. "With *him*?"

“I suppose.” Almas feels hollowed to lightness, as if all the exhaustion of the last weeks has lifted and left her empty. She thinks she ought to feel glad right now, but all she contains is dust and airy space, like the husk of a burned-out house. “They destroyed his host. Now he wants to bargain on behalf of the rest of the border.”

Lidat laughs humorlessly. “After what they did to him and his last night, he trusts they’ll ride out there to treat and not to assassinate him? That they’ll abide by any custom?”

Almas remembers the pale eyes fixed on her. “I don’t know,” she admits. “I think they will, though. I think they mean to.”

Lidat searches her face and then squeezes her hand. Her tone turns brisk. “I’ve changed Elam’s dressings; his fever’s broken and he seems to be healing clean. Let me make you tea.”

“Thank you.” Almas allows her wife to lead her onto the porch and into the house.

They’re still standing at the kitchen hearth when they hear the blast.

* * *

The Watch is an antlike swarm when Almas again reaches the gate. Her side aches from running and she puts out a hand to brace herself on cold stone. Lidat is breathless at her heels.

“What happened?” Almas demands of the first brother to cross her path. He shakes his head roughly at her and pushes past. “What happened?” Almas asks the next, and then recognizes him: it’s the one that had leaned half-asleep on his fellow this morning. He isn’t one she’s seen in the settlement before, so likely one of the Wolf’s own host. His arm is bound in a sling now and he wears an unwholesome greenish pallor beneath his dark skin.

“The field was mined,” he tells her hoarsely. “They mined the field. God—” He bites off whatever bitter oath was on his breath and turns away, but Almas won’t let him go. She steps in and seizes his good arm.

“Is there fresh fighting?”

“No,” he says. “That was—they stayed to see the trap sprung, and rode off. Some of ours are going in pursuit, but—”

Lidat exhales behind her and murmurs something.

“And the men in the Watch party?”

“I don’t know yet,” the brother says. He starts shaking his head and then seems unable to stop. “My Father—our Father, that is—they’ve gone out to see, but—”

Almas has already shrugged out of her jacket and is rolling her sleeves. “Sit,” she directs him. “You’re bleeding, you shouldn’t be afoot.”

* * *

There are few enough of the morning's wounded to tend. She and Lidat are already done with their brisk, sure work by the time two grim-faced huntsmen lead a pair of horses back through the gate. The animals bear a kind of makeshift sling between them. It contains the ruins of two men.

Almas rises from her exhaustion on the tower steps and goes to meet the brothers. They are tired enough or shocked enough not to seem startled by her.

"All that was worth collecting," the one on the right tells her. He's a big youth, broad as a bear, and his beardless face is streaked with blood and rage or grief. "Rest were just mess."

The two in the sling are little better than mess. The one on the right has died in transport, or he was already dead when they collected him; either way, it was a mercy. The body on the left nearly defies identification: his face is half-flayed, the jaw dislocated, and his right hip and leg are twisted at a cruel angle, splintered bone jutting through torn flesh in the incongruous midmorning sunshine. But Almas knows the long, stained braid of his hair.

When she bends over him, she can hear that he still breathes, in a thin unpleasant rasp. His pulse is a faint and listless flutter under her thumb.

I don't make the peace, he'd said to her. God leaves the mending to others.

An author of brutality: the Choyi massacre, the nighttime descent of devils. For all she knows, he *might* have meant to assassinate the steppe raiders' captain under the guise of peace-talk.

But she recalls also a light hand on a child's forehead, a packet of apricots. The way the colorless gaze had considered her in the early light.

She thinks of words she could have spoken then but hadn't, of a dark stain over his ribs, the wounded men waiting behind him. She had thought then that to offer help would make her complicit, but now she thinks it could have been a kind of repudiation. She thinks of burning fields, of smoke on the horizon, of the ones who walk away from such places and the ones who stay to tend them. A little green shoot like shame, like fury, like something else takes root in her fallow heart.

Almas straightens. "I need a clean room, a clean bed. Good light. If you haven't got those here, we'll take him to our clinic; we're equipped there anyway."

"Sister," the bearlike boy says. "We ought to lay him out for rites."

"No," Almas says. Her physician's mind sees already what can be done, what has to be done: joints carefully re-fit, the leg wound opened and debrided.

“He goes to God’s host,” the boy holding the other horse tells her.

“No,” Almas says. “Some of us have hope yet of *this* world.” The Prophet Maret may raise her Sons for martyrdom, but Almas doesn’t have to abide the waste.

Lidat moves wordlessly to her side, and they stand shoulder-to-shoulder.

“Sister,” the boy says. “Your kind concern is—”

Almas draws herself up to her full height and scrubs at her brow with the heel of one hand. Blood is caked in brown crescents beneath her nails. She takes a deep breath, and finds it comes easily despite the smell in the air. “It isn’t *kind concern*. It’s what we do. Your Father claimed to understand duty. This is ours: we help the hurt, regardless. What they *need*, not what they ask.”

Not *because of*, but *in spite of*. The rain will fall on every burned field; every seed will bloom again.

“If God wants your Father now,” she says, “then let Him take him from my hands. But God chooses His instruments well, and He put us here, did He not?” She stands her ground. “Trust that I know my duty at least as well as your Father knows his.”

The two Sons regard her uncertainly. Only boys, Almas thinks. Only lost boys.

“Olek,” says a voice behind Almas. It’s the one with his arm in a sling, the Wolf’s own. “Do as she directs.”

The bearlike boy nods dumbly. He sets his bewildered gaze on Almas and waits for her command.

“So,” she says, draws another deep breath and nods once. “Follow me, then.”

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TWO BODIES IN BASTING STITCH

by Allison Jamieson-Lucy

When Sere Gulliarne is dragged into the city, the canal-mud still clinging to her standard-issue boots, the police do not bother to support her legs. The officers hold her by one wrist and one elbow; the lower half of her body scrapes across the bricks. It hurts, of course. Sere could, if she wished, stand, but she refuses to walk for them.

She struggles in quick bursts, twisting her hips and making the police around her stumble, unbalanced. The man holding her elbow falls, cracking one knee on the red bricks. His new posture brings his face close enough for her to feel the motion of his breath. Sere gathers blood on her tongue to spit in his eye, thinks better of it, and swallows.

She sports a gash at the back of her skull; Sere can feel blood-wet wool all down her spine, seeping into her fine grey coat.

Sere Gulliarne is brought into custody for treason against the state in the week of her forty-eighth birthday, eight months after she fled her position as Deputy Commissioner, but it is the youth in her pain-set face that unsettles those who had

searched for her. She was not meant to be life-laced with anyone. They cannot execute her if she can prove the lacing.

She drops her head back and stares, expressionless, at the men and women hauling her across the red brick of the square.

* * *

Sere had tried to say goodbye.

In the fireplace lay the ashes of a letter that urged her to flee immediately. It had arrived by runner, handed to Sere by an out-of-breath girl with road-dust all up the front of her skirt.

The letter was from Jeska White. *Make goddamn haste, for they come after you with deadly intention*, it said. *Please take care*, it ended.

She sat half-dressed on a stool, pistol heavy in her lap, waiting for Tashet to come home. Sere waited until it was past dinner, aching to leave for the safety of the narrow canal-borough in the south of the city, where the river split, brackish, into man-made channels, but she remained unwilling to simply vanish. Tashet sometimes stayed late in her workshop, wrist-deep in rare metals and small, carefully labeled vials of royal blood.

Sere dressed herself and filled a bowl with sharp cheese, halved apples, and currants, then tucked it under her arm and crossed the square with quick, measured steps. No one stopped Deputy Commissioner Sere Guillaume.

Tashet was bent, riveted, over one of her experiments, focused enough that she thanked Sere for the food without asking what it contained. “This’s delicate,” she said, letting Sere lean in close but hovering her hands protectively over the brazier. “I’ll be done in half an hour,” Tashet added, when Sere did not back out of the room to leave her in peace. Tashet’s ability to judge time while in her workshop was limited, and Sere knew she would be up all night, fussing over this piece of magic.

Tashet’s laboratory was an intimidating place, split by towering shelves into semi-private bays where the high alchemists plied their art. Occasionally something banged, making dark glass bottles rattle musically. In the next bay two alchemists were arguing over what color a solution was; was it closer to silver or black? Sere wished Tashet had just come home tonight, where she could speak freely.

Sere wouldn’t be able to send letters. Diligent, loyal Tashet would never fathom that anyone was reading her mail and would take no precautions. Sere couldn’t explain what would happen to them both if she didn’t leave.

“I have to go,” Sere said. Tashet just nodded, dragging her notes out from beneath a pile of rusted forceps and thumbing through them briskly. Sere was at a loss for how to proceed, so she organized a corner of Tashet’s workbench, putting vials in a

line, then in numerical order the way Tashet liked. “I have to leave for a little while, but I don’t want you to worry. You won’t worry, will you?”

“I always worry, dearest,” Tashet said. She put down her notes and sighed. “Are you going to be late on my account? I can tell you seem more anxious than usual.”

“I’m never anxious,” Sere said. “Be safe,” she managed, and fled.

By the time Sere had exited the top quarter of the city with its grand square and hall of alchemists, she had convinced herself that Tashet knew it was goodbye. She had to have known.

* * *

The rules of life-lacing are simple and romantic: you will live twice as long, and you will die together.

They strip her down to her undershirt and shut her in a room that’s had all the furniture dragged out of it. The floor is rough with tracks of splinters where the movers were careless. Sere resents the theft of her coat and boots, despite the sticky crust of mud and blood that had already ruined them.

She wishes for the heavy weight of her dress pistol at her hip, but the gun is at the bottom of a canal, thrown by Jeska in a fit of symbolic destruction. They would have taken it from her anyway.

A summons comes, and they give Sere a rough skirt of blue muslin. She wonders if they mean to vilify her, dressing her in the colors of the revolution, but she recognizes the look on the face of the guard who brings it to her and thinks it is pity. It is the style of skirt the women wear inland. When he opens his mouth to speak with a continental lilt, she knows he is trying to make her look like home.

The courtroom has fashionable narrow windows fitted with sparkling leaded glass. Across the continent, windows like these keep out the cold. Here they trap the spring humidity until the carved wooden benches shine with damp. Sere sits on the hard chair they give her and waits while the familiar cadence of sentencing hits her ears. They can kill her, even while she wears her connection to an innocent life on her too-young face. She will need proof, in paperwork she does not have. They laced in secret, like stupid young lovers. Still, when the clerk of the court asks mildly if there are any compounding factors, she says, "I am life-laced."

Her response is not totally unexpected. "State the name of your partner," the clerk says. He is interested in her answer, not immune to the judicial rumor-mill, and fails to keep the interest out of his tone.

“High Alchemist Tashet Venkata,” Sere says. The name, despite formal trappings, feels good around her teeth, like slipping her hands into a well-worn pair of gloves.

They do not believe her, and the mood in the room darkens. The clerk’s face falls. Sere is struck wondering what has happened to Tashet that no one remembers the cleanly dressed policewoman who frequented the High Alchemist’s workshop. She folds her hands together to keep them from pressing the surprisingly small cut at the base of her hairline, and wonders if the change is in herself.

* * *

Tashet does not come to the almshouse for eight days. Sere spends the time standing at the window in her little bare room, watching the line of flags that fly over the courthouse, red and green and gold. They are all blazoned with the hare and the tower and the vine, in colors more vibrant than anything out in the canals.

The citizen’s resistance chose blue and grey, the color of sunrise over still water. She had gone to them only to hide, carrying with her a small collection of bureaucratic treasons. She had always wanted to come home again.

Tashet had not told Sere how lacing made everything sharper, brighter, and more enduring. Moments that were once fleeting now run like syrup across her skin; she can feel every

snap of the brilliant flags as if they brushed against her face. The flags haven't changed in eight months, although Sere feels they should have, if only to contrast the unchanging rule.

Across the continent the royal triumvirate sits a life-long term on the Braided Throne. Laced together since birth, their rule could last three lifetimes. Sere had watched the regime stagnate, year by year, as they were blinded by the slow pass of time and the false vitality of the world seen through lace.

Sere had planned the changing of the police guard so there would be a small gap, enough for one woman with a long-nosed rifle to slip into the parade square.

She had watched from Tashet's workroom. The whole affair was choreographed in every step, a holiday pageant for the public to see one of their three leaders, face and body still young after so many years of rule.

Sere was excused from marching in the parade herself at the last minute to go over paperwork. It was disastrous, to not be in public, to have no eyes on her at this critical moment, but she could do nothing. She counted the steps of the guards, watched her orchestrated gap open and close.

The gunshot at the parade was loud, but the bullet had twisted, striking one of the beautiful ceremonial guard-pairs, dropping them both with one wound.

That day, Tashet had asked to see Sere's writing case. For ink, she said.

Sere, harried in the aftermath of the assassination attempt, scrambling to understand what this failure meant for her position and her cause, had been unable to think of an excuse to refuse her.

In her writing case she kept damning letters unburnt while she penned responses. But Tashet said nothing, and no arrest summons came. Sere thought Tashet's silence was proof that her life-laced had always known and quietly forgiven her from the start.

Two days after the parade, still in the frenzy of the investigation into the shooting, Sere tore herself free and went down to sit by the canal. She missed briefings. Her absence would yawn like an accusation, but the agony of anticipation drove her out to the outskirts of the city. It had all gone wrong, but the consequences had yet to fall upon her head.

Jeska found her. He looked sober and tired, his face gaining wrinkles while Sere's lost them.

The sun hung askance in the mid-afternoon sky and it was hot. Humidity rose off of the canals like a wet cloak. Jeska dangled his fingers in the water, teasing the catfish.

"You look awful," Sere said. Jeska smiled and flicked water at her ankles.

“Thanks, turncoat. Same to—” Jeska said, but when he looked at her to finish his thought he stopped. Something dawned on him in perfect horror. Sere watched it march across his face like a phalanx of bayonettiers.

“You look good,” Jeska finished. He took his hand out of the water and dried it on his trousers, holding his breath, lips pursed as he tried to frame a question in his mind. “Sere, uh, right. This is rude but I’ve got to know. How old are you? It takes a long time to get to be deputy police commissioner, and you look—”

“Stop, Jeska, I’m life-laced, you deduced it.”

“Fuck,” Jeska said. “Of all the stupid things—to who? And why? You’re a *cop* so why—”

“I love her,” Sere said, interrupting him.

Jeska sighed, bitter and tired. “Then why’d you get mixed up with *us*?”

“You know why. Because there was a massacre. Because a boy had a ball and a stick, and he wasn’t dangerous, and we killed him anyway,” Sere said. She felt defeated.

“Of all the selfless, selfish things,” Jeska said wonderingly. “At least they can’t execute the life-laced.”

Sere shook her head, and Jeska understood. “You don’t have papers,” he said, like a lead weight. “Because you’re both women.”

There were special dispensations for unconventional lacings, rarely gifted.

“She can’t die for this,” Sere said, hugging her elbows to her chest. It had all gone so wrong.

“Oh no, Sere,” Jeska said, his voice thick with pity and rebuke. “We’ll get you out,” he promised. “I swear we’ll get you out. We’ll save her.”

Sere discovered, too late, that after the parade Tashet had needed to write a list of ingredients to begin anew the tincture that would infiltrate one life into another and replace the guard-pair that had fallen. Tashet’s apprentice knocked over her inkwell. Tashet had reached into Sere’s writing case, fetched out a spare inkpot, and read no seditious letters.

* * *

Sere tells herself it takes Tashet eight days to come see her because the alchemy has always come first. Tashet makes miracles by sewing souls together, and it takes her entire attention. Sere has watched Tashet disregard food, drink, and company; it is not a stretch to imagine her ignoring a pile of official memos slipped under her door out of distraction, not malice. Sere knows, deep in her heart where it stings with guilt, that it takes Tashet eight days to come see her because she is hurting.

When Tashet arrives it is with a burn on her wrist from where she was careless pouring hot oil, the skin angry red and silvered underneath with magic.

The almshouse guard, unfriendly from boredom with her post, does not trust Sere to be alone with Tashet. She stands outside the door, pistol drawn and loaded, listening to every word they say. She doesn't believe the lacing, doesn't know Tashet is as safe with Sere as she is in her own company. Sere isn't the sort whose despair runs to self-destruction.

When Tashet walks in, Sere takes a half step toward her, drawn in like silk that remembers rubbing against a glass rod. But Tashet is frozen, her red and gold shirt uncomfortably vibrant in the pale room. Sere falls back on her heels, skin singing, wanting to press her palms against Tashet's cheeks and kiss her temples, her mouth. For the first time, certain that Tashet does not want her to.

"Tashet," Sere says, and Tashet winces like Sere has struck her. So she says, "Beloved—", her voice catching on the sentiment, but Tashet flinches from that as well, her face turning from reluctance to anger.

"Stop it!" Tashet says, making a small chopping gesture with both hands. "Don't act like that, like you're still allowed, don't." She trembles as if she is about to scream, or cry.

It burns like dust in Sere's eyes to hear Tashet take her name back, to keep for herself. "I couldn't write," she says, because it is true.

Tashet's patience, endless for alchemy and strictly rationed for all other trials, does not suffer this, and she does not bother to be kind to Sere's heart. "What! No, I don't think so, you take off into the canals like a criminal, and you apologize for not sending *letters*? They could have found your body in the canal or shot on the islands of the delta, or hung in some other city square for treason. They would have found my corpse in my workroom on the same day! I spend eight months waiting for my next moment to be my last and you're sorry you couldn't write? Sorry that you didn't have a chance to *explain yourself*? I can't believe you."

"You can fix it. Tell them about us. They'll believe you, even without papers," Sere says, too reasonable, too calm, not begging.

"They won't," Tashet says. She is so certain. "They won't believe me. But I'm going to fix it. I can, I can if I just undo the lacing."

"No, *no*," is all Sere can say. It is close to begging. To destroy the bond between life-laced is supposed to be impossible. They have been poured together, like alcohol and cream. They cannot be unmixed. But Tashet is a brilliant and

unflinching alchemist, trusted by the royal family to lace their ceremonial guards together. If she says she can distill them apart again, Sere believes her.

Tashet draws a ragged breath and cries, “I don’t want to die with you!”

The pain that falls into Sere’s heart is like drinking a gallon of salt water—immediate, cold, and sickening. She wraps her hand around her own wrist and tightens her grip until she can feel the bones grinding together.

“I didn’t want any of this,” Tashet says, her voice so small it’s hard to hear. “God forgive me, I didn’t. I can’t make these choices.”

Sere can’t look at Tashet, so she turns her face to the window and the lines of flagpoles that crown the capitol. She stares into the brightness until her eyes feel rough and dry.

* * *

Sere is not allowed to write letters, although she drafts them in her head. Mainly she aches to contact the dissident force still hidden in the canals, so they might learn from her mistakes. To plain-faced Ynma, a warning about the clever mirrors that send sunlight into shadowy corners of the parade grounds, even well past noontime. For Aeril, who runs the supply lines, Sere imagines letter after letter telling him to hold his life-laced partner close, not to let him use the southeastern

gate to get into the city, where the guard has changed and the police have heavy boots.

To Jeska, she has a jumble of apologies, indictments, and self-pity.

She remembers when she first read one of his editorials and recognized herself in his writing: scar-cheeked, stiffened by fear of empathy, the humanized enemy. It had been a bracing gift to see herself from the outside. He had sketched her as a winnable target; someone who didn't need to change to become an ally, simply the opportunity to break her old loyalties.

They were that opportunity, he wrote.

So it was with a clear head that Sere had walked, plain-clothed, to the cramped row house where the citizen's resistance was meeting. The woman who opened the door was wary, her posture such that Sere could see the outline of a gun clearly beneath her skirt. If she meant to intimidate, she was up against all of the bluster Sere could draw from two decades of clawing her way up the police ranks.

Sere drew herself up to her full height in her heeled boots—the one part of her uniform she had not wanted to surrender, for they rooted her to the ground—and then receded. She wasn't here to make arrests.

"I'm Sere Guillaume, and I want to help," she said gently.

The woman at the door promptly slammed it in Sere's face. Faintly, Sere heard her yell, "Jeska! *Jeska!* Get out here, your daft editorials worked and the police commissioner is on the doorstep! She wants to help and it's your problem!" Sere wasn't police commissioner, not quite, but she appreciated the verbal promotion.

Eventually Jeska opened the door, looking more than slightly drunk. He blanched when he recognized her. "Oh god," he said. "Ynma wasn't shitting me, you're right here, shit."

Jeska was always more eloquent on the page.

He shepherded her up two flights of stairs, past the ground floor with a circle of people speaking emphatically, past a hallway blocked by the disassembled parts of a printing press, to a bedroom. "I would entertain you in the sitting room, but it's full of yelling people," he said.

"This is fine," Sere said quickly. She stood in the middle of the floor, not sure if she should take off her boots, not sure if she should take the whiskey when Jeska offered it.

"So, Sere Guillaume, how do you want this to start?" Jeska asked, sitting down hard on the bed and staring determinedly at her face.

"I thought," Sere said slowly, "I would start by giving you the names of the informants who told me and the rest of the force how to find this place."

Jeska's smile was hesitant but sincere. "Okay. Okay! We can make that work."

* * *

Tashet sends a note to the almshouse with a list of requests. She needs tears, blood, and a drawing to map the scars that blemish Sere's skin. There are new scars in shapes that Tashet does not know.

"She can come and collect me herself," Sere says to her guard.

Tashet comes with a lancet.

Sere sits on the floor, methodically tying and unpicking intricate knots in the thread that's unraveling from her undershirt. When Tashet arrives she does not rise. If she stands her knees might buckle, and she doesn't want Tashet to see.

Tashet sits down next to her and unpacks her alchemy kit. She won't look at Sere, even though they are close enough to touch. Instead she places items in a row: pen, ink, wood-pulp paper, lye-treated cloth, neatly stoppered vials.

"Take off your shirt," Tashet says dully, readying a pen and a sheet with a genderless human figure outlined on it.

Sere stands, grimacing at the pain in her knees, and strips. They've given her a straw pallet, but it is full of invisible biting insects; she has been sleeping on the floor. Purple bruises bloom across the peaks of her hips and her shoulder blades.

Tashet stares openly, her face wracked with pity. Slowly, she brings her pen to paper and begins to scratch out a drawing of Sere's blemishes. Each pen stroke feels like it's digging into Sere's flesh.

"I won't let you," Sere says convulsively. She kicks away Tashet's tidy line of vials. "Can't you see this is horrible?"

The materials for alchemy must be given willingly. It's an immutable law, as true as sugarcane is sweet and cyanide is bitter. Tashet reaches out to still a vial that's rolling in wobbly circles next to her ankle. She stares at it, then shuts her eyes tight and says shakily, "Don't be like this, Sere. You're making everything harder."

"It should be hard!" Sere shouts. "You want to abandon me to die!"

Tashet smacks an open palm against the floor. "You abandoned me first!" she says. "I'm never going to understand, I just—why were they more important than me, Sere?" She smacks the floor again, then yanks her hand away and peers at it, hurt and distracted. "I got a splinter. Ah, it's bleeding, damn."

Without wondering if she is allowed, Sere kneels down and cradles Tashet's hand in both of hers. Tashet lets her; lets her prod with both thumbnails at the meat of her palm until she

finds the end of the splinter, lets her raise Tashet's palm to her mouth and pull the splinter out with her teeth.

"Thanks," Tashet says, taking her hand back and rubbing at it. She looks up at Sere and suddenly her eyes fill with tears. Her mouth twists up in a sob. Sere rushes to fold her into her arms. Tashet's embroidered shirt feels rough and strange against Sere's bare skin and her tears are wet on Sere's collarbone. Tashet hangs on.

"Shhh, shhhh," Sere says. "I couldn't stay. I wanted to stay and I wanted everything to stay the same and I let that ruin everything. I didn't want you to lose your position and your alchemy lab and your ridiculous colorful shirts. But if you let this happen it won't stay the same, beloved. You can't stay in a place knowing that killing someone put you there. It hurts too much. I won't let you find that out for yourself."

* * *

It had started with executions. She is here, jailed in an emptied almshouse, because of Jeska White. He had thrown a rock at her, a little less than two years ago, his fury directed at her uniform and her distant expression beside the gallows.

It had knocked the skin from her cheekbone, which would heal with a dent like a permanent thumbprint under her eye. Sere rounded on the man who threw the rock, pistol drawn, cheek stinging. He stood protectively over a young man,

collapsed on the brick, and did not cower, although there was dirt on his hands from the stone he had thrown. “This was my father,” he cried. “They were life-laced and you killed them both!”

The man on the ground was dead, then. Sere held her neck straight and did not twist to look at the gallows. “The lacing certificate was a forgery,” she said. “The sentence was for counterfeit and tax evasion. All of her paperwork was suspect.” But the ages, even estimated roughly, failed to add up. The man shaking with anger and grief before her looked no older than the man on the ground. His mother, now dead by the state, had been similarly youthful. To be surpassed in age by their son, they could not be living solely their own lifespans.

Sere thought of the additional lifespan ahead of her, thought *what if that were Tashet*. She was newly laced, the change so recent that it did not show in her face yet, filled to bursting with the secret, and the thought of Tashet dead on her account was freshly terrible. “What’s your name?” she asked, shoving her pistol away.

“Jeska White,” the man said. “Are you going to arrest me?”

“No,” Sere said, after a long silence. She could, if she wanted to, for the blood running down her face. “Can you lift him? May I call someone?”

Jeska was a slight man, but he didn't trust her, and it was not her place to carry his dead. Later, after she had dragged him dripping from the canal, twice, both times while scolding him for picking fights with her fellow officers, she would help him write the words for funeral speeches. After she abandoned her uniform, they were bound together by their secrets, by each knowing too much about the other, and by their casualties. Still, she would have helped him on that first day, if he had allowed.

Before her cheek had fully healed, Sere saw Jeska's name on a confiscated pamphlet. She stole it to read by lamplight while Tashet slept.

* * *

Tashet leaves without picking up the scattered pieces of her alchemy kit, wiping her face dry on her sleeves. Sere watches her go, heart churning.

It is cruel to ransom Tashet's life against her own, and Sere cannot convince herself it isn't selfish.

Tashet has been given three options, painted into a corner by Sere's actions. She may do nothing and let them both die, out of stubbornness or spite or romantic gesture. She can leverage all of her political weight and convince the court of their lacing, providing birth certificates and fine alchemical reference diagrams of faces as they age naturally. It will destroy

her career, to be laced to a seditionist, and Sere will spend two lifetimes in prison. Or she can unlace them, destroy their unbreakable bond, and Sere will die while Tashet lives on, unchanged.

Sere hangs in the balance like a plumb line, swinging in ever-smaller arcs around an absolute end.

Tashet is choosing to sever them, the same way Sere chose to leave eight months ago. Ideals supersede love, twice in awful symmetry. It is a terrible choice, but it is Tashet's.

This thought hurts more than the lancet piercing her arm. It hurts more than the burn of the lye-soaked cloth on the tender skin under her eyes as she soaks up her angry tears with it. When she twists to see the scars on her back, jarring the bruises there, it is nothing.

Sere packs the materials for unlacing safely in a box lined with waxed paper. A chance for Tashet to live on, her career unmarred.

The police had caught her on a beautiful early spring day, when the streets next to the canal were dusted ochre with pollen from early-blooming trees. It had almost been her birthday, and she'd wandered too far into the main quarter, hoping to catch a glimpse of Tashet at the open farmer's market or the mineral-seller. Jeska trailed behind her, looking

sharply from side to side and jotting down lyrical details of the setting.

They stopped by a narrow table selling tidy bunches of mint, rhubarb, and small hard apricots. The wicker chair behind the table was empty, and Sere imagined stepping behind the table and out of her life to become someone who sold fruit. She would walk through the orchards with Tashet, between them a basket of taut-skinned peaches and plums. Tashet's fussy shoes would sink into the dirt and she would laugh and lean on Sere, all the restless parts of her unwinding in the whispering shade.

"I met her near here," Sere told Jeska. "I was walking through the park and caught her hammering little metal tags into all the trees. I stopped her to ask what she was doing and she led me around the park, showing me how she wanted to life-lace the trees together so they could grow tall."

Sere picked up an apricot. It was heavier than she expected.

"You miss her," Jeska said.

"Like a limb," Sere said, and then blushed because it was such an obvious thing to say.

A constable eyed her from the street corner, checking that she was not stealing fruit. Sere put the apricot back. Her face had changed enough that he would surely dismiss her, too

young to be Sere Guillaume of the long arrest record and the firm gaze.

The constable stepped toward them, signaling to his partner across the street with his right hand to follow. Sere realized, like pit caught in her throat, that Jeska had picked too many fights to be forgettable.

Jeska had cried for help as they hauled Sere away.

Sere wakes in the dark to the smell of gunpowder and believes in a panic that she is before a firing squad, too soon, too soon, there had been no *time*. How unfair.

But instead of gunshots she hears a rasp of a match striking and sees the faint outline of Tashet's face. The acrid smell that woke Sere resolves into the burnt-spice reek of hastily done alchemy. Tashet's fingers touch, feather-light, again and again against Sere's shoulder, as if she is checking that Sere is not a ghost. "If I get you out, do you know where we can go?" she asks.

Tashet is shaking so hard the matchlight quavers. Her fingers are sooty and her skirt smells singed.

"Did you melt the lock?" Sere asks, distracted by practicalities, unable to process that perhaps Tashet chose a fourth option and is saving her.

Tashet plucks at her burnt skirt with her free hand. “I’m afraid I made a hash of it. I thought it would be fine but this place uses *tin* in their locks, of all things.”

“Cheap bastards,” Sere agrees.

Down the hall someone coughs, freezing them both.

“Do you know a safe place?” Tashet asks, urgent now.

Sere thinks of Tashet’s bright gold shirts and expensive equipment in the second floor of a row house, cramped and vibrant as she laces the spies together, so their senses may be sharper, so they may be caught less often.

“I do,” Sere says.

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COVER ART

“Monument,” by Jeff Brown



Jeff Brown is a professional freelance artist from Saskatoon, SK, Canada, living in Cuernavaca, Mexico. In the world of book cover design and illustration, he has worked with over ninety book authors on more than two-hundred fifty covers. In the world of games, he has worked for companies such as Fantasy Flight Games, Pelgrane Press, and Logic Artists as a concept artist & illustrator. He currently does freelance work and long term projects. To see more of his work, visit jeffbrowngraphics.com.

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