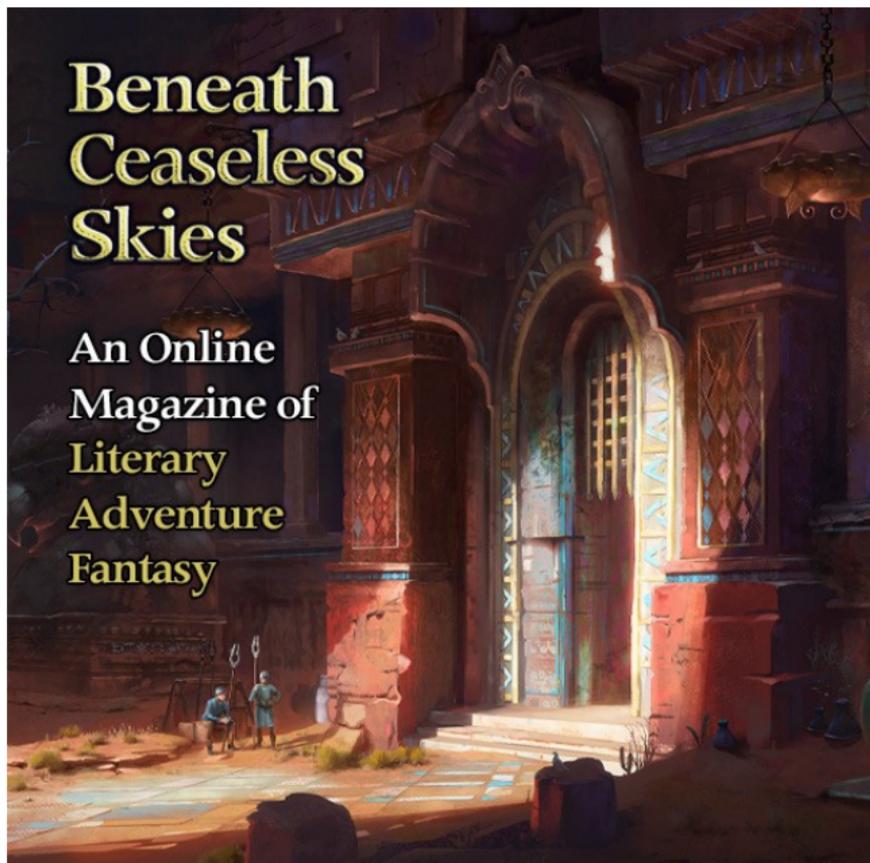


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DEATHSPEAKER

by Stephen Case

I.

“I don’t know how to do it.”

She cries in the night in the darkness of our chambers, and I hold her head against my scarred chest.

“I don’t know how to keep control,” she says. “They all fear me. They are mad to kill me. I don’t know how to make them see.”

I lie awake when she has quieted. I hear the guards changing their posts at the doors. I say their names silently in my mind.

She did not say my name.

For a time I almost hated her for that, and at times I still do—when I catch sight of my burned, blackened visage in a mirror or glass. When I hear the muffled gasps as I limp past servants or courtiers who are new to the palace; when I catch the hushed whispers.

She did not speak my name, though I gave it to her.

I thought she would flee the fortress where she had been held prisoner. I thought that with the knowledge I gave her she

would be free of the king's hold on her. Instead, she came to his palace with more courage and anger than I believed possible. She knew the names, as many as I had been able to give her, but she could not have known them all. She was escorted by luck or by fortune, surely.

Or by something darker.

She whispered names in the darkness, and men died or fled, too terrified to realize that for the moment, she walked in ignorance.

Not for long though. She found the archive, found the vast library where King Tsud kept his endless ledgers of taxation and genealogy. There was a single clerk there, a bent, beetled man as near-sighted and cowardly as the others who kept Tsud's scrolls.

A man like me.

"What is your name?" she whispered.

He blinked with fear but squeaked it like a bird before a snake. "I am Drawoc."

I can see her face as it must have appeared then, with the smile as long and narrow as sunset on the plains. "I will speak your name now if you do not do as I say. Bring me the ledgers of the King's privy council. And then bring me the lists of his guards."

The man hesitated.

“Consider quickly. If you do as I wish, you will have brought me aid in my hour of need. If you do not, you will be dead.”

The ledgers, sharp and crisp in clean ink (for I had written many of them myself) were brought.

She read quickly.

I imagine Tsud in his throne room on the night of her escape, after she has the names before her in his own palace library. Perhaps he has by that moment some indication of what has happened. Perhaps some have been sent to his Deathspeaker’s fortress-prison to see why her guards have not reported. Guards had by then already found me and torn me from my room and my desk. They recognized my birds about the fortress walls. They realized who had conspired for her freedom.

I imagine Tsud in the light of hastily lit lanterns. (I was in agony in the dungeons below, tortured for the role I played in her release.) Suddenly his vizier falls silently. Then his chamberlain. His cupbearer. His chamber-master. His lieutenants, one by one.

She did not yet speak his name.

“More lists,” she whispered to her cringing clerk. “His attendants. His courtiers. His horsemen.”

They died.

Tsud fled from room to room, down dark hallways, in a castle full of the dead. Those who had not been spoken had abandoned him. He was alone with the candlelight and the beating of his own heart.

She came for him in the grand audience chamber. It was a cruel jest, though she could not have known it. The acoustics of that chamber are flawless. He heard her footfalls. She stopped and waited out of sight, in the curve beneath the spreading marble pillars. Shafts of moonlight speared down from the star-paned window at the chamber's summit. She wanted to see his face.

She tells me this, later. "I wanted to watch him die. I wanted to see the light leave his eyes."

"Why?" I ask. This was after she found me, after she dragged me to the king's chambers and bathed my wounds herself.

"For what he had made me."

She whispered his name, "Tsud," and he fell.

* * *

In that first dark night of her freedom, she read the names of all the hetmen, the chieftain of every village, the mayor of every town, the head of every major family and guild. She reads quickly, and her tongue does not stumble.

“Like grass,” she whispered to me when she was finished. “That was what you said. Like mowing grass.”

We had done this before, when she was a prisoner in Tsud’s service and I was the scribe charged with translating the names of his enemies. She had been used as a weapon against his rebelling provinces, for she is a deathspeaker. She kills by naming.

Now her she kills of her own will, for protection. The old leaders are gone, mowed down in a single evening of reading.

We dispatched messages for the new hetmen of all surrounding villages and cities, the sons and scions of the manors and estates, to send their sons and daughters to the palace in groups. Never less than two, never more than five.

We hold the entire kingdom hostage, the two of us. We have their names. Those that Drawoc cannot find for her, I search out myself in the stacks of Tsud’s library. Tsud was nothing if not meticulous. He has every clansman and kinsman listed, along with their wealth and their holdings. They send a tithe of their family to us, and we use them to again people the palace.

“Your name is your allegiance,” she tells them when they arrive. She meets them in the hall where she killed Tsud. She stands on the raised dais in her simple black robe, elegant and terrifying. “You will speak it always. You will call each other by

your given names at all times in my presence and outside of it. You will know that I hold your names always in my mind.”

They are terrified. They must be. Their trial is coming.

“Speak your names.”

They do. But how to know whether they speak the truth? How to be sure our tithe is genuine, that it harbors no assassin planted within the palace with a false name?

There is no way to be certain. But we take our own tithe.

The group from each family, from each hetman’s tribe. They have given their names. The guards who have already passed the test, whose names I hold in my head as surely as I hold my own, are waiting for our command. She repeats one name. A single name, chosen at random from the group. If that person dies, the remaining pass the trial. If that person does not die—if the name spoken was a lie—they are all killed. Then she reads the names aloud of all in the city or village from which they were sent.

A single party failed the trial. It was enough.

And thus she reigns.

* * *

She wants me to give her a name.

I tell her I cannot. “No deathspeaker has ever had a name. None can be given to you.”

“They call me Empress,” she says.

I cannot describe her voice. It is soft, like darkness, but with an edge to it, a huskiness that makes me think of nothing more than a line of black clouds scudding against a coming storm, sweeping the sky of stars.

“That is a title.” I soak in the evening, like an old man. My joints ache where they were torn and stretched. Though she is an empress, she fetches my towel. She will let no one else, though the palace is full of servants. “It is not a name.”

“Why can’t I have one?”

Her face is petulant, very much like a queen’s, though I saw the old queen—who was no mother of hers—only rarely. She died soon after Tsud brought his deathspeaker from the south.

“I do not know for sure,” I answer honestly. I read all I can find regarding deathspeakers in Tsud’s library, and since she has come to power I continue to search for any hidden scrolls or documents. “It might break your power. But it could kill you. Where would I be if you were to speak your own name?”

She stands before her mirror. Her robe is open, and she stares at her form as though she has not heard me.

“Who am I?”

“You are the Deathspeaker, Empress of all Tsud’s domain.”

She turns toward me.

“Tell me again of the city of my birth.”

I tell her what I know, which is not much. It was a trading outpost, barely a village, in the dunes of the far south. There were rumors a deathspeaker had appeared, that a child had arisen with the old power. The journey there from Tsud's borders had taken weeks.

“How old was I?”

“It was hard to say. No one knew your parents or from where you had come. You were a girl of perhaps a decade and a half.”

She presses her dark skin against mine. She had been in Tsud's keeping for perhaps a dozen years before I summoned the knowledge and courage to release her.

Much later she murmurs in the dark: “Is it wrong, what we do?”

I imagine for a moment she is speaking of us now. “Nothing is wrong not done in hate.”

“The death.” She is sleeping beside me, or so it seems. “All the death.”

I brush her forehead with my lips, and then I rise to gather names for the coming day.

We are both trapped.

* * *

There is a faint tap on the door of the outer chamber, and I take a candle and open it. One of the chambermaids is waiting on the other side, her face shrouded in darkness.

I greet her with our only, ever-present defense: her name. “Suoromit. What is it?”

She inclines her head. “A company of travelers has arrived at the palace gates, my Lord Keeper.”

“There is something different about this group, Suoromit, or the guardsman on duty would have found them lodging in the outer wall until a morning audience.”

The name of the guardsman in command this evening, I recall, is Rees.

“Yes, Lord Keeper.”

I wait.

“They are from beyond our borders, my lord,” she says. “The emissary claims to be from the court of the Bone King. He will not wait until morning.”

This is news indeed. As vast as were Tsud’s domains, they were said to dwindle to a speck in comparison with those of the Bone King and his endless holdings in the north. Tsud had waged a war for decades against the southernmost of the Bone King’s border fortresses. He had spent the lives of hundreds of spies trying to learn the name of even the most insignificant of

his lordlings. But the Bone King remained unmoved in his distant capital, and Tsud learned nothing.

“Feed them in the great hall,” I tell her. “See to their traveling creatures. Tell them the Empress sleeps but will see them in the morning. And send me Rees.”

* * *

I meet him in the room that was once Tsud’s privy chamber. The skulls of huge beasts from the south still adorn its walls, along with tapestries woven of golden thread and sealsilk. The table alone dwarfs the palace room I slept in when I was a lowly scribe. It is piled now, as always, with names.

The hatred Rees’s eyes bore when he first came to the palace has dimmed. He still watches me though with the same guarded suspicion he must see in mine.

I have no protection here but the knowledge she bears of his name, and his certainty of that knowledge—his certainty that his name would be on her lips the moment she learned I had been harmed.

I have done nothing to earn hatred, besides what I have enabled her to do and become.

It is reason enough.

“Rees,” I say. He inclines his head. “What do you know of the Bone King?”

“Nothing beyond childhood stories.”

“And what have you seen tonight?”

“I saw men taller than my brother—who is the tallest man I know—ride in from the night on beasts with curled horns and matted fur. They are dressed in thick robes, with blades and much leather. There are a dozen, but they made no resistance when we took their weapons and placed them in the watch room. Their skin is pale and they have no beards.”

I steeple my fingers. “What kinds of weapons?”

“Long blades. Heavy. They seem carved of stone.”

“Not bone?”

He shakes his head.

“Do you think they are from the Bone King?”

He shrugs. “They are from the north. Beyond Tsud’s—beyond the Empress’s domains, it is sure.”

“Who serves with you on guard tonight?”

He lists the names, though I hold them all in my head. It has become difficult, as the ranks of guards have swelled again, but I memorize them all.

“I want you, Trela, and Seye to join these travelers in the great hall tonight. Approach them in friendship and learn what you can. You are canny.” If the offered complement means anything, he does not show it. “I want you to report to me before the Empress meets them in the morning.”

He will think I want information about the travelers, but in truth I want to know the reaction of our own men to these strangers. Will they see them as aliens and enemies? Will this be our salvation, an outside threat to unite us into a kingdom ruled by something more than fear? Or will they be welcomed as potential saviors from the reign of a dark queen?

Rees would rather be on the walls tonight, I can see, and so I know I have chosen well. He inclines his head again and leaves.

* * *

In the morning before the emissaries from the Bone King have risen I speak with Rees again, this time in the antechamber behind the audience hall. His face is tired, weariness having erased the grim suspicion of the night before. I had the servants pour the best wine from Tsud's labyrinthine cellars late into the evening, hoping it would loosen tongues and disarm countenances. I am unsure from Rees's face whether it has been effective.

"What news from the north?"

"They are a close-mouthed people," he grumbles. "They ate and drank well, but they spoke little. I think they knew what we were about."

"Are they to be trusted?"

He shrugs. "They gave no names."

“Is the Bone King a myth?”

Again a shrug, though this one slower. “Their leader, the one who speaks for them. Tall, with a face like flint. That one rests confident. He speaks for a great power.”

I nod, feeling the beginnings of hope in my broken chest.

Soon the newcomers are brought to the great audience chamber. This is where she stalked Tsud in darkness on the night of her release. This is her stage. She is in her element, in her power, here. I cannot help being proud, my pride mingled with desire, when I see her standing in her gown of deep blackness, poised as death herself, beside the throne.

The men from the north are strange. They are as Rees described, tall and angular, wrapped in folds of leather and fur. I can only trust the guards were thorough in their search for weapons.

I wait several steps below the throne, trying not to lean too heavily on my curved walnut staff. I am her mouthpiece. She remains silent and imperious.

They arrange themselves before the throne in a loose semicircle.

“Speak, strangers from the north.” My voice is harsh, and the chamber magnifies it.

One steps forward. He inclines his head and, ignoring me, addresses himself to a point a few steps below where she

stands. He does not raise his eyes to her. For now, he knows his place, treating her as though she is rightful ruler here.

“We are emissaries from the Lord of Deep North. We have ridden a month and a day to reach this place. We were sent by my lord upon the fall of Tsud, whose bones were weak and worm-eaten.” He pauses for a moment before continuing. “My lord wishes to know whether the words spoken upon his horizons are indeed true, whether there is a new Great Power ruling in the south.” Here he bows low.

When it is clear he has finished, I ask him what he wants.

“My lord sends his greetings and pledges friendship. We bring, as a symbol of this pledge, snow-stones, precious beyond measure.” He reaches into a fold of his cloak and removes a small leather pouch. The contents, poured into his hand, fill the chamber with light. Some of the guards gasp.

I venture a glance at her expression. Her eyes are bright in the glow of the stones, but her face remains passive. She knows her role too well: it is death.

“And what does your lord ask in return for these splendors?” I ask.

“A token, from one such as yourself,” he says. There is a scroll in his hand. “Merely a demonstration. That my lord may know and honor your power.”

It is a test.

She steps forward, takes the scroll from him, and hands it to me without looking at it.

“What is your name?” she asks.

Her voice is calm, dangerously so, though I doubt any but I can hear the anger beneath the surface.

He forgets himself for a moment and stares directly at her, uncertain.

“I am not a servant,” she says slowly to his silence. “I speak only names of my choosing. There is no one—*no one*—who gives me names.”

The emissary knows the danger here, but I wonder about those of the palace court who are listening. Do they realize what she is saying, why she is so enraged? She spent years imprisoned with the sole task of readings names given at Tsud’s command.

“But the Bone King,” the emissary begins, preparing, it seems, to gather himself in the certainty of the power on whose behalf he speaks.

“Bone King is a title, not a name,” she interrupts. “And were he here in all his bitter glory, I would speak no names at his bidding or request.”

Is that pride I see in the faces of our guards?

“I will ask you again, if you truly wish to take a message of my power to your lord: what is your name?”

I can see the emissary weighing his choices against his responsibility. He might choose to speak the name of one of his traveling companions, but then he would be seen for a coward and a liar.

Finally he nods, as though to himself, and sets his flinty face.

He speaks a name.

The sounds are foreign to me, guttural and sharp in a way that belies the smoothness with which he speaks our tongue. I can see her turning the name over in her mind, working silently through the syllables as though it is a house the rooms of which she is passing through for the first time. In a moment she knows it, and it is on her tongue.

She speaks.

The acoustics in the audience chamber, as I have said, are flawless. The sound of a body falling, of a skull striking stones with a hollow heaviness, echoes into the far reaches of the chamber.

“A name given in turn,” she says, leveling her gaze at those who remain, whose foreign faces now wear expressions of awe. “Know mine now, and take it to your lord in the north. It is Death. I speak for this kingdom. It is under my protection. If he would have my friendship, remember this.”

* * *

“That was foolish,” she tells me later. We are on the balcony of our chambers, which look out over Tsud’s private gardens. The lawns, unkempt since his death, are a chaos of wildflowers.

“You were wonderful,” I tell her. “The men—our men—looked at you with something like love.”

“I may have begun a war.”

“You sent a message.” My shaking fingers work at tearing a crusty loaf from the kitchens. She takes it from me and breaks it, then hands it back with cheese she slices from a wedge between us. “Perhaps, gods forbid, that messenger was the Bone King’s son or some other favorite. In either case, he has learned what he wanted to know—that you do indeed have the power you claim. And he has learned something more—that you will not be intimidated or controlled.”

“I was so angry,” she says, staring out over the gardens. “Seeing that scroll. That list.”

“I know. But most importantly, you sent a message to your kingdom. You spoke the words that may free you, that may transform this from a rule of expediency and fear to one of loyalty.”

“I am no queen.”

“You are.” I make my voice firm. “You are. You took the throne by your power, but you may hold it by your wisdom.”

“By yours.”

I wave her words away and chew the bread and cheese.

Soon she will not need me. In my foolishness, I thought I could free her to slip away into the night, with the wish that she would whisper my name as she went and save me from the cost of my disloyalty to Tsud. But she had been Tsud’s weapon for so long, killing perfectly and unfailingly; where would she flee where she would not be hunted as a monster and murderer? None would trust her, and none could stay their hand at the chance of destroying or once again compelling such power. I realized when she came to the palace and killed Tsud that her path would be a longer, harder road. She would have no freedom not housed and hemmed by absolute power.

But today there seems hope.

“There will be another delegation of palace servants arriving soon,” I say. “The Walled Cities are sending the last of their tithe, and then the palace staff will be adequate. Nothing like it was under Tsud, but enough for our needs. Enough to administer an empire, more or less, and maintain a palace.”

She shakes her head, her long hair bright as knives in the sunlight.

“No. We will call for more.”

I wait, the question written on my furrowed brow.

“We need an army,” she says.

* * *

The day of my departure arrives more quickly than I feared.

It is perhaps three weeks after our discussion on the balcony that I enter the central chambers where Tsud took council with his lords. His opulent lamp-stands have been taken away, and where before his throne stood draped in porphyry curtains and piled with cushions embroidered with trees and birds in silver thread, there is now simply a large round table. She has stripped the throne and placed it there along with perhaps twenty other chairs.

It is no longer a place for supplicants to come before Tsud. It is a place for her to meet her counselors in preparation for war.

I have news for her, related to receiving a new train of attendants from villages to the south, but she is not alone. I am momentarily taken aback, finding her there with her generals. I recognize Ekip, tall as a spear even seated, and the jagged face of Tlih. There is also, in the fur-robed uniform he wore under Tsud, Reggad the Unbreakable, her highest commander and one of the few surviving from Tsud's service that are now in hers.

But there are others whose names I do not know.

I stand at the edge of the chamber, stricken. She has taken council with soldiers, with generals, whose names are unknown to me.

They have not, for the moment, noticed me, their heads bent together over the maps spread before them.

“Who are you?” I shout, approaching one with a white face and empty eye whom I have never seen before. “What is your name?”

Silence falls. He regards me, confused, and looks toward her.

She inclines her head.

“I am Reidlos,” he says.

“And you?” I whirl on another, my ruined knees crying in protest. “Who are you?”

“I am—”

“Lord Keeper,” she whispers. I ignore their confused, embarrassed stares. “Be at peace. These are trusted.”

I look from face to face. When they look to her, there is neither fear nor hatred. She has unified them against a coming storm, the Bone King’s inevitable assault. She has found her place among them.

I am no longer needed.

* * *

It is not despair that leads me to depart. This is the freedom I had hoped for her. She reigns now from a loyalty born of necessity and not terror.

I no longer need remain. I no longer need hold the names in my mind. It would be impossible anyway. Each day, new companies stream to her banner. The palace is again filled; ranks of watchmen range its walls each evening. Pieces of Tsud's broken armies find their way back to the capital. For now, their hatreds are buried. They speak of her words to the Bone King's emissary. They look upon her with awe and even love.

She belongs to them.

There is one service left I can perhaps render. I gather my birds. I cannot take them all. Several I send north, to watch the passes. I keep my three most faithful, each as black of feather as her hair. One takes his accustomed place on my staff; the others perch on my shoulders.

It feels good to walk with them again under open sky.

I leave her a letter. There is nothing to say of what has passed between us. What feelings she may have harbored for me—a man broken and long beyond youth—must fade as she learns the responsibilities of her position. A prince from a powerful Khanate of the south, perhaps, would be a far more suitable consort.

Not an old scribe.

But the Monastery of the Grey Conclave provides a useful—and perhaps even legitimate—excuse for departure.

Lady,

I go to seek the walls of the Grey Conclave. They know me. My writings have earned me a place within their walls, though I have never claimed it. I go to do so now. Their libraries are vast, deeper even than these chambers of scrolls Tsud assembled. It may be that the Bone King's name is buried therein. I will seek for you the weapon that may preserve peace and add years to your reign. Look for my birds.

May your rule be long, and may it be just.

It will have to be enough. I hope she reads the finality in it.

* * *

The roads are soaked by the rains of early autumn, and the trees are grey figures in mist. I had forgotten the season, locked as I was within the labyrinth of bureaucracy within the palace walls. It is good to walk the roads, and the route to the Monastery though long is well traveled. On my second day from the palace I pass a troop marching the opposite direction, with several servants among them. It is clear they are the latest contingent promised from the villages to the south.

I step to the side of the road, pausing among the waist-high thistles as they pass.

“Hail Empress Deathspeak,” calls one of the mounted soldiers as he nears. He moves his horse from the road to speak.

“Hail,” I answer.

“You are from the palace?”

I have chosen to travel unaccompanied, and I left no notice among the guards of my departure.

“I am.”

“I thought it.” He dismounts. If the scars I wear shock him, he hides it well. “Have you seen the Empress?”

“I have.”

The rest of the company is passing. They are a motley procession, but well ordered.

“What is she like?”

It is difficult to decipher the expression in his eyes. I see eagerness there, certainly, the eagerness of a young man going into the service of a great lord.

“She is Death,” I begin, slowly. “She is grace and shadow.”

“They say she defies the Bone King.”

That truth, at least, has spread far beyond the walls.

I incline my head. “She will protect her people.”

The young man nods. He is nondescript, as familiar as a thousand young adventure-seekers who came to the court of Tsud in its golden days.

I ask him his name. “It is token of the realm. You must wear it on your arm and speak it as you go in and out of the palace. It is your oath of fealty.”

“It is the power of death,” he murmurs.

“Indeed.”

I wait.

“My name is Reklaw,” he says finally.

“Your given name?”

He nods. His eyes are on the departing company and the road toward the palace.

“Be well, Reklaw,” I tell him, raising my hand in farewell.

One of my birds croaks harshly from somewhere above us.

* * *

II.

Lady,

By now you will have realized my departure, and you will have found the letter I left for you in our chambers. Do not be angry. You will know, in time, that I am right in leaving. My services in the palace are no longer needed. I am proud of you. You will rule well.

My thought when I left the palace was to travel to the Monastery of the Grey Conclave. The records they have, I had heard, extend even further than those Tsud gathered at the height of his power. It was possible, I thought, I might find information of service to you. I admit this was in part a justification for my departure. But here I remain your servant, and so I must break my silence and reveal what I have found.

I knew the pathway well, though I had never followed it. By the waxing of the moon, I was in the foothills in which the Monastery lies. It sits at the top of one of the hills as though cupped in a hand, with vast grey-green walls larger even than those of the palace. The words that greeted my shout below the walls were guarded. Once they knew my name though, and saw my birds, the abbot himself lowered the rope ladder for me to ascend.

There is something strange in the sloping of those hills, for what seems a city on a hill becomes in the ascent something larger and higher. This, they tell me, is an effect of that which I found in the caverns beneath the hill, the reason I write you now.

* * *

I had been laboring in the libraries for weeks, finding many things of interest but nothing of direct service to her,

when the abbot came to me. He is impossibly old, with a body bent and broken as a tree that has seen a hundred freezes and thaws. Yet his face appears almost obscenely young, and his eyes bright and sharp. He has lived, so he says, longer than any of the abbots who lived before him, long enough that he recalls Tsud's grandfather making a pilgrimage to the Monastery at the beginning of his reign. When he speaks, one must lean close to hear, but his words are clear and cogent.

"These books," he said when he found me, pointing with his staff to the rows of shelves that dwarf even the voluminous acres of Tsud's library, "are shadows."

I told him I did not understand.

"Follow me."

He led me from the library in which I was working through half a dozen courtyards until we stood at the center of the grove, seven ancient trees growing on seven even older graves. A velvet rope descended into the dry well. Beside the well an acolyte waited with a thick mantle of fur.

"You will need that," the abbot said, gesturing to the mantle.

It was a warm evening. I slipped the mantle around my shoulders with some confusion.

"You are not of our order," the abbot said. The trees whispered around him with the voices of the dead. "But even

here, your work under Tsud found admirers. And now you serve the Empress.” He paused. “The answers you seek are below, though you will not recognize them. If, in the morning, you wish to remain, we will teach you to read their patterning.”

“Do I need a torch?” I asked, glancing into the mouth of the well. I could see nothing but the curved walls of stone descending.

“You will not.”

The abbot’s youthful face was impassive. He watched me patiently.

Finally I shrugged, pulled the mantle tighter around my shoulders, and began a painful descent.

* * *

The Monastery is devoted to the keeping of books and records and arcane sciences the names of which have long been lost. I believed my writings from the years before you came to power would gain me passage within those halls, and in this I was not disappointed.

Those halls—and plazas, courtyards, and libraries—are vast. Within the walls there are miles of corridors, and gardens, and murmuring fountains. It seems as though this place has endured a thousand years, though if the monks are to be believed it has been here much longer.

In the center of the monastery there is a grove of seven trees. They are of a species I have never seen, tall and very old, and they grow in a loose semi-circle. The abbot says they were planted when the monastery itself was founded and they grow upon the graves of the seven brothers who survived of the original Grey Conclave and founded the monastery, in the years after the Wars of Breaking that are only a myth today. He says the bodies of those men had been taken up in branch and root and even now the leaves and wind at times conspire to speak in their voices.

There is what appears to be a dry well at the center of the grove. I asked the abbot about it when I first arrived, but he said it was not yet time. I did not know what this meant.

I searched those immense libraries for the Bone King's name until the evening the abbot fetched me. It was then that I learned what lies beneath the grove at the monastery's center, beneath the moldering bones of those ancient warrior-monks. Whether it was brought to this place by the survivors of the Grey Conclave at the time of the world's Breaking, or whether they founded this monastery here because it already lay beneath this hill, not even the abbot could say. But it is this that will give us the answer to the riddle. It is this that will keep the Bone King's cold armies from breaking down on us like a storm.

* * *

I had almost forgotten, in a city of old men, that I was a man more broken than most. My descent down the well's shaft that was a painful reminder. My shoulders screamed in protest as I climbed. It was as though I was again on the rack in the dungeons of Tsud, though the burden was now only the weight of my own body.

The descent was not far. I had passed only beyond the spill of light from above when I felt stones beneath my feet and saw a clear, bright light coming from somewhere just out of sight. I was standing in a small chamber at the center of which was a deep and narrow rift. The light rose up out of this. I found narrow steps carved into its side.

The climb down those stairs was long. The light grew brighter around me, and there were reflected specks in the stones so that for a time it seemed I was descending down the milky road that is painted upon maps of the sky.

As soon as I had begun the climb downward, the air had grown colder. Now I was grateful for the mantle and pulled its hood up around my ears. My breath came in clouds before my face, and the stones were so cold they burned.

The steps finally ended at the floor of a vast chamber, the ceiling of which arching above might have been the very curve

of the hill upon which the monastery sits. At the center of the chamber, burning like a city of lights, was the shard.

It must be as large as the space of our chambers in the palace. It is a spar, a fragment, something that has been splintered off a larger sphere. It rests along its long edge in the frosty chamber beneath the hill like an immense broken sculpture. It looks, indeed, very much like a huge sliver of ice, slid down from one of the glaciers where they say the bones of giants are still sometimes visible in the snow.

But it is luminous and more transparent than any ice I have ever seen, with ripples, bubbles, and cracks running through its interior.

It is world-ice.

* * *

When I saw your face for the first time, there in the fortress of rain where Tsud kept you imprisoned, I thought I had never before known beauty. Now I know all beauty is reflection. The abbot was right: the books are only shadows.

You have, perhaps in the markets when you were a child—or rather, you would have, had you been free—seen the women who weave coins into their hair and the hem of their gowns. They call in a singsong for passers-by to have futures read from a ball of crystal or a polished orb of ebony. These women know how to cunningly tailor what is said for the one

who listens, but the germ of the belief is this: they can find knowledge in the centers of these crystals or stones where the light is lost in fractures, imperfections, and reflections.

Those crystal spheres are false, surely, but I have seen their model. I have seen that piece to which they all are harkening.

If, as our oldest annals claim, the world was once whole and is now truly broken, then—so the monks claim—one of the surviving fragments is preserved in the frozen chill beneath their monastery.

I am weaving riddles for you. I am sorry. It is late, and my mind wanders with the wonder of what I have seen.

The spar of the world-ice beneath the hill of the monastery is shot through with impurities, with planes of waving light, clouds of suspended opalescence, and tumors of fractures like angry lace. These impurities form a three-dimensional cartography within the ice.

There is an entire world there, a world's past and future mapped and suspended in a frozen maze of glassy silver.

Or rather, a fragment of a world.

Our world.

* * *

“You can see,” the abbot told me when I emerged, hours later. The pink fingers of dawn were clawing at the sky to the east, but he waited patiently beside the well’s mouth.

I was breathless from the climb, which had been agony. I knew, however, that I would make it again. Now that I had seen the world-ice, I was powerless to leave until I had fully mapped its depths.

“What is it?” I asked, when I had caught my breath from the climb.

“It is the world.”

I shook my head stubbornly. There was the rising light around us, bringing shapes into existence and giving them form. There was still, at my back, the sound of leaves in the trees they say eat dead men’s bones. But more than any of that, there were memories of her and our nights together in the chambers of a dead king.

“It is only a reflection,” I said. “I know there is truth in it. But this is the reality.”

“A question of perspective,” the abbot said. He led me away from the trees, down to a stone bench where a simple breakfast had been prepared. “But we have studied the cartography within for centuries. We know for certain what you only felt in your bones upon seeing the world-ice for the first time—it contains within its depths the history and future of our

own world. One hundred years worth of reading or travel or study will not teach you what you can glimpse within the ice in a single evening's viewing."

He had his point. I had seen more than I thought possible, in the confines of that crystal lattice.

"From your eyes," he told me, "I see that you understand."

"I perceived. But I don't understand."

"What did you perceive?"

"The impurities within. The fractures and filaments." He nodded, and I continued. "They appeared random shapes and forms, but then it seemed they represent moments, or realities. I felt I could see the thread of my own life, a miniscule ribbon running from a tangle of cracks I knew to represent my own house and the histories of my fathers. But as I traced it, it changed, and I knew I was seeing my own journey to the monastery and then, somehow, my own knowledge in that instant." I kneaded my aching knuckles. "How is this possible?"

"Your eyes are sharp." He reached for the loaf of bread between us. "Our mystics speak of the world's Breaking as more than a splintered kingdom. The Breaking was rather the creation of time itself—the point at which a timeless, crystalline world was lost and the staggered march of time began. The world was broken and its pieces hidden away in secret places beneath the earth. This is one of them. And they have been

fracturing since then, creating the brokenness of growth, death, decay, life.”

“The world-ice is...”

“Melting,” he finished for me. “Slowly, of course. Almost imperceptibly. The pattern changes. Fractures grow. Complexities arise.”

The light had now touched the highest leaves in the grove around us.

“We have witnessed the rise of the Deathspeaker within the ice,” he explained, “and the bright, spreading whorls of her influence. And we have seen the jagged shadows of the Bone King growing as well.”

“I came here seeking the Bone King’s name.”

He nodded as though this was a reasonable request. “But to see such detail within the ice, you must have keen sight indeed. Such knowledge is hidden in the very smallest of the ice’s aspects.”

We ate the remainder of our breakfast in silence. When the sun began to rise up over the wall of the monastery, he turned to me.

“You will return to the chamber this evening.”

I nodded, exhausted and resigned.

* * *

I am weary now. But you must know this before I sleep, so I write this too-long letter and send it with my swiftest bird. Here, in your realms, is a great secret: a shard of the world-ice that mirrors (or contains) the world itself. I will not search these books for the knowledge we seek. I will seek it in the patterns of the world. I will learn the Bone King's name, even as I watch the fractures of his power spreading in the ice.

I remain, as ever, your servant.

* * *

Time passes.

My bird returns, but he brings no response.

* * *

III.

The Bone King is here.

In the light and the cold, I can see his shape.

The abbot told me that were it not for the cold, certain men would have tarried their entire lives watching the ice, straining to see into the folds and terraces of the lucid crystal. There are libraries in the monastery devoted to the journals of those who have plumbed its depths with their gaze, who have spent their lives mapping the cartography of its interior and attempting a translation into the events and realities of the world it manifests.

Some see more clearly than others, he says. I can read the interior of the fractured shard of world-ice, and my vision grows sharper the longer I gaze. I stand as close to its angled face as possible. I see the threads of our own kingdom, the narrative of Tsud and his family stretching back generations, into the heart of the ice. I see the whorls of bright spars marking your rising. But above it all, dangling from the upper reaches of the crystal like a spidery stalactite, I see the dark fractures of another power and the empty reaches within that seem to drink light, the shape of the Bone King's advance.

The lines are growing.

But to link names to these shapes, to know the history and the nature of his kingdom and his kin, either my eyes cannot follow or the light does not go.

I need more time in this cavern.

"The Bone King is here."

A monk has stumbled into the chamber, breathless and terrified.

"The abbot sent me." He gasps and repeats his message.

I see it, at the upper edge of my view: the dark fractures of the Bone King's influence shuddering forward as the ice continues its slow slide toward disorder to finally intersect the ivory filaments of your kingdom.

“His armies,” I say, “have marched southward, far to the west. They are in the valley.” I pause, squinting. “They are at the walls.”

The young monk nods hastily. “With a message.” The terror in his eyes is palpable. “For you. Come.”

When I emerge from the chamber of ice, the trees of the grove are roaring. If they are truly the voice of seven ancient monk-warriors, it sounds like a multitude.

Beneath them the abbot is with a group of senior monks around the mutilated body of a man.

“He was thrown in, over the walls,” a monk explains, pointing. “The message.”

It is burned onto his bare, torn chest. The letters are angular but legible, written in our own tongue: *Send the one called Keeper.*

The broken figure moans.

“He’s still alive.” I look at the stricken faces of the monks. “Kill him. Put him out of this misery.”

“We have tried,” another monk whispers. “He will not die.”

The abbot is leaning on two brothers for support, but his face is set. “You need not obey this monster. They cannot take these walls.”

“There will be more bodies,” I tell them.

My course is clear. I am loath to leave the secrets of the chamber below me, but I told myself I was leaving the palace to be of service. I do not know how he has found me or why, but I came here seeking knowledge of the Bone King.

Now he is here.

They lower me from the gateless walls by the same rope ladder I ascended not long before. The walls—grey with age and lichen—still seem immense, but the tents of the Bone King's army are spread below them like a sea of fog. I descend to them, my birds specks of darkness far above. I have told the birds to stay behind, but one ventures too close. An arrow takes him, and he drops past me to the ground below.

When I reach the ground, gaunt men who look brothers to those who came to the palace as emissaries are there to meet me. We walk in silence through the camp, toward a wide, white tent that rears up above the others. Around us men in black armor move in silence. They walk strangely, some lurching like broken clockwork, others legless and pulling themselves along on carriages of spiked wheels.

At the entrance to the tent we stop and one enters. He is inside for a long time. I hear no words from within or from the camp around me. All is silent. Finally, when I fear I will not be able to keep to my aching feet longer, the man emerges and

beckons me to enter. He takes my walnut staff from me as I pass within.

Inside, the Bone King sits on a narrow throne. He is tall, and though seated I can tell he would stand even taller than the men who led me through his silent camp. His face is almost impossibly thin, and the long fingers he holds folded beneath his chin are white as naked bone. At each side of his throne stand two guards, naked from the waist up and even more skeletal than him. Their bodies are emaciated, sickeningly thin, but their faces are impassive.

“You are the one called Keeper.” His voice is thin and reedy, like wind over rocks.

I incline my head.

“You wonder how I find you and what I desire.”

It is not a question, so I wait.

“Your queen was not the only power at play when my envoy stood before her.” His accent is not as sharp as that of the men who visited the palace, but it is indeed a voice from perhaps a continent away. It stumbles and pauses over our words. “There are spells to aid tracking, and they were laid upon those in that audience who were of importance. We know where you are, and we know where she is.”

I know very little of spell-craft, and I tell him so.

“When we saw you had left the palace,” he continues, “we assumed you had fallen from favor. Yet now we find you here, not far from our line of march. There is the stink of old power about this place.” His narrow nostrils flare. “Why are you here?”

I always lie as little as possible, because I do it so poorly. It was this lack of subtlety, this failure at subterfuge, that allowed me to be so easily found out when I freed Tsud’s Deathspeaker.

“There is knowledge here,” I say. “The monks sit upon a wealth of lore. I left the palace to seek knowledge of you.”

He smiles. The room seems to drain of light.

“And what would you know?”

“Your name.”

His laughter is loud and ringing, harsh and twisted. “Have you not guessed?” he finally asks when the laughter has bled from the canvas walls.

Terrified, I shake my head.

“I have no name. I am a power, like your queen.” He steeples his long fingers before him. “Indeed, I am much like your queen. Where she is the night, I am the blistering, bone-bleached day.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You would not. The men we sent to your palace gates had not been named. Would you give me your own?”

My mind still reels to find his armies already within our borders and to be speaking with one who was for so long only a cloud on our horizon and before that only a tale to frighten children. Our armies, I tell myself, trying to recall what I had seen in the ice, even now must be moving to counter him. Such a force as this could not move without our knowledge. Yet he speaks as though he has no fear, as though this kingdom already belongs to him.

“No,” I answer.

“Not willingly.” He smiles again. “And you would be wise to withhold it. Our names are our power. Yet my spies tell me in this land every name is known.”

“The Empress would be powerless without it.”

The Bone King arches a nearly invisible eyebrow at the title of Empress but says nothing.

“I have been tortured before,” I add. “I would not last long. But I have no useful knowledge to give. I am just a scribe. I know nothing of the movements of armies or their dispositions.”

He leans forward slightly. “Your posture and your countenance bear witness to your torture. It was clumsily executed. Did you wish for death?”

I remember the rack, the flames, and the hook.

I shudder.

“You wished for a death that did not come.” He gestures to the starved guards standing at attention beside him. “My Famine Guard. They have not eaten for seventeen years. Do you think they long for death?”

I stare.

“You walked through my camp and saw my army. Had you seen what was hidden within their armor, you would not have had courage to walk farther.”

I think of the man thrown over the walls with the message carved in his flesh. The monks said they tried to kill him out of mercy. They said he wouldn't die.

The Bone King smiles again. “Have you guessed my power?”

I begin to shake.

“This girl you call Empress.” His voice is lower now. “She is like me as the night is to the day. My naming brings life. Those I name can never die.”

I find it difficult to speak. “Why are you telling me this?”

“So that when my armies break the walls of your palace I will not have to force my words into this soft and sluggish speech. So you can explain to her who I am and why there is no hope of resistance.”

He stands.

“I have waited in the north for centuries for another power to arise. You think this is a war. It is not.”

He smiles for a third time, and I feel despair.

“This is a courtship,” he says.

* * *

It is dark. My birds are far away.

The first of her armies we meet is that of Reggad the Unbreakable, who had once been Tsud’s most feared general. The Bone King’s hordes attack in two waves. The first are those who have not long been in his service, the champions whose naming by him gives them the immortality of young warrior gods. They meet Reggad’s cavalry in a long series of skirmishes.

They do not die. They are unhorsed and mauled, but the sight of them rising again to their feet is too much for Reggad’s knights, who retreat in confusion.

The second wave are those who have been broken in past battles and are now encased in the ubiquitous black armor of the Bone King’s horde. They are slow, but they are legion, and their ranks swell after each engagement. The young, agile immortals are hewn and broken and join their numbers. They overwhelm Reggad’s encampment on the third day, and the general is brought in chains to the Bone King’s tent.

“Tell him,” the Bone King says to me.

Reggad believes perhaps I have turned traitor. His eyes are crazed and his face bloodied. There is a long gash across his temple.

“Do not tell him your name,” I say. “If you tell him your name and he speaks it, you will live. You will not be able to die.”

Reggad’s face is enraged and confused.

“He has spoken the names of all his soldiers,” I tell him slowly. “Do you understand? He has spoken all their names.”

Reggad will be one of them.

He screams.

I have heard stories of men under torture who have bitten off their own tongues and spat them in the faces of their captors. Reggad does not do this.

“Reggad,” the Bone King echoes when the general’s screams have shaped themselves into his name.

I have turned away long before, but the skeletal guards will not let me leave the tent.

Reggad does not stop screaming.

“Take him to be fitted for armor,” the Bone King says, repeating these words in our own language for my benefit, though I am already picking of pieces of their tongue. “Then take the names of all our captives.”

“They will not fight for you,” I tell him.

“They will,” the Bone King explains, “because the choice will be life in my service or death. Some will choose death. But they will not receive it. At least one in their company will choose life. At least one always does. And that one will tell me names. I will speak the names, and then my men will dig a pit. I will give them one more chance to swear fealty to me. Those who refuse will be buried alive. They will stay alive.”

I taste bile at my lips.

“In the north, when I first came to power, I left legions alive beneath the frozen steppes to grow slowly mad in the earth.”

He scowls and spits.

“You will tell them this,” he says. “You will make them understand.”

* * *

I am dreaming of her.

My nightmares in the palace were of finding myself again in the dungeons of Tsud, again on his rack for having freed her, and I would wake begging her to speak my name and release me. Now my dreams are darker. In my weakest hours, when the moans of the Bone King’s horde and the screams of his new recruits filter through the thin canvas of my tent, I wish again she would whisper my name into the darkness and free me from this deeper hell.

We have been skirmishing with the armies of Tlih and Reidlos across the plains south of the palace. They have grown canny to the Bone King's power. Instead of meeting his forces directly, they burn the fields before them. When they are forced to battle, they aim only to maim. When a soldier is so broken he cannot walk, the Bone King's smiths must fashion wheeled armor, and this takes time.

They have also learned to allow no prisoners. The wounded in the field kill themselves or each other rather than be taken captive.

Reggad and his men fight alongside the Bone King.

I dream of the world-ice as well. It was, I thought, my mission to seek in its depths knowledge that would protect us against what is now happening. In my dreams I am pressing my face against its surface as against a window, trying to see the shapes within. If I were there again now, I would bring fire and try to burn into its heart, to melt out the twisted fracture of the Bone King even if it meant melting the world around it.

* * *

We take the palace. The armies hampering our progress fade away, and the Bone King's path to the capital lies open. The gates are unguarded, the city empty, the palace itself as uninhabited as it was on the night of the Deathspeaker's release.

She has fled.

The Bone King's broken soldiers shamble through empty corridors. The Bone King, quiet with rage, takes a silent seat on Tsud's throne. This was the place of her power; this was where she defied his first advances.

He holds a folded parchment in his hands.

"Read it," he says, thrusting it at me.

His generals have assembled around us after securing the palace. Some have removed pieces of their armor. They watch us, those who still have eyes.

"Four days," I read haltingly, translating it into their harsh and angular tongue. It is written in her hand. She left it pinned to the armrest of Tsud's throne with a tiny silver blade. "A hard march northward will bring you to the River Swift in four days. If you are beyond the river and marching north in four days, your army will be spared."

The Bone King laughs once, harshly.

"Wait for my sign," I read. "Tonight at moonrise."

A few generals glance upward at the star-shaped window, through which the first stars of evening are visible.

"Enough of this," he says. "Tsud's lands and palace are nothing to me. I want her."

"She will run," one of the generals speaks. It is Reggad. "She will continue to fight."

“She is a coward,” the Bone King says, “and I will burn her land until they bring her to me and beg me to take her.”

I glance upward at the window again. An ivory sheen has come to the glass.

Reggad falls.

His armor strikes the floor with the sound of blows, steel on stone.

No one moves.

“He is dead,” someone whispers when the echoes fade.

In the silence that follows, they look to the Bone King with wonder and a kind of hunger.

“Reggad!” the Bone King shouts. His voice thunders in the chamber. “Reggad!”

Reggad does not stir.

One of the skeletal guards lurches in from the antechamber beyond. “They are dead. All of the new soldiers, all of *hers*.”

The moon has risen. She is naming them.

She is freeing them.

“She does not know your names,” the Bone King bellows to the generals before him, his face a mask of fury. He has risen from his chair. “Your names are buried in the north. You belong to me!”

The Bone King flings her silver blade onto the floor beside Reggad's unmoving form.

"Leave me," he says.

They go, but the hunger does not leave their eyes.

* * *

While she is a fugitive in her own kingdom, I sleep in the chambers we shared. My birds have not returned, and I am glad for it. I wonder whether they circle in the darkness above or whether they have found her, wherever she wanders tonight.

When the knock comes on the door I believe for a moment it is again Suoromit, coming to tell me of the arrival of the Bone King's envoy. Instead it is a soldier, young and pale, though the side of his face is a wreckage of splintered, twisted flesh and scar.

"Keeper," he whispers, forcing the door open and thrusting a knife at my throat. Another pushes past him into the room. He is one of the generals who were in the chamber that evening, a hulking mass whose neck has been severed nearly through, ages ago. Blood bubbles at his throat as he speaks.

"You are to be killed this night," he rumbles, each of the words sounding thick and wet in his mouth.

I could do nothing against them, even had I weapons. Beyond them, in the corridor, I can see more of the Bone King's soldiers.

“Why?”

“Because you will hear our names.” He speaks his, a collection of angled consonants that tumble through my mind like clattering steel.

The others whisper as well, and I realize they are all speaking their names, offering them to me in the darkness.

“You can take them to your queen?” he asks.

I shake my head. Without my birds, there is no way to carry a message, and though I have begun to devise one in my head, there is no script I know to carry the strange shapes of their names so they could be read.

“You will try.” The others are glancing up and down the corridor. “The Bone King fears this. I have advised he tear the tongues from those of our soldiers who still speak.”

He carries an axe with a haft nearly the length of his leg. His grip shifts on it now.

“We are sent to kill you,” he says again.

“If you do, no one will ever speak your names.” I can feel the hesitation among them, in the shadows of the corridor. I have never been skilled in the art of rhetoric or appeal, but I am dead now unless I find a way to convince them. “You will have an eternity of this.”

The first soldier raises his thin blade, but the general waves it back.

“No one leaves this palace,” he says. It is almost a question.

“I was raised within these walls.” My heart is hammering. I find in this moment I do not fear death, for I am surrounded by something far worse. Rather I have a desperate desire to do something of use, and a desperate hope that by doing so I may see her again. “There are passages beneath the walls.”

“All the corridors are guarded.”

“They will join us,” I say. “I will take your names to the Empress. She will release you.”

There is a murmuring in the corridor behind him. They cannot understand all I am saying, but the thought of death wakes hope within them.

“The Bone King still holds the young dead,” the general says. “Loyal in their immortality. Not yet broken.”

It is now. I feel as though I see this moment suspended in the world-ice, a forking of the paths or a shattered duality held for a moment in balance.

I cast what little weight I have onto those scales.

“Then we will break them.” My twisted walnut staff is beside the door. I grab it and push past the general, into the corridor beyond. I have picked up a few words of their tongue. I speak one now as I limp down the corridor and feel the ancient, deathless soldiers fall into a shambling phalanx behind me.

“For death!”

They take up the cry.

* * *

We make it as far as the Hall of Division, where Tsud kept his long ledgers and where his moneychangers collected what was due of the tax convoys that came each year from the outer provinces. On the far side of the long rows of counting-tables—tables I had played among as a child—are passages that lead down to the tunnels connecting the dungeons to the deeper passages and treasuries under the walls.

But a mass of men can only move unseen in darkness for so long, and someone within the palace sounds the alarm. Voices call from the upper walls, and torches appear.

The soldiers of the Bone King do not make battle.

They carve meat.

It is confusion. I am pushed to one side, forced beneath the row of wooden tables that are splintering even now. I hear bellows in the guttural tongue of the north and occasionally echoes of my rallying cry: “For death!”

But none die. The butchery never gives way to the exhausted silence following a battle. Men continue to hack at one another, breaking themselves and each other on their black armor and thick blades.

The Bone King has not spoken my name. It would be easy to die here.

But I know these halls too well.

There is a small staircase that spirals back toward Tsud's library. I make for it, hoping to pass unseen through the melee. A few soldiers follow me.

We spill out onto a wide, empty corridor, for the moment untouched by the chaos we have left. I find the bloody general still beside me.

"Through the library," I say.

There is no chance of pushing through the deep tunnels now that the alarm has been sounded, but I had been told the library harbored passages as well.

I had lived my life in that library, or so it seems to me. Even as a child, when my father returned from his journeys on behalf of Tsud's father, he would bring me there. We would read together in the evenings beside the fire. The maintenance and cataloging of Tsud's books had been the work of the lifetimes of a dozen scribes, of whom I was one.

It is fitting then that I should die there.

From the wide windows along the library's south side one can—by daylight—see the outer wall of the palace. Yet when we arrive we find the doors already secured against our passage. It

is clear our ruse has failed. We hear the sounds of shouted commands behind us.

The skeletal guards at the doors part, and the Bone King enters.

His face is a storm. I had seen Tsud angry in the many years that I served him, but his anger was that of a petulant child. I had seen the anger of the Empress as well, which was a dark and silent fury.

The anger of the Bone King is a destroying fire.

“Do you think I would not know?” he screams. “Your names belong to me. You are mine.” His voice drops in tone but not volume, still echoing off the shelves around us. “I have eviscerated living men. I have had men boiled alive or ravaged by beasts. I have tasted their flesh myself. They do not die. Do you understand me? *They do not die!*”

This last is so loud it makes the long windows of the library shudder.

“You.”

He does not have my name. I had given it to her, freely, over and over, but she would never speak it.

But the Bone King will surely take it from me now.

I prefer death.

There is still time. The names in the silent, dry scrolls around us are calling to me. I feel in that moment that I am

indeed only a shadow in the midst of a crystalline world mapped and frozen around me.

I feel her eyes on me.

The next instant there is a crashing against the wide library windows. I can see one of my birds beyond, clawing at the glass and beating black wings.

It is only a moment's distraction, but I take it. I tear a torch from the hand of one of the soldiers beside me and run into the stacks, passing the torch low along the shelves as I go like a burner in the fields torching stubble.

I will die among the scrolls.

The fire catches quickly, but I continue staggering forward. The Bone King and his soldiers will escape, or if they do not they will simply burn and find a new and more horrifying shape in which to continue their deathless existence. But I will die.

I still hold my name, and I will die.

The books and scrolls blossom around me, as though they are the ghosts of trees that have waited centuries to flower.

Here though there is a wall of books that do not burn. It is hard to see anything now because of the heat and the play of smoke, but the absence of flame makes apparent what I had never found in my life in the library: here is a false shelf with a hidden door. I stumble toward it, pushing against it, trying find

the catch to release it, when a huge shape rushes past and batters through like a wave.

The darkness beyond sucks at the flames around us. There is a hand on my arm, an iron gauntlet still hot from the flames. It is the bloody general whose name sits now in my mind like a jagged spike.

“The Bone King,” he says, his voice coming more hoarsely than before. “He burns. Behind us.”

“Dead?”

It seems incredible he should have been defeated, that he would have descended like a storm from the north only to break upon the promise of release she has offered with her namings.

“Not dead.” The general has already moved past me, his shambling footsteps ahead clanging on stones in the darkness. There are other soldiers among us, and it’s impossible to tell whether they are those who were with us before or if they have joined us since, streaming from the Bone King’s standard like rats from a sinking ship. “He named himself long ago. We go to find her now,” the general continues, farther down the tunnel. “For death!”

The men around me, those who can still speak, take up the call.

We emerge, hours later, beyond the walls. The moon is on the horizon and light is growing in the east. We are free of the palace, but the growing light does not make our situation any less nightmarish. These monsters speak their names, over and over again. They pass them back and forth among themselves like currency. Those who cannot speak scrawl them in angular runes on whatever surfaces they can find: helmets, breastplates, their own flesh.

“If we are captured,” the general rumbles. “Hold them all. Any who find the Empress. Bring us to death.”

I try to hold onto them, but the names are uncouth things, born under a harsh northern sky.

No outriders from the Bone King pursue us, but by the time the sun has clawed its way into the eastern sky, dust on the horizon ahead shows we have been found. In a few moments, riders surround us with leveled lances.

“Deserters from the Bone King!” I shout, raising my arms. “We seek asylum with the Empress!”

They halt beyond reach, but two of them move forward. The first, when he approaches, I recognize as the haggard form of Ekip. Beside him rides Rees.

“Lord Keeper!”

I am amazed to see a smile cross his weary, embattled face. All of the men with him are tired and dirty, but they wear set, stormy faces. They have seen their land burn.

“We seek asylum,” I repeat, lowering my arms. “These are fleeing the Bone King’s service.”

“Why?” Ekip’s face is guarded.

“Because the Empress has the power to release them, to give them death.”

Around me the broken soldiers echo their names, as though hoping to speak the syllables to as many ears as possible that might carry them further.

“Where is she?” I ask.

Rees gives me a puzzled look. “She received your letter,” he explains, reining his heaving horse closer. “She is in the seat of her power, where you bid her come.”

* * *

And so my peregrinations bring me full circle.

She waits beneath the branches of the Grey Conclave. Her generals would not let her leave the safety of the monastery. They waited the hours it took for each of our ragged party to be hauled up the immense grey-green walls one by one. When we arrive where she waits in the center of the grove, the soldiers of the Bone King kneel as one before her.

“Hail, Lady Death,” they say.

Her eyes take them in, find mine, and move on.

“They want release,” I say. “They bring you their names.”

“What will you give me for this service?”

“Names, Great Empress,” their broken general says, the blood still bubbling at his ruined throat. “More names.”

She nods once.

It takes time. She speaks them all, and they fall on the soft grass of the hill. Their armor spills around them like black leaves. The wind whispers through branches above.

Then only their general remains, and he is still listing names, dozens and then perhaps hundreds, and she is repeating them back. My birds have found me, the two that remain. They rest upon my shoulders, and I feel something like whole again, though she will still not meet my gaze.

When he has given them all, all those he recalls from his service with the Bone King, he kneels again and places his forehead against her foot.

I wonder how old he is, how long he has been broken and undying in the Bone King’s service.

“And your name?” she asks.

It comes to me. He would speak it himself in a moment, but of all the shared syllables, shattered and uncouth and strange, that I have been given and that have tumbled from my mind, this one rises up unbidden.

I speak it.

She repeats.

Then he is gone.

She shudders and pulls herself erect. I have never seen her drained after a naming, even when we toiled together by candlelight over the lists and ledgers Tsud constrained her to speak in her fortress-prison long ago.

“Keeper,” she says. “I must speak with you below.” She points to the opening of the dry well.

Since I have been gone the monks have fashioned a lift that allows one to descend with their feet in a loop of rope. She descends first, and I follow.

My feet have barely touched the ground in the chamber beneath when her weight slams me against the wall of stone.

“Never presume to know what is best for me,” she hisses, her breath hot and fierce. “When I want you gone, I will send you away. Do not leave before.”

Then she buries her face in my neck, and I hold her.

“I will name you,” she mutters into my chest. Her shoulders shake only slightly. “If you leave again, I will speak your name into the darkness.”

We wait together for a time, two children holding each other in the night, two lovers hemmed by silence. Presently a

slow dripping from the silvery chamber beyond breaks the stillness.

“What is that?” I ask, with a growing sense of dread.

“What I must show you.” She pulls me toward where the world-ice waits in the chamber below. “The price.”

Her skin looks ivory in the glow from the luminous ice.

“Your letter,” she explains when we stand before it. “When we learned the Bone King’s power, I knew I would have to come here before I hoped to pit myself against it, before I tried to speak names he had already spoken and take them from him. I don’t know how my power works, but when you wrote of this, of the world being here... I knew I would need to draw on it.”

The sound of dripping comes again. There is a puddle beneath the shard. As I watch, a pearly drop slides from the ice to fall to the surface below. “It is melting.”

She nods. “The abbot says I have drawn power from the ice itself and sped its dissolution. And if what they say about it is true...”

“Your victory over the Bone King has moved the world, the ice, toward disorder.”

“I do not regret.” She squares her shoulders. “You saw what they were. I watched you in the library, within the ice. I

sent your birds to aid you. But I am Death. To save my kingdom, I have spoken the death of a world.”

The shard before us drips steadily in the silence.

“Help me, Keeper. Help me find a way to fix it.”

I take her hand. “Always.”

I can see into the world-ice more clearly than before. I can see the shape of the Bone King’s influence, peeling away to the north, broken against the sharp bright spires of the Empress and her kingdom. I can see the consequences of its cost, moving in static waves through the lattice of the ice itself, warming and breaking it.

In the crystal’s depths I can see our future, suddenly clear.

I can see the two of us together, at the end.

And I can see the blade in her heart.

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THE BROKEN KARWANEER

by Jeremy A. TeGrotenhuis

Dying fires flickered red from the caved-in barn and blackened clock-tower. They cast long shadows over the corpses slumped throughout the commons. There was a mother, her shoulder torn open to the cracked bone. A child's corpse lay beneath her, bloated and blue, smothered by the last act meant to save it.

Orha knew violence. It was a thing she wore. Cloaked in it she stood between her *karwan* and danger time and again, throwing back raider bands with her armor and sword. By it she provided the *karwan* its livelihood. Time and again she rode out at the head of the column to hunt the twisted beasts so valued for the virtues of their blood and bone, for the power in their skin.

There was sense in the violence she knew. Reason.

The mundanity of the fires sickened her, their light dimmed by the lenses of her mask. She knew there would be a smell of burnt flesh, of wood smoke and rot, though it did not reach her. Abel's mount plodded behind, a muted ringing of hooves above the muted crackle of the flames.

Red flames, like campfires, lit by human hands.

Her fingers groped along the metal seam of her mask. There was sacrilege in witnessing such violence through a veil. Rank air hissed in through the open seam. The galvanic thrum of her armor faded, and with it the power it vested in muscle and bone. *Good. Let me feel weak. Let me feel powerless.*

“Captain!”

Abel reined in beside her. She peeled the leathery facemask away. Her eyes, accustomed to the tint of the armor’s lenses, saw in shades of pink and red, as though all the world were a raw wound.

Seeing clearly did nothing to salve her. The hammering of her heart did not slow. The pain in her ribs, the feeling of emptiness, of impotent rage that boiled and boiled and the steam of it filled her skull. Seeing clearly accomplished nothing.

“Captain, some might still be lurking about.”

She clipped the mask to her belt and dismounted. “Tracks over there.” Orha pointed to the blackened tower at the center of the village. “See what you make of them.”

Abel hesitated for a moment. She felt his eyes, heard the halting steps of his horse.

“Do what I say, corporal.”

Orha knelt beside the mother. A faint odor of gun smoke lingered. The mother's shoulder blade had been splintered by a gunshot at close range. Her child, it seemed, had survived the fall, but not the weight of her body. A gold band still wrapped her wrist. *Why, then, the effort to ride her down?* Orha wondered, grasping for a fragment of reason, a mote of sense to be made. Wasted effort.

Senseless waste.

She gritted her teeth against the mounting pressure in her skull, like steam rising from a kettle in her chest. *Is that when the void breaks through? When the emptiness becomes too much?* A brokenness of the soul and a wound in the body. So Brighteye had described the moment of awakening to sorcery. His voice, usually full of warmth, flattened when he spoke of it. There were people in the world who lusted for that terrible power. The same sort of people, Orha assumed, who would kill and leave the corpse its jewelry.

She stood, and breathed, and forced reason back into the world.

“What have you found?”

Abel squatted beside the tangled web of tracks. “Not much of a fight. Feet running off in all directions. They scattered, and were cut down one by one. Poor bastards.”

“Don't be profane.”

Abel looked up at her. She could not see his face, only the bug-eyed mask of his armor, scaled hide and silver seams. He was young, and like many of the young he wore cynicism as a shield. How else to live in a world so broken?

“How many?” she said.

“At least ten horse, probably more, and a wagon.” Abel stood and pointed. “Though I think they came for more than pillage.”

There, between the ruts, a line of footprints, all different sizes, walking in the halting stutter-step of prisoners leashed to the saddle.

“Every *karwan* needs new blood, I suppose.”

His words were a bellows in her, heating the kettle in her chest, raising the steam. Orha forced herself to move, filled the emptiness with action, with purpose.

“Search for survivors,” she said, and studied those footprints. Bare feet made muddy with gore, some too small to be older than ten years. She counted seven sets of prints, at least, following their captors with a halting gait. There, one had resisted, had been pulled to the ground and dragged for two dozen paces, where they struggled back to their feet to stumble on.

New blood. Every *karwan*, even these bastard raiders, needed new blood. People died on the waste, without walls and

white-armored knights to defend them. Hunts went wrong. Plague broke out. Sometimes it was as simple a thing as a few fouled wells and not enough rain to fill the cistern wagon. They were free, without a white-armored boot on their necks, but they suffered for that freedom.

Children were born to Orha's *karwan*. Brighteye made a point of that. Every young woman who was able gave three lives before she took up the gun and lance to join the column. Young men had to fight younger, but that was the way of the world, and women fought their own battles to bring new blood to the *karwan*.

Orha had tried, but never quickened. Some people were only born to fight.

New blood. Was that why? They came and killed and stole seven children, just for a drop of new blood.

There was, at least, a glimmer of reason there.

Not enough to quiet her anger, to fill the void.

Nothing would be.

* * *

“And what will you do, when you find them?” Brighteye said.

Orha watched three of the *karwan*'s children as they brushed and prepared bags of feed for her and Abel's horses. They were orphans, rescued from a village dying the slow death

of starvation so common to settlements on the waste. Brighteye made a point of welcoming such children into his *karwan*. Always they came willingly, with nowhere else to go. Orha had heard rumors of *karwan* that stole children to use as or bait for beasts, or worse. She had never believed such stories. Lives were too valuable to throw away.

Brighteye leaned heavily on his cane. His good eye searched Orha's face. The other was hidden beneath a strip of blue cloth. Orha had seen it uncovered only once, when Brighteye had found cause to unleash sorcery. Black crystals of cacocite grew where his eye should have been. Black crystals just like those that sprouted from the ground where the world grew thin and the beasts came through.

"Sir," Orha straightened, as though by standing tall and seeming resolute she might convince him. "We should know where this raiding band rides. They are not the sort we want to meet, and the *karwan* is weak, still recovering from the last hunt."

"Do not lie, Captain." Brighteye shook his head, and the wrinkles at the corner of his eye hardened. "I know you well. What do you seek? Justice? Vengeance? An answer? Justice and vengeance are fickle things, and no answer these raiders might give could satisfy."

“Then are we to let them go?” She was surprised at the blade in her voice. It betrayed the black fire burning within her. *It poisons me. It makes me crueler than I am.*

“Whatever you want from these men, however you punish them, it will not be the end of evil. There will be horrors in your future. You must learn to live with them. To see them, and accept them, and weep, but to go on.”

His focus seemed to turn inward, and Orha felt that his words were as much for himself as for her.

“To go on.” His hands tightened around the head of his cane. “It is all we can do, and it is the greatest defiance.”

“I am not interested in defiance.” Orha backed away from him. “You speak as though the world is theirs, as though goodness and justice have no claim. You would let brutality rule without argument or answer.”

“Endurance is an answer.”

“It is an empty one.”

“To argue against violence with violence is empty.” Brighteye’s voice quavered. “I know this. What sort of wound do you think it was, that awakened me to sorcery?”

“I feel empty already.” She grasped his hand. “Please. Let me do this. I want to punish them, but more than that, they stole children. Children who will be raised by monsters.”

His frown deepened. Finally, with a heavy sigh, he said, “Take Abel with you. I can spare no one else.”

“Thank you.” She covered her heart in salute. He returned the gesture, shook his head, and went to help the children with the horses.

* * *

The raiders’ trail had led west, so the *karwan* turned south. Orha and Abel would meet them at Yezel Oas, where they would make camp and wait by the fresh water. It was a dangerous place to linger, for all manner of *karwan* filled their cisterns there. Brighteye would wait, but not long.

They sealed their armor, felt the galvanic rush of power, the surge of speed and strength to match the beasts that crawled out of the thinning places in the world. Orha had, in her younger days, often seen the irony in that. The *karwan* hunted those beasts for their skins, which went to make armor to make hunting easier.

What if we never hunted? We could throw away these stitched hides, find a place to scabble in the dirt. Dig wells, raise corn, live in peace.

Such a life was harder, she knew, and the places where food still grew in abundance were scarce. Villages were shrinking everywhere as the sickness of the thinnings spread through the earth, as plows turned up as many shards of black

crystal as stones. There were cities, like Capanilla where she had been born, but cities bred hardships of their own. The violence of such places had been more cleverly disguised, dressed in white armor and built on a foundation of law and tax and procedure. But violence, nonetheless.

Violence was a thing she wore.

I can choose its aim, she thought as she and Abel left the *karwan* behind. *I can direct it, use it to protect and to provide.*

They rode back to the butchered village, the silence a taut wire between them. Abel followed orders. He had saddled fresh horses and readied supplies at her command, but she felt his resentment. *He must think me a fool, and this a fool's errand.*

She remembered when they found him. A boy and his grandfather, on foot, walking the waste after the thinning ruined the land beneath their village. The old man had died days later. Abel was strong, steady with a gun and dependable with a lance. In his sixteenth year Brighteye recognized that strength. Young men always saw armor as a gift, as an honor. Never as the burden it was.

He had two children. Both girls, from different mothers, as was the way in the *karwan*. Diversity of blood kept away mutation. Orha felt a pang of guilt at the thought of them, at the risk she forced upon their father. That they hardly knew

him did little to assuage her. Neither did the thought that he would likely die on a hunt long before they came of age.

Perhaps they were why he had come without protest. He was a father, and by all accounts a good one, or as good a one as life in the *karwan* allowed. *Does he feel the same burden that I do? The same emptiness? Does he ride forth in rage?*

A backward glance told her nothing. His armor was sealed, and there was no truth to be found in those green, crystal eyes.

“What do you make of all this, Abel?”

He cocked his head.

“Captain?”

“Do you think me a fool?”

He did not answer till they caught sight of the columns of smoke, thin now, that had first led them to the butchered village.

“No, Captain, not at all,” he said.

“This errand may end in our deaths.”

He shrugged.

“Death and I made peace a long time ago, Captain.”

“You are too young for such sentiment.”

“Maybe,” he said. They were near the village now. The barn had collapsed completely, now nothing but smoldering rubble. Crows leapt from their meals in a flurry of wings.

“You put a spear in my hand, and Brighteye gave me armor,” Abel said. “The gifts I have are certainty and strength of will, and those weapons kill fear.”

“Would that I had your gifts, corporal.”

They returned to the hobnailed hoot prints, which led west, followed by the tread of shackled children.

* * *

They found the beast late on the fourth day, a mound of brutalized flesh that dwarfed the hills on which it lay. Muscle drained of life and color sagged in limp ropes. Without the power vested in its hide the beast was a formless thing, dragged apart by gravity and pressure and the laws of size and volume. The longbones of its sprawled limbs glistened in the sunlight. Carrion crows had plucked its eyes and picked at the tender flesh along its ribs. They circled overhead, a furious choir, as Orha and Abel approached.

“This was freshly done.” Abel reigned in his horse. “And by amateurs.”

Orha imagined him studying the deep punctures in the beast’s flank, the countless tunnels bored by gunshot, the bones splintered and ruined in the ease of the kill. He would be wondering, she was sure, why its killers—the butchers—had taken only the skin and teeth. The most valuable pieces for trading, yes, but a *karwan* took everything of use. Longbones

to reinforce the wagons or for the shafts of spears. Meat for the stewpot. Organs—the ones that were not poison—for their medicinal qualities.

These things only flitted through Orha's mind. She could spare no thoughts for them, no contemplation. Her mind was not her own, and shied from analysis, from anything but raw, screaming rage. For there, beside the beast, lay the body of a little girl.

“Profiteers,” Abel said, and even through the static of their helmets Orha heard the bile in his voice. “We were wrong, Captain. Not a *karwan* at all.”

Her dress was blue, beneath the mess that caked it. A length of rope around the girl's wrists led to a shattered stake of wood, broken by the beast's assault. The bones of her neck had twisted to snapping. A swift death, to end the dread, the panic of struggling without avail. There was a weal around her wrist to show that she had run until the rope refused her even that defiance.

The butchers' tracks led to a nearby stand of jagged rocks, where they had hidden with their guns while the girl wailed and pulled against her tether. While the beast came, dragging itself on oversized limbs, snapping its dog's jaw full of needle teeth. While the girl baited their trap, and died.

“Not for new blood, then.” Orha's voice was soft.

Abel's cough crackled into her ear, and he shifted suddenly in the saddle. His hands found the seal of his mask. It came away, and he retched.

Orha looked to the sky. The crows drew black circles against the clouds, eager for her to leave their meal.

You wish to feast on monsters? The black flames roared within her. The kettle boiled. *This creature is but a crumb beside the meal I will make for you.*

"We are not far behind." Orha said, kicking her mount. Abel grimaced, spat, then replaced his mask. They left the carcass, and the girl. Soon the crows ceased their crying. Orha heard their wingbeats as they drifted down.

Pray, crows, leave room for more.

* * *

The next morning, they came upon a thinning. At first glance it looked the same as the terrain they had been crossing, an ordinary stretch of dusty earth. But to the waste-trained eye there were signs. The lingering smell of a thunderstorm and a shimmer in the air, like heat rising from sunbaked earth in the dry season. Black cacocite grew thick in the ground, cracking beneath their horses' hooves. The crackling, static sound of it thrummed deep in their ears.

"Must be where the beast crawled out," Abel said.

“They’ll try to lure another on the far side of the thinning,” Orha said. “Beasts won’t go near the corpses of their kin.”

An image of blue fabric and frayed rope, stained in blood, came to mind. Another beast, another child used as bait. *No. Not if we hurry. Not if we stop them first.*

The butcher’s trail curved southward, for even a profiteer knew better than to ride into a hole in the world. If they hurried, they might catch the butcher by end of day.

As they rode wide around the thinning, Orha recalled her first sight of such a place, when the *karwan* had come upon one and routed wide around it. She had shivered in fear and wonder, recalling whispered tales told with haunted eyes of the cousin of a cousin or the friend of a friend whose uncared-for footsteps had led into a thinning. Their souls, it was said, fell out of the world like water through a sieve.

She had asked Brighteye if any of those stories told true.

“Yes, child,” he said, “in that they reflect our fears, which are born of uncertainty.”

“But you are a sorcerer,” she said, “and the stories all say how sorcerers broke the world and made the thinnings. That makes them evil, doesn’t it? How can you be something evil?”

A faint smile touched his lips. “If only the world were so neatly ordered. Child, not every good man is without brokenness. In fact, for some, it is brokenness that made them

good. For others, those who cannot endure, their brokenness only lashes out against the world. Sorcery is that. It is lashing out.”

Orha frowned. Brighteye shook his head.

“I see that you do not understand. Perhaps someday you will, but I hope not.”

“What a cruel thing to say.”

“Oh no, child, no. I would not wish knowledge of sorcery upon my worst enemy.”

“What about the thinnings, then,” she said, “and the cacocite, and the beasts?”

“There are many accounts. Many words borrowed from ancient, half-forgotten traditions. The thinnings lead to hell, or the world behind, or primordial chaos. Who can say? We only know that we fear whatever lies beyond, that the thinnings breed a black crystal that poisons the soil, that those who wander in never return, and that only beasts crawl out.”

“But where did they come from?”

“If I knew the answer to that I would not be riding with the *karwan*, but called to council the kings in their cities, heralded as the greatest mind of our age.” He grinned at her, but she could not find the humor in his words.

“No one knows?”

“No one knows anything, my child.”

“Well.” Orha stared at the blue sky. “That’s bleak.”

Silence held between them. Brighteye shifted the reins in his hands and sighed.

“It doesn’t matter, does it?” he said. “Wherever they came from, whatever caused them, they are here, now, and they shape all our lives. Any explanation could do but one of two things. Either assign blame, and so justify cruelty in the name of revenge or punishment. Or, if it were discovered that no one is to blame, that the world simply is the way that it is and we are doomed by no fault of our own, we would be left with nothing but despair.”

“But if we knew, maybe we could fix it. Or stop it from getting worse, at least.”

Brighteye’s eyes widened, and he laughed. “Your optimism is boundless, child. That it has survived your short life full of hardship is nothing but a miracle. Yes, perhaps we could fix it. I have no notion of how such an effort should begin.”

Orha remembered the questions, and the want for answers, the fog of uncertainty descending with Brighteye’s words. It clung to her, and never lifted.

She no longer wanted to fix the world. Where she found goodness, she would protect it. Where she found cruelty, she would resist. And perhaps, if she had the strength, she might leave the world better in her wake.

She thought of these things, and followed the butcher's trail.

* * *

Campfire smoke rose in a pillar that cut across the moon. Five hard days of riding, and they had caught their quarry at last. Orha tied their mounts to a gnarled tree. They checked the seals of their armor and took their swords. Orha and Abel had no need for guns. Violence was a thing they wore.

From atop the low hill Orha studied the butcher's camp. She saw two covered wagons laden with supplies brought from the city and trade goods ripped from the slaughtered beast. Tents were scattered haphazardly. Only two men stood watch, one facing north and the other south. The rest had gathered around a campfire. She looked for the children, and saw them huddled beside one of the wagons, far from the fire, near the hobbled horses.

Night settled. The men went to their tents. One of the sentries, perhaps disgruntled at having been left out of a night of drinking, walked to the fire and took a bottle back to his post. One of the children cried out in hunger. The sentry spat a curse and threw a stone. The child yelped and then was silent.

Orha crawled back to their horses at the bottom of the slope. Abel followed. He drew his sword, a wide blade of hammered iron, too heavy for a hand without armor.

“I hope you will not need that,” Orha said. “You lead the children away while I hold their attention.”

She could not see his face, and the bug-eyed mask betrayed no frown, but Abel stiffened at her words.

“Why?”

“We are not here only for vengeance, Abel.”

He studied her, his hands tightening around the bone handle of his weapon.

“Let me fight,” he said. “You lead the children away. The *karwan* needs you more than it needs me, should something go wrong.”

“No, Abel,” she said. The black fire roiled, built pressure in her skull. She was so near to release, and not about to back away. *Do you feel the same way, corporal? Do I deny you catharsis? Well, you are young, and still far from breaking. You can endure.*

Finally, he sheathed his sword.

“Meet me at Tullis Well, when it is over,” she said. “Three days. No longer. If I do not appear, hurry on to the *karwan* and speak well of my death.”

“I will,” he said. “And then I will ride out again to avenge you.”

She shook her head, but did not scold him. Perhaps that would be the best course, if she died. She found herself thinking little of the future, beyond the bloody hour to come.

The butchers were not expecting an attack. Orha carved the first sentry from throat to navel. The second managed a single cry of alarm before his head spun from his shoulders. Power surged through her, and her blade wailed a keening song as it split the air and wicked flesh. They came crawling from their tents, half asleep with pistols and knives to hand. Too slow. Too weak. She left them sprawled and shattered.

Not one of them had armor. Not one of them could rival her. The few blows they managed to strike rebounded from her carapace. Their bullets flew wide, for their aim could never match the speed of her fury.

Violence was hers that night, and she made sure they knew it, that they understood cruelty and fear before they died. Their blood and their screams splashed against her. These wicked, deserving men. And still the black fire raged, and the pressure only grew.

She whirled, brought her sword high to strike, and froze.

A man stood at the mouth of his tent and held a girl before him. A scar seamed the left side of his face, and another furrowed his burly arm from elbow to wrist. That arm held the girl close. He pressed the barrel of his pistol to her throat.

“Drop the sword.” The butcher’s scar rippled as he spoke.

The girl searched Orha’s face with eyes wide and terrified. The butcher’s finger twitched on the trigger.

“I said drop it!”

Orha’s hands tightened around the bone handle of her sword. Breath came shallow. If she lunged she might stave in his head. Thirty paces, she counted. No distance at all, in armor.

“Lower it, I said!”

No distance at all.

Black fire raged. Steam built behind her eyes. The bones of her arms shuddered, enraged, ready to kill.

No distance, but all the distance in the world.

Her hands opened. Gunshots ripped the air. Two bullets hammered her armor. It cracked and she fell, screaming. No distance! But he had been crueler. More willing.

Violence, in the end, had been his.

* * *

She remembered something else. Something that Brighteye had said. There had been a long pause, while they passed the thinning, but as they left it behind he had turned to her.

“We may not be able to fix the world, Orha,” he had said, “but this is what we can do. Protect compassion where it is

found. Resist cruelty when it rears its head. To go on, in spite of the brokenness, is the greatest defiance. Do that, and perhaps the world will be a better place, if only where you tread.”

She remembered, as she lay sprawled in her broken armor, while the butcher with his scar stood over her and, grinning, shot her in the forehead.

* * *

It did not kill her, she realized when she woke to the pounding in her head and the burning ache in all her bones. She sat on hard ground, her wrists bound and wrenched to one side. Her back pressed against something rough, hard, and thin as a rail. A phantom ringing dulled all sound, and the pain behind her eyes glued them shut.

Not only the pain. Blood. Her armor had deflected the bullet, but it had scored a furrow in her scalp.

“Wake up.”

She gasped as frigid water splashed her face. Her eyes fluttered open of their own accord. She saw the world in spinning color. The butcher grinned at her, with his scar and his pistol, which he tapped against the side of his head as he watched her sputter.

“Not much time left, and I’ve some questions before you die.”

He squatted. His eyes drifted down to the smallclothes Orha wore beneath her armor. The only things she wore, now, which clung to her, damp as they were. When he had satisfied the urge to leer, the butcher again met her gaze.

She ignored him. The rage that had burned within her had been dampened to a fading ember. Had Abel managed to save the other children? She saw only the butcher's hostage, the girl, there behind him. The others, then, must have escaped. Perhaps Orha's death would not be meaningless. There was some comfort in that.

The butcher drew his mouth into a line, shook his head, and drove his fist into her belly.

She retched, then slumped, held up only by the thin rope that bit her wrists. He reached into the pocket of his vest and withdrew a brass pocket watch, checked the time, then clicked it shut.

"You haven't got time to waste on lip, woman," he said. "You forget that I broke your armor. You're weak and pink like the rest of us. No more carapace. Now, to my questions."

He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder at the girl, who stood beside a thick stand of shrubs where Orha saw seven men hiding, their guns in hand. She stood like a dead thing stuffed with cotton and felt. Motionless. Empty-eyed.

“We thought for sure no one would come looking for those waste-urchins. Then there you were, and that coward who never showed her face, come to murder the better half of my boys and steal our hard-won bait. And I’m asking, first, who in the hell you are, and second, why in the hell you care.”

Orha had been nothing but coals inside, but his words were a bellows on her heart.

“Who are *you*, butcher?”

“Who am *I*?” He rolled back on his heels with a quizzical expression. “A hunter, and that’s all. A man out to make his living and rid the world of a few monstrosities.” He grinned. “Just trying to do my part.”

“You’re worse than any beast.” Orha sputtered.

“Oh, that’s not true.” He flipped open the pocket watch again, then clicked it shut. He drew his brows together, as though returning to some oft-contemplated thought. “At worst I’m of the same caliber as a beast. These villages out here, they can’t survive. It’s only a matter of time before something gets them, either the cacocite or a rampaging beast. I’m no crueller than nature itself.”

He opened the pocket watch again, turned its face toward her. A picture had been pasted to the inside of the cover. Three children, dressed in finer clothes than Orha had ever seen.

“I’ve got a family to feed back home. Children with bright futures to provide for, unlike these waste-urchins. Might as well get use out of them—”

“Use?” Orha said through her teeth. The black fires rumbled back to life. “You don’t know anything. You speak as though these children are doomed, but they aren’t. The waste—the world—is cruel, but we survive. Yet you rob them of even that chance, and for what? A fresh shirt for your son?”

A heavy thud beat the ground, rolled through the earth. Then another, louder, and another. She knew the tread of beasts like she knew her own voice. Her heart began to pound.

The butcher stood. “Time’s up. Guess I’ll track your friend down. Have to get my property back anyway. Maybe she’ll be more forthcoming.”

He shook his head, stuffed the watch into his pocket, then ran to take cover with his men. The girl shuddered at his passing.

Another footfall shook the earth. Orha strained against her bonds and craned her neck. The beast lumbered toward her on twisted, many-jointed limbs. Its head swung back and forth. Seven eyes, terribly human in shape but black as the eyes of carrion crows, fixed on her.

She had faced down beasts before, but always either wearing armor or at a distance with a gun in her hand. Her

bonds cut into her wrists. The rope was too strong, and the stake driven too deep.

This will not be how I die! She ground her teeth. *Bound and powerless.* The black fire raged. The beast's next footfall was near enough to shake her bones. She heard its ragged breathing, slow and rasping like a broken bellows. A musk like rotting flowers filled her nose. She had never smelled it so clearly. She had never been so near without her helmet.

It loomed over her, its seven eyes narrowing.

This will not be how I die!

But it would be.

And so many died in just the same way. Not gored by beasts, but staring down death inevitable just the same. Slow sicknesses that stole life in bits and pieces. Sudden traumas predicated only by a rush of fear and burst of pain. They were a lucky few who died happily in their sleep after a long life fully lived. Most people died badly. Why should she be any different?

In the end, even the vengeance she longed for had escaped her. And if it had been hers, what would it have mattered? A few cruel men slain, a few brutalized children saved, but only for a moment. Brutality would come again. Cruelty would always rear its head, and compassion was so vulnerable, so impossible to protect.

The beast lowered its head, seven eyes blinking, and breathed the scent of her. She met its gaze. Her body shuddered. Her bones ached. The pressure built and pressed within her, and her body was a weak vessel, too thin, too powerless.

She would not shut her eyes. She would not go quietly. Blood trickled from her hairline, stung her eye. Pain pulsed where bullets had broken her armor and bruised her. Her hands quivered and clutched the air.

The world was broken. It could not be made right. And Orha would die, badly, finally knowing this.

A scream, empty of fear and full of fury, tore itself from her throat. And with it the dam that held back the pressure of her rage gave way. *So let it burn.*

The pressure that filled her skull poured through the furrow in her scalp. Where the pressure had fled, power rushed in, like the first sweet breath after drowning. Black fire followed behind.

With a grunt of surprise, the beast was gone. Where it had stood, there burned a black wall of flame. Flames she recognized. Brighteye had used them, only once, to save the *karwan* from certain destruction.

A sob broke from Orha, and she staggered to her feet. The rope was gone, and the stake. The things she hated, one by one, ripped from the fabric of the world.

She turned her eyes on the butcher, who aimed his pistol, and then was gone.

Not enough.

Never enough. He was not the only butcher in the world. The world bred them, the cruel. White-armored in the cities. Raiders on the waste. These hideous profiteers. Symptoms. Consequences of a greater brokenness. Something unfixable. Something worthless.

The world is not for me and my kind, Orha thought, as the fires poured out from her, directionless, a lashing out at every cruelty suffered and imagined and yet to come.

She raised her hand, put it to the seam of the world, ready for the final unraveling.

“Stop!”

A sob reached through the flames. A fog lifted. Orha saw the girl, on her knees, tear-streaked and pleading.

“Please, please stop!”

A moment passed, and the fires went out.

* * *

It took them a while to calm one of the butcher's horses. The creatures were skittish around Orha, in much the same

way they were skittish around the beasts and thinnings. She felt a pang of guilt while the girl, Saelle, stroked the creature's neck and whispered calming words.

Her fingers drifted up to the furrow along her scalp. It no longer bled. Its surface felt smooth, hard, and cold. She imagined a line of black glass glimmering there, and shivered.

I have lost my armor, she thought, while Saelle held the horse and bade her mount. *Violence is a thing inside me, now, held in only by this brittle seam.*

A seam she could tear loose, at any moment, to let free again the black fires.

The fires she had loosed upon the world had died. Those she carried within still burned, fiercely as ever, and would never stop, she knew. This was what Brighteye had meant. She now understood why he had not been able to answer her questions. It was not a thing to speak of easily, and never with one who had not felt it. To go on, broken. The greatest defiance.

Orha took the reins with Saelle sitting behind her on the saddle. The girl wrapped her arms tight around Orha. She was so slight. So young to have already suffered so much.

A pang of deep sadness shook her and stirred the black fires. But the pang was good. It told her that she had not given in, that her heart still felt for the world. She could endure.

Is this what Brighteye feels, when he looks at me? I begin to understand him, more and more. He would be deeply saddened, she knew, when she told him, as she would be to learn that Saelle, or Abel, or any other person with a good and compassionate soul had reached that breaking point, that place where the world itself is the enemy, and irredeemable, and the only path left leads to obliteration.

Not the only path, she reminded herself. Saelle had led her back. She wondered who had been that person for Brighteye, and what had become of them.

Abel was there, after all, with three stolen mounts and the five children. At the sight of them Saelle gasped in happiness and scrambled out of the saddle. She raced over and caught up the two smallest in her arms. It was the first time Orha had seen her smile.

“I thought you were dead.” Abel’s voice was muffled by his mask.

“Then you should have moved on.”

He tilted his head quizzically. “But Captain, you said three days. If I’d disobeyed you’d have bitten my head off.”

“How long has it been?”

“Today is the third,” he said. “We should hurry on. Brighteye will be fearing for our lives.”

* * *

The *karwan* folded the children into the patterns of its life. Strays were common enough, and most strays carried trauma. The *karwan* could not take those hurts away, and Orha knew that the lives they should have lived would always haunt them. So it was for most in the *karwan*. So it was, Orha had come to realize, for most good people in the world.

When they returned to the *karwan* Orha felt eyes on her like she had never known before. Fearful eyes that traced the seam of glass along her scalp. Abel had suggested that she wrap her head in a scarf, till she had time to share her story with Brighteye, and he in turn had time to warn the others. She had refused. This was who she was, now. Let people make of it what they would.

Only Brighteye looked first in her eyes.

“Oh, child,” he said, and embraced her. “Welcome home.”

The tears came unbidden.

When the children had been settled and her wounds had begun to heal, she sat with Brighteye on the seat of his wagon as she had often done as a girl. Saelle rode behind Abel. They would not let her carry gun and spear for some time. But she would, eventually, and Orha had no doubt that she would earn armor in time.

“Brighteye,” she said.

“Yes, child?”

“Could I have done it? I was ready to. Willing to. I hated the world. Often I have been angry, but this was deeper. This was loathing. And I had my finger on the seam of it all, ready to tear and leave it all in tatters.”

He slowly nodded.

“What if it happens again?” she said. “What if the *karwan* is attacked, or worse, and I lose myself in the hatred?”

A silence held between them.

“Are you asking whether or not it lies within the scope of your power? Or are you asking whether or not *you*, Orha of my *karwan*, could do such a thing?”

She thought for a moment. “Both.”

“To the second question, I say no.” He smiled at her. “For you did not.”

“I wanted to. If not for Saelle—”

“If not for Saelle, then for Abel, or for me,” he said. “I remember standing in that place. The hate. The emptiness. The temptation. But I endured. And so did you. It is the character of the person, Orha, and not circumstance. For endurance simply is the willingness to go on in spite of everything, in the face of any circumstance.”

Brighteye shifted his grip on the reins. The horses trudged along.

“To answer the first question,” Brighteye said at last, “I can say only this. In that moment, the world feels so thin, so fragile, and the hatred so potent. But the world is still here, Orha. Either it is more resilient than we know, or else every man and woman who has ever held the power to destroy it has decided to go on.”

Gently, he handed her the reins.

“I am not sure which would hearten me more.”

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