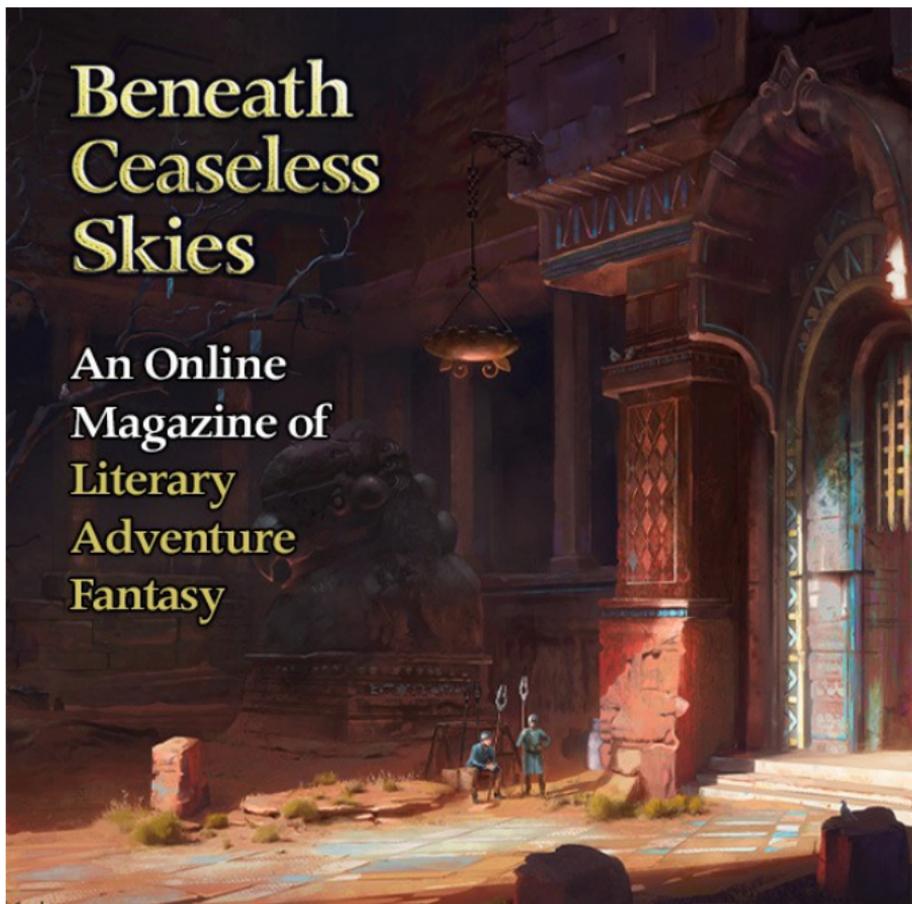


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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ACROSS PACK ICE, A FIRE

by Marissa Lingen

The icon of the saint glistened in the gaslight like a map of empire, and not Solveig's own empire. The green and red mineral paints for the verdant background, the saint's lips and wounds, were from her own lands, of course, iron and copper hauled by horse cart from the famous mines to the brand-new railways and then traded to the Veralduki icon painters to the east. Those pigments were usually used to ground spells, to anchor them.

The blue, vivid blue, gleaming blue, marking the saint's robe: that was ground lapis, from the Veralduki empire itself, as was the shimmering lead white of the spirit attending the saint as an ivory gull. One was for summoning, the other for cleansing. She had used both many times in the years she had been the prince's personal sorceress.

But the gold, the gold leaf that picked out the halo and made it shine—*that* was dragged out of the ground, at no small human cost, in the contested lands of the Kvenmark in between.

That was where the trouble lay.

It was fitting, Solveig supposed, that the troublesome gold part of the icon's spell should come from the troubled Kvenmark. Gold was always a wild card in sorcerous workings, and the modern sorcerers who attempted to apply natural philosophy to their methods had not found a way around that. It would take her a great deal of study to work around the gold, with the spell she had in mind—and at the moment her mind felt hollow, emptied out by the very loss that sparked her desire for revenge, or justice, or both.

Solveig swallowed her brennivin all at once, barely tasting the caraway as it burned its way down her throat. Behind her there was a tiny rustle, more felt than heard. She turned.

The refugee girl Noora was there. Thin and sallow from her long illness, she would never have been a beauty at the peak of health, uneven features, snaggle teeth. The black silk mourning frock Solveig's mother had bought for Noora hung on her like a pall. Her three-dimensional pallor made the icon on the wall look like humanity's perfection, the actual child—sniffing, hungering—a copy.

Several people had whispered in Solveig's ear that they wouldn't blame her if she hated Noora for carrying the Veralduki-crafted disease that had killed Per. A dirty peasant child was bad enough, they hinted; a diseased one, far more than anyone could be expected to countenance. But Solveig

only saw Noora's hunger for love, revenge, and as many good meals as she could put in front of her. Per had been the one who wanted to take in a refugee child. Solveig couldn't betray his most loving impulses, even when they had betrayed him.

Solveig put her arms out, but Noora did not come to them for a hug. Solveig turned the gesture into an open-palmed shrug. "I couldn't stand the funeral crowds either. Have you eaten?"

Noora shook her head miserably.

"You must eat. *I* must eat." Solveig felt the truth of it as she stood. A long day of sympathizers and well-wishers, shaking hands, having her cheek pressed by them, topped by brennivin, left her shaky and empty. If the child had only come for an embrace, Solveig could have leaned on her. But Noora was not like that. "Come. We will face them together, and fix ourselves plates."

Solveig knew that they could not help but make an entrance among the mourners. Only a few of them were talking of Per himself, what a good man he was, what a good doctor, what a good friend. The rest were speculating as to whether his widow the sorceress was taking it well, what she would do with the ugly sickly little foreign child, whether the neighbors should buy extra magic shielding against the grief of Solveig Martasdottir.

Solveig knew that those who should fear her magic were not her immediate neighbors. But she could not blame them for seeing that she was holding herself together by the very narrowest of margins, even if they had not troubled themselves to understand precisely why. She put her hand on Noora's shoulder protectively—steadyingly—and went in.

Her mother, a grey and rigidly upright copy of Solveig, swept over to them. “My dear. My dears.”

“We need food,” said Solveig. “We need food, and we need —” Her eyes scanned the packed salon. “Mama, I can't, I can't have all these people. It has been too much already.”

“I can feed the child,” said Marta. “There's plenty on the smorgasbord yet, I will take her to make a plate.”

Solveig bobbed her head. “And I will clear the people out.”

Marta looked dubious but focused her attentions on the refugee child, on thin slices of cheese and apple and crisp rye cracker breads, on trying to coax her into eating richer things, crepes stuffed with cheese and salmon, little nut pastries that had appeared without Solveig requesting them.

Solveig forced herself to turn from marveling at the way that her servants had handled things, to speak to the guests quietly, politely, decorously. “So sorry,” she murmured to each. “Thank you so much for your support in this difficult time. But

I'm afraid the family needs some quiet. There is so much to attend to. So sorry. So sorry."

They took the hint reluctantly, leaving in clumps and clusters, clucking to themselves about how thin she and the child looked, how pale. Whether it was safe, even now, for her to keep the child in the house. What she might be driven to do—though their speculation fell woefully short of her own plans.

Finally she reached the secret heart of the gathering. On her own favorite deep red velvet divan, eating the last of the grapes he had sent for Per when Per was sick, was the prince. Solveig bowed her head into the least curtsy politeness required, feeling that she might tip if she bent any lower. Feeling that she would break.

"My lord," she murmured.

"Oh, do not stand on ceremony, Solveig Martasdottir, not in your own house, not on this sad occasion," said Prince Eugen. "Per Helgisson was our faithful servant. We mourn him as you do." Though the prince was impeccably correct—even, by his own lights, compassionate—Solveig found his unctuous tone grating, and she had to force herself to respond graciously.

"My lord, I fear that it has been a long day for me," said Solveig. "While your presence honors us all...."

Prince Eugen got to his feet in one smooth movement, kissing Solveig on both cheeks before she knew what was

happening. His moustache was waxed, something Per had never done no matter how he had moved in the prince's inner circles. It poked at her stiffly. She stifled the urge to slap it—and him—away.

“Poor dear lady,” he said. “We feel your loss as our own. Think no more of it, but come to the palace again when you have decided that you are ready to serve again.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Solveig softly.

The prince's departure hastened the exodus of the rest of the mourners, sincere and otherwise, and soon it was only Solveig and her mother, and little Noora, who took the prince's spot on the divan and earnestly munched her apple slices.

“When *will* you serve again?” asked Marta.

Solveig sank down next to Noora. “Mother, I don't know.”

Marta handed Solveig a plate with all the same things on it as she had given Noora. Solveig picked at the cheese. “The prince won't forgive you the little intruder forever. For now Per's death has wiped the slate clean.”

“I cannot think right now.”

Marta steeped her fingers together. “You are a sorceress. If there is anything I have taught you, it is that sorcery means you are never exempt from thinking. Not in illness, not in exhaustion. Not even in grief.”

Solveig closed her eyes, swaying a little as the room spun around her. She knew Marta was right. But it was too soon, far too soon. When Noora was fully well—when it had been more than a week since Per’s death—when she could eat cheese without someone having to hand it to her, tell her how much cheese was the right amount of cheese. When she could look at the prince without wanting to scream at him for not using his famed charm to intercede and stop the war between his neighbors, to keep the atrocities from spreading. When she was absolutely sure that her wrath would not fall on him instead of the Veralduki empire, where it belonged.

In the old days, she had trusted the prince. She had thought that working for him and traveling with him would mean that he would listen to her and Per. But that had been before the Veralduki Empire had decided to take the Kvenmark lands for their own, before Prince Eugen and his parents had decided to let it happen without lifting a finger. Before a war had torn the neighboring countries apart while Solveig and her compatriots watched. The incomparable cold-weather gardens of Jakani burned, the Porvian waterdance troop held hostage to the Veralduki emperor’s sadistic whims. The suffering and disease that radiated from the trenches of the North Kven front. She had thought that being part of Prince Eugen’s entourage meant she could influence him toward greater

justice in the world. She had thought that her years of service meant he would listen. At the very least, she had believed that the prince she served would have brought a smaller kind of justice to her husband's killers.

She would have to find another way to get those kinds of justice.

Solveig opened her eyes. Her mother and Noora were still there. Per was still dead. The plate still looked impossibly full, and far more distant than it ought to be.

But between the icon upstairs and Noora on the divan with her, Solveig began to understand how, exactly, she might achieve her revenge on her husband's distant and faceless killers.

The icon was a relic of their travels with Prince Eugen. In those times, Solveig and Per had sailed the waters of the far north in the prince's personal guard on his boreal exploration ship, and her skills as sorceress and his as physician had been indispensable to His Highness in ways she could never have predicted.

One winter they were marooned in the pack ice off the northern Veralduki coast for several weeks.

The peasants had heard that there was a rich Fendik ship, and three of them came together, trudging across the ice. The captain lowered a ladder down to receive the Veralduki callers,

who were wrapped in enough layers to look like walking rag bags to Fendik eyes, in their tidy furs and sweaters.

“They’re looking for a doctor,” the translator reported.

Prince Eugen looked at Per inquisitively. “You don’t have to go. It’s filthy down in those little towns, you could catch anything.”

Per drew himself up indignantly. “I am a doctor. And my wife is very good at disinfectant spells.”

The prince shrugged. “Have it your way.”

Solveig walked out of the prince’s cabin with Per, out on the cold deck with the interpreter and the ragged Veralduki peasants. “Do you want me to go with you?”

He kissed her. “You can stay here where it’s warm if you like. If there are any magical illnesses I can send a runner for you, but in a village this poor, I expect it’ll just be malnutrition, filth, unlanced boils, unset bones. Nothing you need to stand around watching.”

Solveig had been relieved, but only briefly. Soon she realized she had nothing to do all day but stand on deck in the cold, watching the ivory gulls wheel and waiting for Per to return. She did not consider this a grand bargain.

Per came back hours later, bags under his eyes and a large rectangular bundle under his arm. He bade the modest among the crew not to watch, for he stripped to his smalls, whistling

though the wind came across the pack ice, and dropped the clothing he had worn to be burned in a fire upon the ice rather than letting it on board ship. His smalls he sent to the galley to be boiled.

“I could have decontaminated those,” said Solveig, surveying her naked husband with mingled dismay and satisfaction as he scrubbed himself.

“A waste of spell ingredients,” he replied. “I’m glad you didn’t go, Sol. It was grim. It was dire. Those poor people.”

“But you did some good.”

“Oh, plenty of that. They insisted on paying me, poor wretches.”

“With what? Contaminated eggs and their firstborn children?”

He gestured at the wooden rectangle, whose rags had gone overboard with his clothes. Solveig turned it away from the wall and gasped. It was a glistening icon of Sankt Vidkun.

“It was what they had. The village all together.”

“You can’t take an icon from a village sorcerer. I am one, I know how dangerous our gifts can be. Even little children know, gifts from a sorcerer can be blessing and curse in equal measure. What if it’s a trick, a trap?”

“Be calm, love, it was not their sorcerer. They are too poor to have one. It was in their church, and I healed enough of them—”

“You can’t let them give you their church icon, Per!”

“I can’t *not* let them, Sol. They were too proud to let me do it free, they were beside themselves.”

Solveig turned to the icon, examining it closely. “Not exactly going to make a showing in the Academy, but beautiful in its way.”

“We’ll keep it. Of course we will, we have to.”

It had hung in their house for seven years, the beginning of a war, the arrival of a child—but not their own—and Per’s death. Solveig had tried not to think of the way that Per and the prince had fought, long into the night, after the icon came on board. About what to do about the Veralduki. About whether the prince could continue to sail around regarding the world at an impeccable distance. Per had lost. The prince, inevitably, had won. And now Solveig looked to the icon for her answers.

But there was still Noora to tend to, in the month it took Solveig to crack the puzzle that occupied all her days: how to use the icon to house the spell that would avenge Per. Despite the gossip of half the malicious souls at the funeral, an eleven-year-old girl was not an inconvenient parcel to be shipped back and forth between countries as it became politically expedient.

She had to be fed, though she did not want to eat after her long illness. She had to rebuild her strength, though she was listless after the death of her protector.

Nor did Solveig herself have much more interest in these activities. It was Marta who marched them outside into the bracing winds for walks, Marta who made sure the servants had instructions for preparing all of Solveig's childhood favorites, simple things that might not daunt Noora's foreign tongue.

It was Marta who confronted her daughter in her workshop as she tried to solve the problem of the icon.

"Not more lapis," said Solveig out loud. "More lapis would give them an actual plague. No plague. We have had enough of plagues."

"Solveig," said Marta.

"And not phthalocyanine blue, that's too modern, too contained, it's got to be contagious."

"Solveig!"

"In a minute, Mother."

"Whatever it is can wait until you and Noora have had a walk in the fresh air with me."

Solveig blinked at her. "Oh dear no. You take Noora for her walk now. I have to apply—ah, ochre, yellow ochre—and then I

will have this all finished. And I can go to see the prince about Noora's and my journey."

"You and Noora are going on a journey? To the country, perhaps? It would be good for you to—"

"To a country."

"You're not taking her back to Kvenmark."

"No, Mother." Solveig took a deep breath. "To the Veralduki Empire."

It took three diagrams and an hour and a half to convince her mother that she had not taken leave of her senses, by which point Noora had taken her coat back off and was building a fort with the beautiful tasseled pillows in the sitting room. Marta decided that a game was close enough to the kind of healthy exercise she wanted for the child and joined her at it.

Prince Eugen took less time and fewer diagrams than Marta, which was a great relief, as Solveig did not intend to offer him any, nor anything like the truth. He greeted her with smiles and a samovar of chocolate.

"Prepared to rejoin my service, Solveig Martasdottir?" asked the prince, once again bristling her cheek with mustaches.

"I have one final task, but I think your highness will approve," said Solveig.

He raised a well-manicured eyebrow and circled his hand for her to continue.

“I fear that my husband and I—members of your highness’s retinue—taking in a refugee was politically inexpedient for you, for the country,” said Solveig. “I would like to make a gesture toward retrieving your neutrality, if I may—or rather toward demonstrating that yours was always there, that any lapse in neutrality was ours alone. I would like to return the icon given to my husband by the Veralduki people when we were trapped in the ice.”

Prince Eugen clapped his hands. “What a thoughtful gesture! Return to them the icon that your husband received, demonstrate to them that you bore no ill will toward the Veralduki people or their government, merely that your husband felt a sentimental attachment to an orphan child.”

Solveig forced a smile. “Just so, my lord.”

“Brilliant! And then you will return to service?”

“Stronger than ever, my lord. And to further the cause of diplomacy, I will bring the child with me. A Kven child bringing a gift to Veralduki people—surely this will help her people to understand that they ought to sue for peace.”

Prince Eugen gave her a long look. “We cannot take a position in this conflict.”

“Peace is always the goal of a neutral state, my lord.”

“I suppose it is. Well then. Return safely, and further the goal of peace.”

Solveig curtsied neatly and took her leave, her divided skirts swirling around her. She managed to suppress a smile of triumph in case anyone was watching. There was a long and arduous task ahead yet, so triumph was premature in any case.

Outside the palace, the prince's servant, anonymous in palace livery, had Solveig's horse waiting, fresh and warm from the stable. Everyone's breath came white in the cold. Across from the palace, the line of Kven refugees stretched for blocks: children and old people, huddled into their coats, clustered together for warmth. Kven who had never met each other before became each other's new families in the refugee lines. She thought of Noora, weak and ill as she had been, subject to the rough-and-tumble vagaries of those lines, and shuddered. Was it worth Per's death? Nothing was worth Per's death. But unless her sorcery managed to turn time back and notice in time that Noora's illness was of magical origin, the question was moot.

When they had first taken Noora in, Per thought that she was having a hard time adjusting to a new country. Solveig thought that she was sullen—which was not as bad a thing as it could have been, as Solveig too had been a sullen girl at eleven. She had stared at the ground on the ride home, wept at the

bright colors of the sitting room, and closed herself in the nursery—intended for a much smaller child—taking only bread and milk, and that only when the maid begged her in Kven.

A doctor and a sorceress. Solveig felt sure that they should have seen, should have known, that there was something more wrong than only difficulties settling into a new home in a new country with a new family. But “*should have*” cultured no cheese, as the peasants said. The fever the Veralduki had planted among the Kven blossomed in the child and spread to the rest of the household. “*Should have*” was turned to “*should now*,” and a long ride into the cold.

When Solveig returned home from her audience with the prince, Marta had prepared Noora as promised, with a riding coat and hat and fine boots. Noora looked as sullen as if these had been manacles, her early demeanor returned.

“Do I need to send for another physician, as ours is gone?” asked Solveig.

Noora glared at her.

“Many’s the poor child who would give their left thumb for that hat, foreign or native alike,” said Marta.

Noora ripped the offending headwear off and flung it at Marta’s head, then fled the scene.

Solveig pursued. Chaos followed. By the time order was restored, Marta had soothed two housemaids and the neighbor

across the square, Solveig had cast two spells, and Noora had apologized, grudgingly.

Solveig had also explained that she had no intention of returning Noora home.

“You have to trust me.”

“I trust no one who takes me on a ride to the north of the Veralduki scum with winter coming on,” said Noora. “And you would be well-advised to keep the same as your own maxim for life.”

“She’s not wrong about that, daughter,” said Marta.

“Hush,” said Solveig. “It’s just a visit. We’ll ride back out again.”

“That’s what the Emperor of Bonterre said,” said Noora.

“Who educated *her*?” said Solveig, astonished. The child was not wrong, but her timing was, as always, drastically inconvenient.

Marta rolled her eyes.

But the next morning they set out on their horses all the same, the two of them with pack animals in tow for winter supplies, and for carrying the icon. It was wrapped much more carefully going into the Veralduki Empire than it had come out, swathed in layers of canvas and then packed in its own box specially built for carry on a saddle.

The snows fell as they left home to ride north, and Solveig tried not to be disheartened. It would be worth it. It would have to be.

She checked Noora's color periodically as they rode. Her face was angry and closed, but her cheeks were pink with exertion and cold, her health returned. Any Kven child who couldn't bear the temperatures of early winter would find herself in serious difficulty, but the magical plague that had taken Per had nearly taken Noora too. It had been intended to. Solveig felt vindicated in worrying.

In fact Noora had reached death's pier first, she had just lingered there longer and eventually taken a different ship. Per had hovered at her bedside, trying remedy after remedy, until he too collapsed. By the time Solveig shouldered aside his colleagues, it was too late. She only barely did the counterspell on Noora in time—her younger constitution made her last longer.

By the time they reached the Veralduki borders, she was beginning to think Noora was trying to make her wish she had not.

Every furlong was a snow-covered misery. Noora replied only to direct questions. She would not sing songs. She would not play road games. She cared for her horse, spoke to him in

caressing tones; even the pack beasts she showed regard for. For her foster mother, nothing.

Finally, in their rooms in the shabby inn that was the best they could find the night before the Veralduki border crossing, Solveig had had enough. “You will not make a difficulty for me with the border guards,” she said. “I do not have the power to protect you from their wrath.”

“No, foster mother,” said Noora.

“Also if you annoyed them it would thwart schemes of which you know nothing, and I cannot have that.”

Silence.

“Am I understood?” Solveig continued.

Noora burst out, “How am I to know anything of your schemes if you won’t tell me?”

Solveig sighed. “I am trying to keep you safe.”

“By marching me into a country full of people who hate me, very safe.”

“Noora. They do not hate you. You are only a child.”

“They have slaughtered hundreds of children like me. Thousands.”

“And your people have killed hundreds of their children in return.”

“We were the invaded, not the invaders,” said Noora fiercely. “Do not forget that.”

“I never do, or I would not be on this mission.”

Noora went still.

“Did you think I was neutral? Your foster father and I took you in against the prince’s wishes. The Veralduki Empire is no friend to us.”

“You are returning to their care a valuable piece of art. Why not keep it?”

“Noora, what do I do for a living?”

Their hearth fire snapped. The tiny inn bedroom stretched large between them. “You are—you are a sorceress.”

“And what are children told from their earliest days about accepting gifts?”

“That a gift from a sorcerer....” Noora’s mouth made an o.

“Blessing or curse, what do you think, Noora?”

Noora’s eyes darted to the parcel, too valuable to leave in the inn’s stable with the horses’ tack. “I had thought,” she whispered.

“What had you thought?”

Noora slipped off her bed and padded over to her own bags. She pulled from them a tiny pot of indigo ink. “I was going to sabotage the icon. So that they would suffer, the Veralduk scum. I was going to put a spell on it.”

Solveig rubbed her temples. “There is a spell on it already.”

“What does yours do?” asked Noora eagerly. “Wait, I know, I know. It brings them the same illness they gave Per and me. That’s what it has to do, doesn’t it, Solveig? It has to.”

Her thin face was alight with joy. Solveig almost hated to disillusion her, but she remembered what the illusion was, what source for her joy. “Noora. No.”

“No? *No?* What do you mean, no? What else could it be? Unless it has *more* pestilence, *more* despair, how could it be enough? They *killed your husband*. He was the best man I met since my father, and they killed my father too, and they used me to do it. You have to kill them all!”

The hearth fire lit Noora’s thin, pale face a flickering orange. Vengeance gave it an internal glow. Solveig winced away. “Noora. Sit down. Let me explain.”

“No!”

“*Noora.*”

Glowering, she subsided onto the bed.

“The people in this village, the people who gave Per the icon,” Solveig began. “Wait until you see them. They are poor, desperately poor. He helped them. They are no better off under the Emperor than your people would be.”

“They’re Veralduki,” Noora objected.

“They’re from the far north. The empire gives them nothing and takes their children in conscription, all the

strongest of their sons and daughters,” said Solveig. “They are losing too. If I sent plague among the Veralduki elite with this icon—if I killed them through these peasants—it would be just as unfair as if I used one of your cousins to do it. And it might not work. The people from this village don’t travel much.

“So the plague I’m sending takes some time to kill.”

Noora frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s a revolution, child. I am undermining their government. I’m sending it as a seed from this tiny village, but since no one will die directly, it can spread from there.”

Noora frowned suspiciously. “That sounds like the sort of thing grown-ups say when they don’t want to do anything at all.”

“Quite the opposite. I was married to a doctor for years—I learned how important the tiniest things can be. This revolution will spread like a disease. Like the one you had, that you gave to Per. But with magic assistance. Like the one you had.”

“That I gave to Per.”

“And the fishers, the farmers, eking out a living along the coast, they will pass it to the cities, and they will kill the people who killed your family in this horrible way. The people who killed Per. But not the innocents living in squalor. Not the ones Per wanted to help.

“They’re like you. You’re someone he wanted to help. We can’t betray him that way, Noora, can we?”

Noora was quiet for a long time. She got up and poked at the fire with the poker.

“I needed you to come along to convince the prince I was making a genuine effort,” said Solveig. “No one knows I’m doing this. He has to believe I’m trying to sow peace. We have to complete this mission for peace among our three countries: my neutral one, and yours at war. Perhaps we even *will* see peace—with the new government, when it settles. But for now, all we must do is complete the public gesture, which only we will understand. Then we can go. If you don’t want to stay with me after, I will take you home to Kvenmark, to whomever you can find to take you. Or you can come home with me as you said you wanted.”

Noora poked the fire again and did not turn. “You give them the death of their entire empire, in exchange for Per’s death.”

“Yes.”

“I think I am your daughter now,” she said very quietly.

“Then you will behave yourself with the border guards.”

“Yes.”

“And do as I tell you at the village.”

“Yes.”

They passed the rest of the very short night in quiet, and Noora was as good as her word with the guards at the only border Solveig's country shared with the Veralduki Empire in the far north. Some eyebrows went up at a Kven child coming into Veralduk with a neutral sorceress, but Solveig's diplomatic status made it impossible to object, especially when Noora showed so much respect and courtesy.

Still further north they rode, and soon the ivory gulls, rarely seen over any but the most coastal of lands, flocked overhead, alerting Solveig that they had almost reached their destination.

The village was much as she had imagined it from Per's reports, much as it had appeared from the water. One church, no other public buildings. A handful of hovels. Snow-covered farms. It was the church to which she repaired. The villagers, unused to visitors, soon abandoned the tedium of their daily work and gathered on the front steps to hear their business.

Solveig performed a minor healing in honor of Per. The village priest, upon hearing of their loss, performed a short honorary service for their benefactor. Many bows all around, though only the priest understood what was being said on all sides. Everyone was shocked to see Solveig, uncomprehending of Noora's status. The minute they saw the icon, no one objected.

And so the deed was done.

An old woman took them into her ramshackle hut after, her arm protectively around Noora, and gave them tea with berries floating in it. The hut was filled with smoke from the sullen fire. Everything between the child and the old woman was conveyed in gesture. Sit here. Be warm. Thank you. Thank you.

Noora's eyes were as wide and wild as they had been since the height of the fever. She pressed the old woman with a fierce embrace when they left. Solveig was glad to get both of them out of there without an emotional breakdown or an international incident. She breathed the frigid outdoor air with relief.

She could not burn all of her clothes, but she was glad to get far from the village for the night, to start a campfire that was her own and her new daughter's. To be unburdened, lightened, finished with what needed to be done. The wheels were in motion. She could go back and work on other things for months, years, waiting to hear the results.

She could afford to be patient.

"You were right," said Noora. "They were—they were not a threat, those people. That woman. I couldn't have—if I had sabotaged the icon, I would have felt so—"

“I know it,” said Solveig. She put her hand on Noora’s shoulder for a second only, then drew back to watch the birds side by side, content with the quality of the silence they had found.

Solveig feared that someday Noora would realize that igniting revolution was not clean or kind, especially to destitute villagers who were likely to bear the worst of it. She could only hope that the girl would realize that her foster mother had done her best. She could make vengeance her own; she could not make it clean.

The ivory gull wheeled out over the pack ice, a speck of white only distinguishable against the shimmer of blue-white ice because it was moving. They watched it into the distance before mounting their horses and turning south, toward home.

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Marissa Lingen lives in the Minneapolis area with two large men and one small dog. Her work has appeared in [Tor.com](#),

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GALLOWS GIRL

by Mel Kassel

A good Gallows Girl knows how to steady a man when he twitches at the end of the rope. She'll take his hands and hold them tight, or grab him by the forearms if she needs to. The firm touch of a good Gallows Girl is usually enough: he'll go slack, stop kicking, and let the noose dig. The death is just as ugly, but the passing is eased.

A good Gallows Girl will open herself a tiny bit, let him scrape off some of her innocence to carry with him as he goes. My sister told me that it hurts a lot. But it's supposed to be a good hurt, and it's the only way to know that you did your job.

"It's a saintly pain," she told me, her face somber and set like wax. After that, we stopped playing hideaway and throw-the-bones. She was needed by the town, and she took it on all at once, all that seriousness, after just one hanging. They said that she was a natural. They stretched her shadow bigger and bigger, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to fit in it, when it was my turn. And that was fine with me.

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Ellie, my tutor, took me to see my first sentenced man on the day after I turned twenty. He was shirtless and singing in his cell, a song made of nonsense words. I couldn't find his navel among his belly hair and rolls of fat.

"He's so big," I whispered. "Can I quiet a man that big for my first?"

"How big he is in the world doesn't matter," said Ellie. I waited, and sure enough, she followed up with: "Your sister's first man was over six foot."

"My sister's first man was the Hell-Pig Himself, and she tamed him without touching him, and he was probably eight feet if he was an inch," I said.

"That's enough, Kal." Ellie looked down at me, beseeching from underneath her green hood. My parents would scoff or yell if I mocked Lillian's perfection, but Ellie reacted as if wounded. She was reminding me that my reputation was braided with hers. And I liked her, so I listened.

"What did he do?" I asked.

"Killed some folks. Robbed their home. That's all we know about, but I'd bet the T-bird he was riding on wasn't his neither."

"He has a T-bird?" I clutched at her arm. "Can we go see it? Please?"

"We're here to see him. We can look in on the bird later."

I nodded, fidgety. There had been terror birds in the town stables before but I'd never tended to them. I had looped by during my errands to catch glimpses of them eating, their huge beaks plucking at red slabs of meat with surprising daintiness. Their riders—couriers, doctors, hunters for hire—typically didn't stay in town for more than a few days.

Ellie would be doing me a kindness by taking me to see the bird, and so I doubled my focus while we were in the jail. I squinted through the bars at the man, tried to get a sense of who he was. He had made his bed, but was he naturally neat? Did he always sing when idle?

He ignored us while I studied him, though he could see us perfectly well. He had to know why we were there.

Tomorrow, I would climb the ladder to my platform and wait for him to fall through the trapdoor above. There would be a bag over his head, and the noises coming from the bag would sound like a drain struggling to swallow mud. I would take his hands, and I would let him see inside me and paw at my bones until he found a gleaming part he liked. Then he would die, and I would let go, and because of what I had given him, he'd have a chance at forgiveness.

For now, we were strangers. All I knew was that he had murdered people and that he couldn't sing very well. I fiddled with my skirts and tried one last time to learn something from

his face, which was disarmingly normal. No beady eyes, no shelf-like brow. He looked like any of the men who sat in Jordan's saloon in the early afternoon.

"You're my Gallows Girl, then?" he said, abruptly cutting off his song. I straightened, adjusted my expression.

"Yes," I said. I tried to imitate the even tone that Lillian used when addressing the soon-to-be-hanged. "Now we have seen each other."

"Now we have."

Our compact made, I glanced up at Ellie, ready to leave. But the man wasn't finished.

"You'll be the last thing I ever touch," he said, stepping up to the bars. His eyes flicked to Ellie, and he smiled. "They couldn't find me a pretty one, hm?"

"You won't be able to look at her once you're dangling," Ellie said. She was defending me, thinking that his words had stung.

"You're not pretty either," I said, as though we were simply trading truths. He shrugged and turned away.

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When we left the jail, the sun had risen high and merciless over Red Leg. The vendors on the thoroughfare were spreading sloth-skin awnings to shade their wares, and I saw old Hart flicking water over his cart of fruit, trying to keep up the

illusion that the apples and berries were dew-spat. Braxton had arrayed his rings and bracelets—whittled from the bones of only the most respectable deceased—into the outline of a flower, ivory blooming against red silk. Others had already packed up for the day.

My eagerness to greet the T-bird had faded. I suppose I shouldn't have expected courtesy of a murderer, but Lillian had said that her men respected her, barely spoke to her, sometimes sobbed in her presence. Would I have to snarl back and forth with my condemned?

The jail sat squat and long on the north edge of town, built far from the gallows so that the sentenced had to walk the full mile-and-a-quarter south. If I looked that way, I could see the cherrywood crossbeam stark against the sky.

Every small town brags about its gallows, but Red Leg had reason. It was so tall that it seemed a monument. Ellie had told me that the planners had wanted everyone to see the hanged, and so they had foregone a bell tower for the gallows, and from then on no building was allowed to reach beyond that beam in height. The wood was thick, sturdy stock that stopped a fist with blunt sound, no echo. When it creaked with a dying man's weight, the creak was an acknowledgment, a thanks, never a threat of collapse.

Our Gallows Girls were likewise legendary, and Lillian was bearing out the rumors. She had departed for Broadcreek three months ago. It was a fine assignment, a crowded crossroads with a steady supply of the soon-to-be-hanged, and our parents had cried proud tears when the letter came. They knew that Red Leg was a birthplace, not a destination. It couldn't hold on to the girls it raised.

Ellie and I turned off the thoroughfare and headed down Cratt Street to the stables. I could tell that she was nervous, thinking about how I would fare the next day. There was little hope that I could soothe the man as fast as my sister had soothed her first, but people now knew that there was innocence in our bloodline. They presumed that I would at least impress.

"It won't matter if you aren't as quick as her," Ellie said. She was halfway talking to herself, but it seemed like she had scanned my thoughts.

"I know. I'd like to be close, though. I think I can quiet him quick. I'll try."

"Are you scared of the pain?"

"Can't be worse than when that big 'dillo bit me," I joked. It was the wrong thing to say.

"You know it's not like that. I've tried to tell you. It's—"

“You’ve told me. Many times.” I sped up to avoid a lecture, bunching my skirts in my hands.

Ellie used to be a Gallows Girl herself, of course. She had trained Lillian, and given bits of herself to tens of dangling men. But a tutor can only teach you the rites and the sayings, peppering their lessons with memories. There’s no way to practice—you don’t get the full idea until your first man drops.

* * *

The smell of hot meat and hay rushed to meet us as we approached the stables. Packett, the mammal-hand, was ushering a horse into one of the stalls, the sweat on his bald head a testament to the effort.

“Packett, your west,” Ellie said.

“My west, your east,” Packett grunted. “Here we are.” He gave the horse a slap on its rump, pushed the stall door shut, and laid down the wooden bolt.

“We’re here to see the T-bird,” I said. Packett’s face scrunched upwards into skepticism, but it was the friendly sort.

“Don’t stick your fingers near his face, Kal,” he said. “He makes up his mind about people quick. He’ll be on your left toward the back.”

I jogged to the stall, grinning so hard that my bottom lip cracked. Packett could cheer me up just by saying my name. He wouldn’t have let Lillian back here, or Neal, or Jessa, or any of

the jobless ones who were the same age as me. But I had helped him snap the antlers off of a stag-moose last winter when its shedding was delayed, heaving my entire body over a bough while the animal huffed. And I was unafraid of Big Meg, the town's only ground sloth, who ate tree leaves broader than my head and ploughed the farmers' ditches with her massive front claws. I wasn't yet strong enough to file those claws during digging season, but Packett allowed me to climb up between her shoulders and brush out ticks. He trusted me to work with them, saw that I had a knack and let me test it.

A T-bird was no plodding draft animal, though. A T-bird was speed and snake-quick cunning. The sight of its hatchet beak above the grass was an omen of rancher's loss, and to steal an egg was to outrun your death. The art of taming chicks left most wranglers short a few fingers at the least.

This one was a young adult. The feathers about his neck were still maturing into a ruff.

"Hello," I said, and it was more of an awed breath than a word. I had never been this close to a T-bird before. Big Meg dwarfed me, but standing next to this predator—far above my head but still so close, eight feet at his bright orange eyes—was more intimate.

He looked at me dead on, which was strange. Most birds, they turn their heads and favor one eye to check you out. But a

T-bird stares in a straight line over its beak, so everything on its face points right at you. I felt sighted, as if by a pistol.

He made a deep clucking noise, and I saw his throat pulse in and out. He sounded curious. I searched along his side for the vestigial wings and found their outlines, small and almost silly, against the bird's bulk. I desperately wanted to reach out and stroke the deep-blue feathers on his long neck. But Packett had told me not to, and by now Ellie had caught up and was glaring at the T-bird, looking angry that he had deigned to grow so big and deadly.

"Let's go," she said.

"You're scared?"

"No teasing. Your parents expect you home soon."

I glanced from her face to the bird and back again. The sooner the man was hanged, the sooner the bird would be without a claimant. My parents had bought Lillian new shoes and a cavebear skin cape after her first man. Now I knew what I would ask for.

* * *

Supper was a quiet rhythm of passing bowls from person to person. Mother and Father were skittish. They wanted to let me know that they were pleased, that my relative mediocrity was still a boon, but they spent the whole meal fishing for words without dragging any of them up.

“I’m not that nervous,” I told them. It seemed to smooth out their faces a bit.

I had spent so much time with Ellie that I had forgotten to think on my parents. And they hadn’t asked me much, throughout my training. The truth was that they were already screwed into their place in the town, and I was an extra piece that could go anywhere. They loved me fine, and I loved them back, but we had little to offer each other.

“You met him today?” Mother asked. I nodded.

“He was big. He murdered some folks a short ride out north. That bunch of houses, they didn’t have any gallows, so they brought him here.”

“A murderer, that’s nothing petty.” Father tried to kindle my ego, and I shrugged. “Think you can send him on his way in a minute?”

“Probably. Ellie thinks I’ll do well. It won’t be as fast as Lil’s first, but that’s fine with me. It means I get to stay here.” I bit into my cornbread as they both settled further into their chairs, appeased.

Later, as I stepped out of my skirts and prepared for bed, I relished the silence of my room. It was exhausting, reassuring everyone that I didn’t covet Lillian’s talent, that I wouldn’t throw myself into a long sulk once I emerged as the lesser Gallows Girl. But it would have been more work for me to deny

the title, or to let them know that I wouldn't make it my life's center. Once a Gallows Girl is found, her sisters must also wear the gray hood.

Innocence is dwindling, Ellie had said. And so we must share.

I would quiet the man, I knew, with all the adequacy I had come to expect of myself and a bit of the natural talent instilled in my kin. I had no desire to excel in my role, and no fear that I would fail. My future looked to be a comfortable one: I'd have as much time between hangings as I would need to sample the town's small joys.

Lillian had outgrown Red Leg in one swift sprouting. But I still felt like the perfect size for the place. I loved how I could nod to folks while I was on a walk, not saying anything, and still get my own name back in response. I knew which alleys shot upwards into walls, and which opened up onto streets. I helped to herd the big armadillos—"walkin' houses," most called them—to slaughter each year, and polished their shells into tents for children to huddle and play inside. I could draw what Red Leg looked like on the approach from any point on the surrounding grass plains. Sketching from the south was easiest, because the town was framed by the gallows, and all the buildings looked like they were bowing to the wood.

* * *

The hood was so large it almost hung in front of my eyes. I shifted my weight, testing the bounce of my platform, which was a skinny jut of planks attached to the east side of the gallows, yearning towards the middle. They had to measure the man and the rope several times. Too short, and he'd hang above me, out of reach. Too long, and I would have to clamber down the rope until I came to his scalp. I should be at the level of his chest, and close enough to pull him towards me without falling off the platform's edge.

I could hear the group speak from the stage over my head. The seams of the trapdoor disrupted the grain of the wood, so the door itself looked out of place, a perfectly wrong square.

I preferred not to look down. Lillian had invented a rhyme to help with the dizzying height: *80 feet up means 80 to fall, grab his hands and let him call*. When she shared it with me I thought it childish, but now I recited the first part over and over, wheezing it into the wind.

Most of the town had gathered on the thoroughfare, but I was too far up and away to discern faces. They all looked like stalks of grass stuffed into clothes. Jessa had told me once that people placed bets on how long a Gallows Girl would take to soothe a man, and I wondered, irritated, who had done that today. I wanted no one to win. I placed no bets on their

livelihoods, on how long it took for the mammoth meat to cure or the bullets to sell.

Above me, they were reading him his rights and instructions. Soon the trapdoor would open, teasing a view of the sky behind the darkness of a falling body. I recalled lines of advice from Ellie and Lillian.

Dive into yourself. Feel the gleam in your bones, the light left by lack of sin, and shine, shine like shouting. It helps to close your eyes once you have him in your hands.

Two steps sounded from overhead, and he was standing on the trapdoor, that warped portal in the wood. I could feel every part of my hands in isolation, the slight bends in each knuckle on each finger, the tendons strung over bone. Both hands began to itch, terribly. And then he dropped.

Many sounds occurred in succession: the trapdoor clattered open, the fabric of his clothing hushed past the wood, the trapdoor swung so violently that it rapped the underside of the platform, the rope whined, and he choked, awful swamp sounds filling the black bag. *No more singing*, I thought.

He was huge, a suspended whale that blotted out the sun, but my hands were eager. I reached for his arms. When I gripped them, his fingers found my wrists and tightened, trembling.

I closed my eyes and willed my bones to gleam.

Memories from when I was little. Simple games. Chasing Lillian, being chased, her hair a dark streamer behind her. Tasks I loved, like sifting through the thickness of Big Meg's fur, or beating cream until the waves in the white sea curled and froze. Ellie had taught me to think on such things, those that were easy and cherished. I imagined them trickling along my bones, bringing a glow, and it worked: the shine branched quick, like lightning. Each vertebra became a beacon. My teeth ached from holding light.

It made me feel trapped, like I needed to burst through my skin and join the brightness outside. I wanted to run and jump until the light exhausted itself and went dim. Standing here was maddening, impossible.

Straining to keep my bones contained, I was all the more unnerved when he began to grope at me for purchase. He swung and grasped, pulled, slid away, then returned. The hands he used inside ourselves were slick with something oily. I felt them trying to twine my light about them, and knew I was supposed to let it happen, to help, so that he could have hope as he passed.

But Ellie and Lillian had not prepared me for this. The pain, yes, I had expected. Even these unsuccessful swipes at my bones were agonizing. The feeling swept through places deeper than my body; there was the sensation of pulling, unraveling,

and the knowledge that whatever went with him would always trail a thread, his clenched fist at the other end.

But they had not mentioned the *trespass*. All of my bones were screaming at him to *get out*. Each second he pried at me was counter to what should be, and I resisted despite everything Ellie had told me, trying to turn away from the hands that plunged in the darkness we shared.

There was nowhere to go, latched together as we were, and he finally managed to snag some of the light, to stab and hook part of himself through it. I screamed as he wrested it from me, a small piece of glow, a pittance, and yet at the moment it tore away it seemed the most essential kernel of me he could have chosen.

The snap of its separation shocked me into opening my eyes and pushing him, hard. I was sobbing. The hinge of my jaw was a knot of flame after screaming for so long. The rope keened as he swayed back and forth, all motion gone from his body. And there were creaks from below as Ellie climbed the ladder to the platform, hissing at me, “Kal, don’t faint! Don’t faint!”

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I shuddered for days. Watching my blankets shake, it seemed as if they moved on their own, that they were jostling me.

Ellie sat with me and cajoled me into eating. Both of us knew that taking as long as I had, and wailing besides, was the worst thing that could have happened. Pity swam in her eyes like worms.

Jessa came to see me, held me and kissed my cheeks. We shared an odd picnic on my bedspread and entertained the idea that I was sick with something anyone could catch. But then she asked “What happened up there?” and I knew she had told people she was coming, had promised them news, and if I didn’t give it, she would say I was a stricken mess. Talk in Red Leg would spiral on either way. I shook my head, told her to get out.

My parents, blessedly true to their cowardice, brought me food and empty chatter.

I took to counting my bones. It wasn’t an exact art, but it helped me to breathe slow and recalled the welcome chore of counting heads in Packett’s stables. Taking stock of myself, feeling the slight hills under my skin where my joints connected, I came to a quiet appreciation of my body’s machinery. He had taken a piece of light from me, but what did that matter? My hands reported twelve ribs on each side, a cragged but sturdy spine, a laughably large number of small parts in my feet. *I’m swimming in bones!* I thought, only to shy from the image that the thought carried.

* * *

One night, weeks from the day when my first man had dropped, I made my bones gleam again.

I had started to visit my memory of the hanging more and more frequently. As much as quieting the man had hurt, filling myself with light had not. It had felt miraculous, and powerful, though these were words I could not touch at the time. I kept searching for the root of the feeling, and on this night, I picked at the first moments like they were stubborn weeds.

The light came back in a hesitant tide.

I closed my eyes, saw my bones shining. Again, I yearned to run and leap and swing my arms, to use up the light until my marrow emptied of it.

Just running—that wouldn't do it. There was something else, some nameless action that would be perfect for the light, that would channel it and diminish it and satisfy me. I didn't know what it was.

And there was an emptiness here, too. I ached for the light to reach every part of me, but it fell just short into a blank, throbbing sliver, the scar left by his thievery.

I counted bones as a way to ignore that gap. I had numbered them in each leg when Ellie knocked and entered.

“Kal, your north.” She sat at the foot of my bed, and I reluctantly let the light seep away.

“My north, your south. Here we are. Hi, Ellie.” I opened my eyes to read dread in her face. She placed a hand on my shoulder and waited, silent, for me to realize what it meant. When I did, I sat up and yelled.

“No!”

“Kal, there’s no one else.”

“I won’t do it. I won’t quiet another one.”

“He killed—”

“I don’t care what he did, you can quiet him, you know how!” She shook her head and I yelled louder, suddenly aware that I was furious, had been furious, and was just now allowing my fury to breathe. “It’s not like you said it would be!”

“We can never truly prepare you.”

“No. It’s not right. You said it was right, Lillian said it was right, but it’s not. The glowing means something, something I can *do*, and it’s mine!”

Ellie was close to crying, reaching for me. “Every man deserves to pass with some purity. You know this. This man, now, deserves it.”

I slapped her away. Her patience was an insult, an arrow through me. I aimed to shatter it. “I made my bones gleam because I wanted them to. Just now, I did.”

She stared at me, disappointed. “To wallow in our own innocence is prideful.”

“I don’t want to be innocent!”

“You’d keep it for yourself? You’re one of so few who can share it.”

“I won’t. I won’t.”

I had never driven her to anger before, but I did this time. She got up and walked to the door, the heels of her boots punishing the wood, and spoke low before leaving: “You would make the town a place for empty deaths.”

* * *

Just before dawn, I dressed in riding pants and took my father’s gun. The handle ended in the smoothed and lacquered joint of his mother’s hip bone, a pretty piece of work that had cost a great deal. It was evidence of his superstitious nature—duelists held that mother guns gave them luck. Fortunately, my father had never tested the belief during his tenure at the bank.

The handle felt disturbingly at home against my palm. It was as though my body welcomed another bone, an extension of those it already had. But the weird familiarity could not make up for the fact that I had never shot a gun this small before. I was accustomed to the heft of a hunting rifle, and this was a trinket in comparison. I considered filching the key to the shed, where the rifles were stowed, but decided against it. The key was close to my parents’ room, the shed door heavy and loud.

I didn't want to leave Red Leg forever. But I couldn't quiet another hanged man; the very idea set my skin screaming. I had to find Lillian. She'd tell me what was happening with my bones, and she could convince the folks here to seek a new Gallows Girl. Maybe she'd even come back, once she learned that both I and Red Leg were in need. Ellie would listen to her. As learned as my tutor was, she had admitted that Lillian surpassed her in ability. By the end, she had seemed frightened of her.

I crept downstairs and slid out the front door, holding the gun awkwardly in my right hand. The street was gray, waiting for the sun to lend it color, and the plains grasses shushed each other from behind the buildings. Even now, Jordan's saloon would have someone at the counter, and the farmers who lived at the west end would be awake. I took a path flanked only by the sleeping, walking fast and quiet.

Inside the stables, the snuffling and shifting of the animals made me pause. These were the sounds of home, the great, comforting sighs from the beasts who knew me.

I was here for the one that didn't.

The T-bird was already on his feet, bright-eyed in the gloom. I took a piece of jerky from my pocket and tossed it gently upwards, and he snatched it out of the air with his beak as casually as a person might take a coat off a hook.

“Will you let me ride you?” I asked. I put my hand on the latch of the stall door. The T-bird tilted his head. He had let the murderer saddle him, but murderers had the confidence to kill, and I was running scared from everything. He could probably hear my heart stuttering, smell my sweat, put the hints together quickly, conclude *she is weak*. I imagined myself opening the door only to have that weapon of a mouth clamp onto my neck and shake. Or would he use his talons?

Slowly, I undid the latch and pulled the door open. The T-bird took two quick strides forward so that his chest nearly pressed against my forehead. He was too fast, I had no time to move, and I tried to stand tall without flinching away. His feathers were so close that I could pick out the shafts running through each one, the stripes of gray within the blue vanes. I also smelled him for the first time—a strong dusty scent that reminded me of old paper, mixed with the gamy, coppery tang of meals that bled.

“Hello again,” I said. He trilled, and it sounded like bubbles rising from somewhere deep.

Figuring out his tack wasn't too difficult. The bridle gave me the most pause, because at first I thought it was a feed bag. But the leather pouch fit snugly around his beak, and the reins clipped to raised loops on either side. It was more muzzle than

anything else. He didn't object to it, though I felt guilty for hiding the most powerful part of him.

The stirrup was too high for me, and I had to find Packett's stepladder before I could mount up. The T-bird waited. He didn't move when I set myself into the saddle, or when I turned to stash the gun in the side pouch. I wondered if they were all this obedient, once they had been reared to serve. If I needed him to attack, how would I tell him?

Just get out. Just go.

I touched his neck and squeezed gently at his sides with my legs. He walked.

* * *

Riding the T-bird for the first time felt like floating. Compared to a horse's, his strides were huge, but they hardly jostled me at all. He comported himself like most birds, with an eerie sense of balance that kept his body still but bobbed his neck back and forth. I could feel the potential for true running coiled beneath me, a promise of maddening speed, of flying far and fast.

"Runner," I said, petting his neck.

We moved at an easy lope down the thoroughfare. I saw the buildings from a new height, and it was as if I was a stranger, watching them pass. Eventually I stopped twisting my neck to either side and looked straight ahead, letting the town

part before me. I pretended that I was merely traveling through, that I had no idea what Red Leg looked like as it came to life in the morning, that no one on the thoroughfare would toss me a bracelet braided from extra twine just because they saw me wandering by their stall most days.

Those same people bet on how quick you'd quiet him. They loved that you screamed, that you took so long. Something to talk about for days and days.

The gallows stood at my back. It itched at me, plucked at the hairs on the back of my neck until I shook my head. I didn't want to turn and look at the beams. But when I heard the sound of hoofbeats, and Ellie's voice yelling between them, I had to turn.

"Kal, stop! Stop! I'm with the law!"

Packett rode next to her, his face crumpled and sad. Sheriff Leed was at the rear. He hid under a hat and behind a huge brown beard and mustache, but I knew what he looked like without them. He'd called on Lillian when he was a clean-cheeked deputy, and they had gotten close for a while, until her training began in earnest.

If I had left the stables at a full sprint or ridden around the outskirts of town, they wouldn't have caught me. I knew that then and I knew it as they rode up. But my anger was still too strange—I needed her to nurture it again so that it could keep

its name. I needed her to prove that it should be there, pulsing, filling my bones with red. Of course, I also hoped that she might say something new that would break it, and open a window that led back to town.

“Ellie, your north,” I said.

“My north, your south. Here we are.” She spoke as though she had never been my teacher, had always been hunting me. I started to cry. “Oh, Kal,” she said, and spurred her horse forward. I pulled up on Runner’s reins and he backed away.

“I demand the right of disappearance!” I had chewed on the phrase for hours, but when it finally left me it sounded strident, like the beginning of a tantrum. I said it again, steadying myself through sobs. “I demand the right of disappearance from Red Leg.”

Ellie shook her head. Packett frowned deeper, and Sheriff Leed eyed Runner as if the bird had somehow planned this rendezvous. He spoke to me without meeting my eyes.

“Who will you duel for that right, Kal?”

Runner shifted his weight, mirroring my disquiet. “Whoever most wants to stop me. I’m leaving. I don’t want to be followed.”

“Oh, Hell’s teeth, girl, you’re turning nothing into something all right.” Ellie glared. I sniffled while she addressed me as an inconvenience. She thought me foolish. She thought

me mistaken. The anger swelled in me, made my bones creak and whistle.

“Duel me,” I said.

“I wouldn’t waste you or a bullet.” She dismounted. “I can bring you back using skin alone. Get off that bird.”

“You’ll duel? Skin only?”

“I’ll call it that if you want.”

I looked to the sheriff, and he nodded. I swung one leg over Runner’s back, and as I thought about how best to jump down, he knelt so that I only had to step. His large orange eye was level with my own gaze for a brief moment. I almost reached up to undo the bridle straps. If I lost, I wanted him to run to the plains, then past them to places I couldn’t see. But there was no way for him to know that; and maybe his handler had ruined him for the wild. I left him standing indifferently, pawing the ground with one reptilian foot.

Ellie and I shed our clothes without ceremony. I had no plan. She was older but far from frail—I had seen how spry she could be, catching a cup I had dropped, clambering up a ladder to the platform where I screamed. Wrinkled and wiry, she crouched in front of her horse. She let her hair fall, loosing black and gray curls to lay behind her shoulders.

The air at the edge of town was crisp enough to give me gooseflesh. My shoes gone, I curled my toes against the hard

dirt. I could feel the cold pathways on my face that my tears had left. Neither of us rushed the other.

“Until one yields,” the sheriff said, impatient. Packett was silent. He had to have been the one who alerted the other two, once he noticed that Runner was gone. But I couldn’t ration him any of my anger, not yet.

Ellie and I stared. I numbered the bones in my hands as though they were soldiers. When I reached the base of my right thumb, she charged.

Lillian and I had wrestled as children, but that had been years ago. I didn’t know where to grab Ellie when she hit me. She elbowed me in the stomach first, and I doubled over, coughing. Before I could catch my breath, her arm was around my neck, and she had me in a headlock.

“Come back now,” she said. “It will be fine.” I couldn’t answer her. My fingers scraped against her arm and I stabbed downward with my chin, but her grip tightened. She’d choke me until I fell unconscious, I realized, seeing gray dots that ate steadily away at the edges of the world. My nails raked until they found blood. She didn’t let go.

I felt warm. I slipped from sight into the other realm, saw my bones inside me. They glowed red-hot, their edges shimmering like the metal on an anvil.

They make swords from that, I thought as my windpipe tightened, sealed. I waved my hands uselessly upwards, trying to scratch at her eyes, her face, but her arm blocked them. I couldn't reach.

They bend it to make swords.

My bones glowing, stretching, sighing as they vented some of the light. My arms reached and reached. My hands found her face and my fingers dug into the flesh of her cheeks, and I stretched them too, stretched them so they went deeper.

Ellie was screaming. Packett was saying, "Sheriff, what's happening? What's she doing?"

I crooked my arms in impossible ways, created angles that cracked. My fingers clawed and burrowed into Ellie's face. She unwrapped her arm from my neck and I breathed. My sight flashed from bones to earth, bones to earth. Ellie turned away, still screaming, blood hitting the road, and I felt my fingers slide out of her skin.

The light in me said, *You can bend, bend, bend.*

I pulled my arms and hands back into the shapes I knew.

"Did you know what it was?" I asked. "Did you know I could do this?"

"You are cursed!" she said. She whirled, showing the four puckered holes on either side of her face, like shallow bullet

wounds. I looked from her to the horses. The sheriff's hand was on the butt of his gun.

“Skin only!” I shrieked at him, and he didn't move. Didn't draw, just sat there, pale. “Do you yield?” I asked Ellie. My light was still hot and spreading, and it felt right, using it, honoring it.

“You have to come back,” Ellie said. “You have to let me help.” She stumbled toward me. “To use your innocence like this, you can't—”

I waited for her, thinking she could not walk straight. But she surprised me, lunging and grabbing my wrist, twisting hard, twisting until something snapped and the light flared. I cried out and knelt, but she kept her hold while I batted at her with my free hand. The light in my right wrist rushed to a new, jagged end, a break in my framework. And I saw Ellie's bones wrapped around my own, glowing faintly.

“You can do it too,” I said, gasping from pain. “Or maybe you can't anymore.” Her face crimped into an expression of disgust, and she shoved me toward the ground with a grunt.

Instinctively I put my arms out to stop the fall, forgetting that one was splintered at the end. When my chest landed on it, the bone rose through the skin, a white pillar jutting from where a doctor would take my pulse. The pain was a bear trap gnashing its teeth at my wrist, grating, fiery. I willed myself not

to pass out. The light seeped from the wound slower than the blood, but the loss of it ached and brought my tears back.

“Yield, Kal,” Ellie said. But I could not. I’d die before I let a hanged man take any more of this from me.

They make swords like this, I thought. And smaller things. Daggers.

I clenched my jaw and gathered the light. It spiraled around the bone, smoothing it, lengthening it, pinching the end so that the break became a point. Long enough to grab, a blade birthed from the end of my arm, reaching over and past my palm. I breathed hard and watched the dirt spread beneath me when I exhaled. I pushed myself up on my good arm. I readied my daggered one.

“Yield, Kal.” Her footsteps came close.

“She’s holdin’ something,” said the sheriff, and I leapt up, brought my arm forward in an arc, felt my bone scrape between her ribs and pierce the softness behind them.

* * *

A good Gallows Girl wears the gray hood until she must hide the face of another. She does not abandon the town she was supposed to serve, a torn cloth around her bloody wrist. She does not flee on the back of a terror bird in search of her sister. She does not find her, drained of light and life in a town that hangs so many.

A good Gallows Girl does not carry a mother gun. She does not point it, clumsily, at the sheriff in Broadcreek who surrendered her kin to dangling men almost every day. She does not sculpt her legs until she towers over him in his office, or point her shoulder blades until the tips break through the blanket of her back. She does not become a monster until he weeps. She does not escape with Lillian's too-skinny arms wrapped around her waist.

A good Gallows Girl does not know that all Gallows Girls can bewitch their bones. And if she does, she certainly does not tell the others, town by town, leaving feathers where she's been.

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Mel Kassel writes dark speculative fiction in Chicago, where she also works as a client care coordinator at an animal hospital. Her stories have appeared in Gamut, Interzone, Three-Lobed Burning Eye, and elsewhere. You can find her online at melkassel.com and on Twitter @melkassel.

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COVER ART

“Bird House,” by Jordan Grimmer



Jordan Grimmer is a concept artist and illustrator with over five years experience in the video games industry. His recent in-house positions include Kobojo Ltd. and Lionhead Studios. He is currently working with Leading Light Design. To see more of his work, visit www.jordangrimmer.co.uk.

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