

penumbra



speculative
fiction mag

Aug 2k23 • vol vii issue 2

Interview with
**Lenore
Sagaskie**

Fantasy novels and
indie filmmaking

plus

E. E. King • M. E. Garber • Jon
Michael Kelley • Miguel O. Mitchell •
M. Christine Benner Dixon • Steve
Perry and George Guthridge • Carl
Scharwath • Andrew Hughes •
Christina Sng • Emily Crook • R. Mac
Jones • Wendy Nickel • Marisca
Pichette • Alexandra Grunberg • Elby
Rogers • Maija Haavisto • Alina
Măciucă • Irina Tall (Novikova) •
M.A. Dosser • David C. Kopaska-
Merkel • Janis Butler Holm

Penumbria is published six times a year (June, August, October, December, February, and April). ISSN 2693-0234. *Penumbria*, *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Mag* and *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine* © and TM 2019–2022 Neomythos Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

Note that content in *Penumbria* sometimes contains adult language and/or situations. If it were TV, it would be rated MA.

We are always open for submissions of art, animation, and music! We are open for fiction and poetry submissions from 15 June to 15 September and from 15 December to 15 March each year. Please see our Submissions page (<http://penumbria.com/subs.html>) for details.

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From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

RECENTLY I WENT THROUGH a (very old) collection of my short stories, looking to discover whether I was any good as a writer. Wait. Let's rephrase. I was curious as to whether any of those stories, written in the punkish days of my youth, would catch my eye as an editor now. Some of these stories had been published by our university literary magazine; some had never been published; one had been my ticket into graduate school (the first time, now known by me as *The Horror*). But that was a very different time, mostly pre-2000, and at the very least some of them would be woefully out of date: The climate change story talked of global warming rather than climate change generally, characters didn't have cell phones, and one of them used Polaroid cameras as a way of getting a photo "instantly" (as otherwise it would have had to have gone to the film developer, and the horror of the story required instant images, which didn't exist at the time).

How did it go? Let's say I (the writer) received mixed reviews from me (the editor).

There is definitely promise in those old pieces; there are even a couple or a few that would make it at least to the second round of submissions for *Penumbric*. There are also a few I look at now and think, My God, why did I send these out to anyone else? I admire my chutzpah, though. And I have to treat that younger me with some ... er ... kindness, remembering that I thought I was ALL THAT and that my major influence was Harlan Ellison, which meant being a bit in-your-face was inevitable. But also, looking back, I think I was somehow both overconfident and insecure—I remember sending some of these stories to big name magazines, the Asimovs and *Analog*s of the world, venues that accepted fewer than ten stories per issue and probably had thousands of submissions, places I had little chance of getting into as my very first publication ... and then I gave up. I never sent things to the smaller magazines, never tried to build

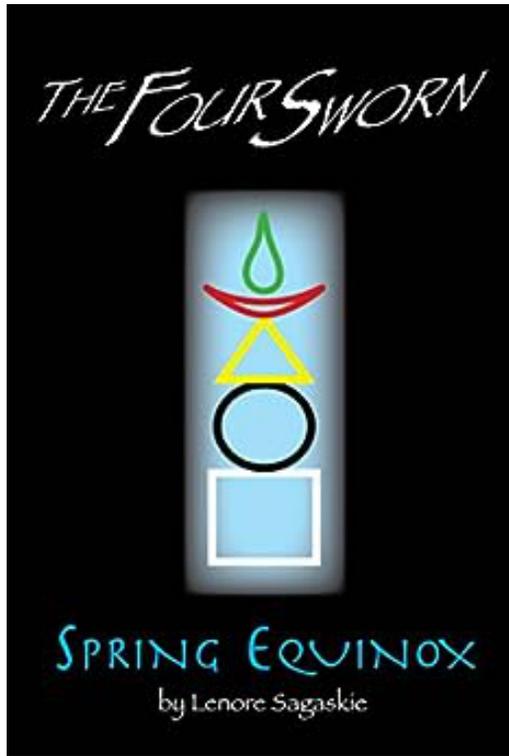
my confidence in any way. Mentally I went from "I'm the best, dammit!" to "I suck and should be stomped to death by dinosaurs before I inflict any more of my writing on the world." And, as I've discovered editing and publishing *Penumbric*, there is no shortage of brilliant writing being published in those smaller magazines, too (which both exhilarates [the editor me] and frightens [the still insecure writer me]).

So I guess I discovered a message for myself in that old writing that was neither "God, I'm brilliant!" nor "God, I suck!" It was the value of continuing to try, of reading, of valuing what I'm doing enough to really give it a chance out in the world, of not giving up, of ... well, just writing, maybe having a few close and trusted people read it, editing, and sticking with it. (And learning ... growing ... getting better and not just assuming I'm Harlan Ellison from the get-go, because there was only ever one of those, and I ain't it.) And amongst the less obvious advice: Don't let the insecurity stop you from writing. Yet somehow keep yourself from the opposite extreme of hubris. As with many things, balance is key.

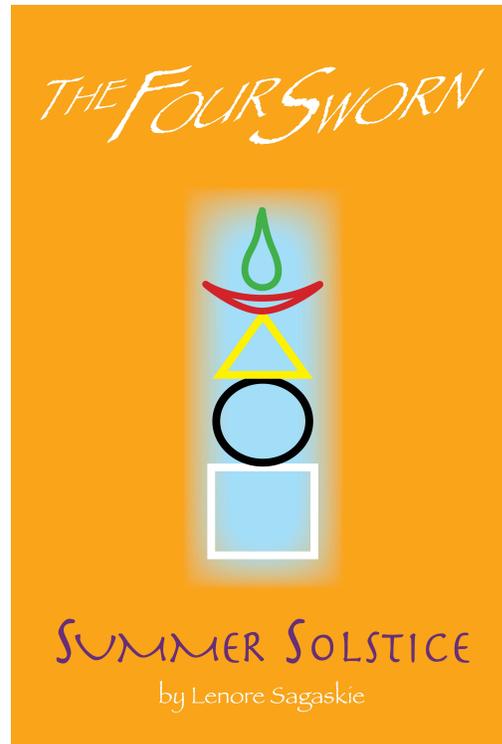
Which, reading it, may be obvious as well. But, perhaps, difficult to actually do.

Until next time (our Halloween issue!),

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbric



Covers of The Four Sworn series so far:
Spring Equinox and *Summer Solstice*



On fantasy and filmmaking

An Interview with Lenore Sagaskie

by Jeff Georgeson

LENORE SAGASKIE is a Canadian American fantasy/horror writer and filmmaker living in self-imposed exile in Michigan. Her short film, *Rage*, garnered four official selections, several nominations/finalists, and four wins during its run on the film festival circuit. She is often buried in several projects at once—and is right now, in fact—but kindly carved out a bit of time just before filming a trailer for her next film, more about which will be revealed below.

* * *

Your Four Sworn series is so wonderful in the way it really develops the characters and their surroundings in an almost tactile way (e.g., the descriptions of pottery making, of smithing, even of visions in the water). Is some of this from your own experience? How do you achieve this level of visual/tactile detail in your writing?

Thank you! I was, and still am, a multi-media artist. I called upon some of my own experiences with creative processes. I have always been a tactile learner, so I always tend to be descriptive in that manner.

What do you find is the most important part of developing a book (or series)?

The most important part of writing a book to me is to create strong, distinct characters and strong character interactions. We all have a unique way of speaking, as well as interacting and reacting to other people and situations. I try to give my characters distinct voices and personalities. It's important to me that a reader can distinguish who the character is by the way they speak when they commit to a series. When I read a series, I feel comfortable when I can tell which characters are speaking just from the interactive dialogue.

Are you continuing to work on that series?

I am still writing The Four Sworn series. The third book, *Autumn Equinox*, is currently a work in progress. I tend to overwrite, and it reached a page count of over 400 pages. It isn't even close to being finished. I want to finish it and possibly break it into two novels, hopefully before the end of this year.

*So I have to ask the old chestnut, where do your ideas come from? Are they based on kernels of experience (as in "The Remaining One" [in *Penumbra*, December 2k21])?*

Some of my writing ideas come from personal experience and some



Lenore Sagaskie (photo by Robert Roblin)

of my characters are modeled on people that I've known or encountered. Some of my ideas are based on "what if" scenarios as well. I often think of mundane things and wonder how they'd be affected if something supernatural or extraordinary happened to someone who was just minding their business and enjoying their life when their reality shifted.

We've spoken in a past issue (February 2k21) about the influence of music on your writing/storytelling. Do you associate (or play) certain music with/for certain characters? Do you end up with a sort of playlist for your books?

Music is so important to me. I listen to music every day. It helps me focus when I write and it helps with my mental health. I do associate

certain music with some of my characters. When I'm writing chapters that are heavily focused on the main characters in *The Four Sworn*, I write while listening to the music I feel they would like. Abby is the metal head who also listens to *Apocalyptica*. Sara is into classic rock and old country music. William has a bit of an anarchist streak and has a fondness for 70's and 80's English punk rock like *Anti-Nowhere League*. Joe listens to a bit of everything but is into *The Halluci Nation*. They do a great remix of Keith Secola's *NDN Kars*. I have playlists for family, friends, and workouts. I think I will start putting more effort into making character playlists too!

*You are not only a writer but a filmmaker, with your short film *Rage* winning many accolades. How did *Rage* come to be? Is filmmaking something you've trained for, or is it more through experience, or both?*

I've always been a writer and artist. I got involved in the film industry around 2011. I did some extra work in a few films and found myself working as a crew member on several independent productions, mostly doing set creation as part of the Art Department. I got the opportunity on more than one occasion to do some script writing, and I've co-written and ghost-written several scripts. A lot of the productions that I worked on never made it past the post-production stage, and I always wondered if it would be possible for me to write, produce, and direct my own production. When I came up with the concept for *Rage*, it was originally going to be a short story, but I ended up writing it as a script. That's when I realized that it was time to make my own film and see if I could do it. I was really surprised and pleased with how well *Rage* was received on the film festival circuit.

*I like the really intimate shots in *Rage*, such as when Jim is driving, chasing after the person who keyed his car. Also, really nice wounds! Was that a lot of work?*

I was very fortunate that the Director of Photography, William Mosqueda, really understood the emotion and the atmosphere I wanted to convey in the film. He provided some exceptional insight and I respect his process. I was so fortunate to work with an amazing



Stills from *Rage*: (top left) Jim (Tim Pepper) chasing the person who damaged his car; (middle right) Kris (Cydni Skyy Newman) in a daring escape; (bottom left) Jim and Kris, both wounded, talk about what to do next (copyright 2021 Lenore Sagaskie/Ghost Cat Studio).

crew. Mark Foster worked as gaffer, and I enjoy working with him. He really understands how important light and shadow are to every scene. I constructed blood squibs, but Tiffany Bishop was responsible for the amazing special effects make up. She is so talented and does some incredible gore effects. I am so grateful to have an amazing crew. Their talent and precision in their craft really elevated the production. I can't thank them enough for all the hard work they put into the production of *Rage*.

Was it difficult to get that much story/development into such a short amount of time?

It was a bit of a challenge to get everything done and condensed into a short film. Even though I had written a short script there were still some scenes that we had to leave out. Editing in film is just as important as editing is in writing, and sometimes you must sacrifice a scene or two to get the film to a comfortable finished length.

Filmmaking (especially indie films) is a ton of work and time. Do you find it worth it? What do you find particularly exciting about it?

Filmmaking is a lot of work and involves a great deal of time. I can't speak for everyone, but it's very gratifying to me. When I write, it's like I'm writing down a daydream as it transpires. Filmmaking is returning the process back into the daydream, but it's orchestrated by me. I get really excited about making the film, and it becomes my entire focus during the pre-production stage. I design and create set elements and some of the equipment, I do auditions, interview potential crew, scout locations, pay attention to the Farmer's Almanac for weather for shoot days, plan schedules, buy/borrow props, etc. There's just so much to the process and I embrace it. I become so enthusiastic, and I'm always grateful to the people that act and become part of the crew. It's like I have a crazy vision and people not only encourage me to do it, but they also willingly participate! And they bring their absolute best with them when they do. It's so incredible when I see what we've all created, and it's even better than it was in my head. Filmmaking is the best drug I've ever had.



Logo for the upcoming feature-length film *Wind Witch*

What are your literary and filmic influences?

I read everything from horror, fantasy, and science fiction. A few of my literary influences are Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, Tanya Huff, Patricia Briggs, and Robert J. Sawyer.

My film influences are Richard Kelly (*Donnie Darko*), Eli Craig (*Tucker and Dale Vs Evil*), Sam Raimi (*Army of Darkness*), Akira Kurosawa (*Seven Samurai*), and Dario Argento (*Suspiria*). I love films that do practical effects in imaginative ways. I am a huge fan of Dario Argento. He used a lot of arthouse elements and practical effects. Argento also focused on using music, not only accompanying

the film, but to build the intensity of the horror. I was lucky to see Goblin perform a live concert accompanying the film *Suspiria* last Halloween. It was a great experience. I try to emulate Sam Raimi in some ways. I have also used my car in my film, and I plan to keep using it in every film I make.

You were in the military. How has that influenced your writing/film-making (if it has)? Are there any other life-influences that have influenced your creative arts?

My military experience really translated well to my filmmaking. Once I begin a film project, I maintain my focus and stay “on mission” until the production is completed. I excel at planning, logistics, and preparing for eventualities during the pre-production and production phases. As anyone who has ever made a film knows, there are things that happen you just can’t prepare for: weather can cause delays, accidents happen, and sometimes equipment fails. The military taught me how to accept the unpredictable and to pivot quickly and resolve the situation as soon as possible. My military training also gave me a sense of responsibility to safeguard the most precious assets on the set: the crew and cast. I always ensure that the people who are part of the creation process are in a safe environment, so they can focus on what they need to do without needless distractions.

You’ve mentioned elsewhere (in a 2019 interview) that you tend to work on several projects at once. Is that still the case? What do you have planned?

I do have a few projects coming up, now that you mention it. I will be continuing to write my Four Sworn series with the last two books. I’m building some new equipment to hopefully make production a

lot easier. The BIG news I’d like to share is that I’ve started pre-production for my next film, *Wind Witch*. It is a feature length, horror-comedy about a young woman struggling to find where she belongs after the sudden death of her grandmother. The small town she lives in is run by a group of locals and a lot of things that happen in the community are toxic, especially to the people who don’t fit in. Skye works at a job she hates, doesn’t fit in, and feels stuck. A group of three strangers rolls into town. They sense something sinister about the town and investigate not only the town, but the sudden death of their friend, Skye’s grandmother. I will be doing a crowd funding campaign for the film in August, and I will be posting the details on social media and my website. I’m still looking for talent, extras and many other roles, and I will be posting those opportunities on the socials/website as well. We have fun making our films, and we always have room for more people.

* * *

*You can find the first two books in her fantasy series: The Four Sworn: Spring Equinox, and The Four Sworn: Summer Solstice, on Amazon (at [amazon.com/Four-Sworn-Spring-Equinox-ebook/dp/B076KM2G41](https://www.amazon.com/Four-Sworn-Spring-Equinox-ebook/dp/B076KM2G41) and [amazon.com/gp/product/B076DKKHZ3](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B076DKKHZ3), respectively). Lenore is writing the third book in The Four Sworn series, and her first feature length horror-comedy, *Wind Witch*, is currently in pre-production.*

You can find Lenore lurking on Twitter and Instagram and Threads as @lenorewrites, and on Facebook as herself.

For more information on upcoming projects and crowd-funding opportunities, visit www.ghostcatstudio.com



Still Life with Copper Teapot by E. E. King

Your Guide to the Four Blends of Penumbra Faeryland Tea, in Order of Their Particular Usage

by M. E. Garber

Everyone admires a good tea, and who can resist the strong online community surrounding our Penumbra Faeryland teas? Of course, the sheer respect we bring to the table teases the imagination with the heady savor of *influence* and *power!* But we're more than just a place on the internet, so let's move on to the teas.

* * *

1. Penumbra Incipience Spring Tips

The entry-level into the Penumbra Faeryland experience, this First Flush is exquisite, exhibiting a gentle nuttiness and slight fruitiness that's sweetly compelling. The tiniest whiff of smoke draws the tongue for another sip as you seek the hidden fire surely behind it. A rounded mouthfeel, expressed through notes of delicate pale almonds and whitest cream, creates satisfied, appreciative murmurs.

You'll long to share this tea, but choose wisely who you'll confide in about the rarified world of Penumbra Faeryland! It's a special journey that can be impeded by small-minded companions.

Brewing notes: this blend benefits from gently swishing the leaves as they steep at a lower temperature. Do not overboil, or you risk exposing bitter notes that could forevermore prejudice the drinker against these particular tea blends.

* * *

2. Penumbra Baroque

Congratulations! You've graduated to this complex tea boasting more astringency than the previous one, but also more depth. The flavor lingers, altering on the back of the tongue to something "more"--whispers of conspiracy strengthen into notes of molasses, date, and subterfuge, mingling with stronger whiffs of smoke from still-unseen but deeply suspicious fires. Once you've sipped this particular blend, there's no going back to the simplicity of the previous one, I'm afraid. But congratulations: this means your tastes have matured and refined--unlike your former friends and colleagues, who remain lost, and blind to the truth.

This tea is best brewed and sipped in the dark, away from the prying, accusatory eyes of those not on the Penumbra Teas of Faeryland journey. Most enjoy it with added milk, which brings a soothing whiteness to the cup. Appreciation of this Baroque blend unlocks wider access to the Penumbra Faeryland networks, which ignites greater passion for these rarified blends.

* * *

3. Penumbra Baroque Extra-Noir

This is a bold tea. One for palates unafraid of its rank, earthy flavor and smokey essence. A symbol of hard-won status and respect, this tea's deeply tannic bite is appreciated by connoisseurs, whereas for the newcomer it's simply too strong, too miasmatic. So, not for begin-

ners. Perfect for those already steeped in the ideas and ideals of *conspiracy*, for those primed to exceed the Penumbral and plunge wholeheartedly into the deeper, still more complex, and truly *Umbral* Faeryland teas. For *you*.

For best results, this blend should be boiled long and hot, then doused heavily with milk until pleasingly pale. While other tea aficionados may bleat that the color is too white, you now know better than to heed them.

Also, at this stage, you should be suggesting this tea's merits widely to those a step below. It's your duty to share your love and knowledge of the Umbral Faeryland teas. Remember: no one becomes a true aficionado without help from above, and if you're drinking this tea, you're *above*.

* * *

4. Umbral Ambrosia Amnesia Blend

This tea is your moment of glory. A statement of who you are and wish to become. Anyone can follow along a path led by others, but it takes a truly dedicated acolyte of the Umbral to move past the shackles and restraints of their self-blinding society. But the way forward demands it! For you, then, this pinnacle of teas: the addictively inspiring Umbral Ambrosia Amnesia Blend.

With a nose of sharp, sweet decay overlaid by a deep char (reminiscent of the bridges you've been forced to burn with intractable family

and friends), this blend further separates our wheat from the chaff with the bitter coolness of gun oils and zip ties. Its up-front astringency puts off all but the most loyal, hardcore aficionados, placing you in the glittering, exclusive club you've been seeking--even as it clears other, lesser options from your path.

Granted, it's a hard blend to swallow, but now your tastebuds have acclimated and you can shrug off the vinegar-ed stares of lesser minds. Perfect served with a dollop of palest creamed honey.

By now, you've probably heard whispers of an *alternate* blend, not Umbral but maybe something better. Don't believe it! You've found a loving home in the Umbral Faeryland. The only other option is rejecting your favorite, lush teas--wasting all your progress and the efforts you went through learning about them--to instead accept an eternity of that crude, facile, and most unrefined brew--a harsh green tea uninspiringly called "Unbiased Objectivity." With its boring name and unverifiable credentials, those on the Umbral path can hardly be expected to try it! There's no covering *this* nastiness up with milk or honey--you have to drink it plain, unadorned, or it curdles in your belly like the lie it is.

So here, have another cup. Ambrosia Amnesia, right?

And have you heard, there might be another, deeper Umbral blend dropping soon ...

The Tended Field of Eido Yamata

by Jon Michael Kelley

Somewhere in the distance, the faint tinkling of a bell ...

In the serenity where he now found himself, Yamata still retained the vista of his previous life.

Sitting meditatively, he could recall every moment of that existence with uncommon clarity. However, he did not recognize from those memories the child standing before him, a girl of obvious Japanese descent, about eight years old, wearing a simple knee-length white dress that seemed remarkably clean and bright, given that her bare legs and feet were black with dirt. A rice hat made of bamboo sat confidently atop her head, and hooked in the bend of an arm was an ikebana basket of similar weave. But there were no flowers.

Except for not having a mouth, she appeared normal in every other way.

But then, Yamata had to look no farther than his own desiccated body to know that 'here,' 'normal' was not to be the dominant theme. Obviously, the afterlife was amenable to showcasing his wasted form, one achieved in the previous one through self-mummification. But that such a gaunt and withered state had escorted him so authentically into the next realm was rousing some concern, as he could only slightly turn his head, and to a greater degree his right arm.

Am I to remain forever a rigid corpse? he wondered.

As it had for the better part of his life, a yellow robe draped his body, though with much less resolve given his strangled girth.

Interestingly, *he* was able to speak, and had done so upon his relocation; a kindly greeting to the girl. She'd responded only with an unenthusiastic wave of her hand, her brown eyes staring on, mildly curious.

Beyond the girl was a vastness that Yamata was still trying to grasp. And, like the girl, there was nothing he could recall from his previous life to make its comparison; a life spent mostly in the Tōhoku region of Japan's Honshu Island, in search of purification. To all points on the horizon, barren furrows radiated outward from where he sat, a lotus posture that was the very hub for those tilled spokes. He was reminded of a naval flag, one belonging to a country that only had his compulsory allegiance: *The land of the Rising Sun*, its red ensign's beams flaring outward in strong allegory. And similar intentions were at work here, he suspected, as neither from the east nor west did *this* sun rise, but instead beat down relentlessly from a perpetual noon.

Although his time here was (in the vaguest sense) relatively new, the tropes for enlightenment were ageless.

The atmosphere was leaden with quietude, as if becalmed eons ago by some great inhalation and since petrified while waiting for the ensuing release. Once here, Yamata had intuited an acceleration of awareness. Not the *passing* of time (although there were sequential aspects to the construct), but rather a kind of hastened shedding; a sloughing of absolutes, and things now obsolete, receding away like dreams do upon wakening. And very much like dreams, those references slipped no further than the periphery of his erstwhile life; lingering there, close by and ready should they be called upon to offer

up sobering testimonials. Witnesses to a world that was more devoted to the conservation of falsehoods than to their dismantling. That Hell was eternal was just one of those; that death was the end of learning and bettering oneself, another. No fires burned hotter than those of the physical world, the fires of greed, lust, anger, hatred, sickness ... Heaven, he believed, was anywhere such conflagrations had been doused.

Not so unlike his previous journey, the one he would begin from here would be chaperoned by contemplation. He would be careful of being too prideful, and to always remember that it was never about what life had denied him, but rather what he had denied life.

Yamata considered again his permanent seat, his cadaverousness, the hushed girl, the vast field stretching in all directions ...

A field unproductive yet, aside from the growing anticipation.

And that fixed ceiling of sunshine. On a profound level, Yamata accepted the unflinching brightness as obligatory to the venue, for the most crucial lessons were often the most evasive, and to achieve their understanding required keeping any and all shadows squarely underfoot.

That, or the enduring sunshine was simply here to nourish what was clearly an imminent crop of inestimable scope, and aspirations.

In what was without doubt a land of extended metaphor, he considered a myriad interpretation, from the obvious to the abstruse.

Upon those very thoughts, the little girl stepped closer and tipped her basket to allow him to see its contents. Only a few remained of what appeared to be some kind of seed. With much effort he tilted his head and, beyond her, looked again upon the rows, this time focusing on proximity rather than distance. He saw her footprints, deep and purposeful, marching along the soft trenches. Even closer, he saw the tiny indentations where her finger had pushed seeds into the soil. And he could now see that her impressions weren't just localized but

disappeared into the staggering distance; toward a horizon not teetering upon the curvature of a round world but poised securely upon the blaring infiniteness of a flat one.

A determined girl! Yamata stared at her again and thought she might even be unusually pretty. But the unnatural smoothness below her nose was influencing that illusion. When having first seen the mouthless girl, Yamata thought of her as stage dressing to his soliloquy, a caricature of quiet innocence. A projection, perhaps, of his immaturity in this new place. He now suspected her reason for being here was as practical as it was chaste metaphor. She was to be, among other things, the assistant to his immobility.

A less liberated person might have called it servitude, but Yamata saw the potential for a collaboration, though he was yet unclear as to what his reciprocal role might be. And that she could read his thoughts wasn't entirely accurate, as he believed her to be, to some degree, the very extension of them; of his mind. His duality.

Regardless, there was no question that those omitted lips accentuated expression in her eyes. She was smiling in her agrarian achievement.

He smiled back, then impulsively wondered: *Does her white dress suggest virtue? Purity? Or, is it to represent the absence of beguiling color?* After all, beyond the gold tint of his robe there was only a monotonous blend of bucolic hues.

Abruptly, the girl gave a sighing motion with her shoulders, slowly shook her head, then began walking a tight circle, eyes down and focused on her dirty feet.

Watching the demonstration, Yamata was struck with the notion that she was communicating her annoyance with him.

Have I become tedious with my musings? he wondered. *That it is not truth I am chasing but my own tail instead?*

If she agreed with these thoughts, she gave no sign.

Finally, he said to her, “Giving in to the assumption that you have no name, even if you could speak it, I shall call you Uekiya.”

Upon hearing the word, the girl looked up and nodded to the unfailing field, accepting her new title: Gardner. Then she lowered her eyes once more and resumed etching a tight circle into the loamy soil.

Again, considering the girl’s inability at speech, Yamata recalled a quote from Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, and wondered if she was the exemplar for such wisdom: “*He who knows, does not speak. He who speaks, does not know.*”

Then, to confirm that she either was or was not, in fact, substantial, Yamata reached out his workable hand for her. Stiffly, she stopped going around and round and regarded the gesture with narrow eyes, then slowly shook her head, as if to say that was not appropriate.

Why? he wondered. *Am I being reminded that something’s authenticity doesn’t necessarily lie in its solidness?* Or, was there still lingering within him a tactile need? One not quite disassociated yet from his former self?

Then there was sudden growth in the field. Already the girl was bent over and studying the nearest sprout, a thing that vaguely resembled an asparagus spear, no larger than his littlest finger and appearing just as corpselike. A reaffirming sign that this was going to be a harvest most different from any other.

Still bent over, hands on her knees, Uekiya turned her attention to him. Where triumph could not insinuate itself in a smile, so it sparkled doubly in her eyes.

From behind him came once again the tinkling of a bell. A declarative echo, perhaps, of his resolve to achieve *Sokushinbutsu*, the practice to reach ultimate austerity and enlightenment through a most ambitious art of physical punishment: self-mummification. For a Shingon Buddhist, it was an enduring commitment. For many years the devoted monk would practice *nyūjō*, adhering to elaborate

regimes of meditations, physical activities that stripped the body of fat, and an exclusive diet of salt, pine bark, nuts, seeds, roots, and urushi tea. This tea was especially significant. It was derived from the sap of the urushi tree and highly toxic and was normally used for the lacquering of pottery. When ingested, vomiting and dehydration followed. Most importantly, it ultimately made the body too poisonous to be eaten by carrion insects and their ilk. If the body absorbed high enough levels, some believed it could even discourage like-minded bacteria.

Finally, when sensing his end drawing near, the monk would have himself locked inside a pinewood box, one barely large enough to accommodate his body, wherein a permanent lotus position was assumed. Some monks would insist on having coal, salt, or even lime heaped around them to stave off the slightest moisture.

Once confined, the practitioner’s only connection to the outside world was an air tube, and a bell one he would dutifully ring every day to let those listening know that he was still alive. When the ringing stopped, the air tube was removed and the makeshift tomb tightly sealed.

After a customary three years had passed, the body was exhumed. Of the many who attempted to achieve such a hallowed state, only a very few triumphed. Most bodies were found to be in normal states of decay. However, those who accomplished their own mummifications were regarded as true Buddhas. Highly revered, they were placed into the temples for viewing.

For their tremendous spirit and devotion, admiration was still paid those who failed in their endeavors. But for Yamata especially, that was modest esteem and certainly not the sort he ever hoped to gain through compromise.

Uekiya had dropped her basket and, arms dangling at her sides, was now staring intently at something behind him. And by the tilt of her gaze that something seemed to be looming from a great height. Her awe was absolute. Had she the proper hinges, Yamata thought, she

would have been left slack jawed. He then became both exhilarated and frightened. What could exist among these rural and most modest trappings to provoke such veneration? If he were prone to such expectations, he might have believed she was beholding a god.

That she was witnessing a massive thunderhead instead was the likelier explanation. After all, from a parched point of view, threatening rain clouds could easily provoke the same respect as any passing deity.

Moisture. Yes, it would be the remaining ingredient needed to placate the construct's agricultural objective. Being unable to turn his head fully to either side, Yamata's visual range was limited, thus leaving the matter most tantalizing. Yet another clue that the lessons here would not be easily learned.

After what may have been a mere moment or the passing of centuries, the girl reached down and retrieved her basket, either her wonderment spent or the spectacle finally retreated.

Another burst of growth in the rows, now appearing as a more recognizable plant. Although still spindly and emaciated, the stalks were more pronounced and now home to little brown offshoots that were unmistakably leaves, semi-translucent in their infancy. A quality that he found to be strangely reminiscent, but of what he couldn't yet say.

Whatever relevance this germination had to the setting remained unclear. Yamata continued to employ his wisdom, always mindful that this was by its very nature a land of illusion.

Yamata again reached out for the girl, his compulsion growing fierce. This time, Uekiya wheeled and violently slapped his hand away, nearly breaking off the first two fingers. With utter disbelief, Yamata stared at those digits, both dangling now on withered tendons and pointing obliquely, if not forebodingly, to the ground.

The pain was sudden and intense—and disconcerting. He had not anticipated there to be such measurable discomfort beyond physical

life. But he did not react instinctively and withdraw his arm. Instead, he left it out there for her to see. A testament to her brashness, to her insolence.

With something akin to compassion, Uekiya's eyes softened. Then she made her way to the closest plant and began plucking its leaves, placing each one carefully into her basket. As Yamata watched, his curiosity grew into trepidation as he realized that those lucent leaves were the same color and texture as his dried, wrinkled skin. After having gathered only a few, Uekiya stepped up to his extended arm and began carefully applying the leaves to his broken fingers, bringing them back together at their fractures, then wrapping and gently rubbing the new tissue into place, manipulating and massaging it until it was indistinguishable from his own layering. When she was through, she turned his hand this way and that, regarding her accomplishments with satisfaction.

Yamata flexed his fingers and found them restored to their original, albeit intransigent, state. But any appreciation of Uekiya's handiwork was quickly dissolving, melting into an anxiety unlike any he had ever known, confirming that the most profound realizations were often the most unsettling.

Within the rows there was yet again another acceleration of growth, this time even more telling as a small whitish bulb had become evident at the top of every stalk, each of those now taller by another eight inches, and with heartier girth.

Are they the rudiments of a flower? Yamata wondered of the spheres. A fruit? Or are they the beginnings of something I dare not try to imagine?

His determined outlook, he realized, was growing dim. A dread had begun building in the thick atmosphere, but there was no beating heart to accompany it to crescendo. Just his quivering essence.

And still the plants grew, now four feet high, their bulbs even whiter and plumper, where within those a restlessness festered. As he stared,

they disconcertedly reminded him of caterpillar nests, the larvae inside those silk pouches squirming to break free.

Yamata turned his eyes to Uekiya, as if her own eyes might provide answer, or at least a concerned recognition to his plight.

He balled his right hand as best he could and vehemently condemned her speechlessness. *“Are you to remain forever silent, or must I say just the right thing, ask just the right question to elicit a response?”* But her attention had once again been drawn to something behind him. Something gargantuan was still his impression.

It was then when Yamata noticed that something had gone missing from the construct. He searched his restricted view; frantically so. It was vitally important to remember, he was sure. Everything presented here had dire meaning and was only expected to change or disappear altogether once its purpose had been understood. Or so he expected.

Then there was movement. On the nearest plant, its bulb had begun weeping milky rivulets; viscous streams trailing down the stalk with the ambition of warmed honey. Then Yamata realized that the discharge was not comprised of any liquid but was made up of hundreds of pale white worms. And maggots. Upon reaching the ground, the creatures struggled in the loose soil, their frantic undulations less confident but still maintaining a fixed progression toward his still and sitting form.

Bent over once again, hands on knees, Uekiya was watching the bugs' advancement with rapt wonderment.

The first worms to reach Yamata reared up and attached themselves to the lowest parts of his feet, then began burrowing through the brown, shriveled skin. Sparkles of intense pain began dancing behind his eyes, and a shrill, strident noise stung his ears; the pinched squeal, he quickly realized, of his own dry voice.

The pain of them entering his body was memorable, but the kind they ignited once inside was astonishingly bright and bellicose. A

feast not had on mere shriveled bone and muscle, he feared, but upon a profound and everlasting food source: his soul. And it too screamed. Sounds not birthed from a decrepit throat but instead the collected resonances of isolation and grim oblivions, now to be intoned upon an unending existence.

The internal writhing of the worms was equally insufferable, and he cried out for a boyhood god; one he had no occasion to revisit, until now.

Finally, mercifully, the pain slowly receded after the remaining worms had inserted themselves. It was a momentous reprieve. But another look at the burgeoning rows beyond confirmed that such amnesties would be fleeting.

Leisurely filling her basket, Uekiya had set about plucking leaves from the offending plant. Yamata stared out across his field, one that was now growing a perpetual supply of sutures; grafts to outwardly mend the external damage caused by an equally eternal progression of the most vile and ravenous creatures.

But what about the internal damage? he desperately wondered. *How will she mend that?*

Uekiya was now kneeling before him, massaging the leaves onto the chewed holes in his feet, restoring the dead tissue.

When finished, she went back to staring at the anomaly behind him.

Yamata prayed that the girl was, in fact, witnessing a storm. Prayed for a deluge to drown the crawling masses. For lightning to scorch them thoroughly, then let typhoon winds scatter their seared remains across the farthest reaches of this perpetuity.

Prayed for any blight that would dissuade his punishment.

Once, his great profundity did not abide the generic concepts of an eternal and torturous perdition. Now, he was being forced to reconsider. Ironically, what remained intact of his fracturing philosophy

was the reverberation of his most insightful expression; that it wasn't about what life had denied him, but what he had denied life.

And life, it was being made very clear, was not going to be denied *him*.

Despite his most sincere, consecrated motivations, he had accelerated his own death and thereby corrupted those intentions. To tear away the shiny tinsel of devotion revealed the harsher truth of a prideful suicide. But his biggest sin of all was saturating his body with urushi tea. Having done so, he had denied the carrion eaters their due; had disallowed the natural progression of things and had done so vainly and with utter disregard for consequence.

The bulb of the second closest plant had opened, releasing its own white undulant stream. Yamata looked beyond the advancing worms and out upon the incalculable vastness, and within that silent horror

was revealed the thing that had gone missing. The bell. It was no longer being rung. And on some instinctual level, that awakened in him a fear more primal than the worms themselves.

Uekiya's growing devotion to the unseen behind him was inviting its own species of fear. Her wide brown eyes had assumed a tragically revering expression, and Yamata was now on the brink of admitting that no less than a god could warrant such reverence.

But what sort of god captivates a child while hiding behind an atrocity of infinite proportions?

Yamata one last time contemplated Uekiya's absent mouth, and out of all the convoluted, Byzantine reasons he could think of for it not being there, he finally decided on a more austere one. Once in hell, there is simply nothing left to say.



Drinking from the Mountain Pool

by Miguel O. Mitchell

Admired

by M. Christine Benner Dixon

She tucked vials of water in her hair,
refilling them whenever she showered
or swam. Once they learned her secret,
birds came, and she was crowned with
dry-throated moths. Her friends filled
the vials with cut flowers, which stayed
bright all day, even in the hot afternoon.

Her pillow molded and then mossed
over, wet from the spilled water every
night. Her bed turned dark with humus,
and her hair blushed green. Her room
became a knoll, her body blossoming
in one long plot. The birds still hunted
round seeds. Thirsty moths still drank.

And her friends cut flowers from her
wrists to carry home, unsure if she
was there or not, whether she had
gone.

The Macaw

by Steve Perry and George Guthridge

Aleem's entrance into the Indian ambassador's party was as smooth as oil on warm glass, at the precise instant between too early and too late. That was part of the showing, in itself as important as any other part. She glided in quietly, the twin tigers padding along beside her. Then she stood posed, not speaking as the door slid shut, blocking out the L.A. night and the ever-present crowd that must have watched in awe as she'd alighted from her private car.

Next to me, the ambassador had lifted a drink bulb to his lips. He choked and covered his mouth with his dark hand when he saw her. Saw *them*. He hadn't approved the tigers' use, I realized. Someone in his government had surprised him, someone who knew how much more valuable the rare cats would be after Aleem used them in the showing. In her *art*.

Aleem was dressed in a gray bodysuit and ballet slippers, her thin figure almost childlike. Her short, ash-colored hair covered her head like a cap, and she kept her face carefully neutral. In the dimly lit room, she was nearly invisible between the tigers, as she had intended.

But the tigers—ah!—the tigers!

They were Royal Bengals, psychotopicked to follow commands from the ultrasonic stimulator Aleem carried hidden in one hand. As the crowd stood breathless, the moment stretched to a fine and calculated tension—the anticipation building ...

The animals paced away from the slight woman, moving in unison toward the large oval rug near the bar. The crowd parted in a rippling wave, uncertain how to react. It was safe, wasn't it?

The big cats surveyed the room, yawned, and stretched out as if lordly aware they were the center of attention and admiration. Each was dyed with luminous green pulse-paint. Over that, Aleem had traced a line drawing of the natural fur markings in translucent orange and black. She'd timed the pulse-paint so the cats blinked sequentially, great beasts of living neon. The watchers had to shift their gazes from animal to animal, the effect nearly hypnotic.

There was more: Aleem had injected the cats with myelenglow and, wearing Kirlian shatter-glasses, had traced their nervous systems with yet a differently timed pulse-paint. The tigers were living blinking paintings, airbrushed to perfection, spectacular to behold. Once the media were allowed into the party, the yawning beasts would show up on a billion holoproj sets around the world, testimonials to the world's most popular living painter: Aleem Van de Mar, screamingly successful artist.

And commercial whore.

And my wife.

The pulse-paint was organic, engineered of living microorganisms, and the bright colonies had brief lives. The colors would fade within hours. By then, holographers would have done their magic to capture and counterfeit the tigers. Three-dimensional projections would adorn private cubicles, and museums would have signed, limited-edition copies. But the living art would dim and be brushed away as flecks of dead gray paint, like dried moss in sunshine, leaving the tigers as before, though more famous.

Her work's transience was one reason for its popularity. Some critics

claimed it expressed life's ephemerality. The more cynical said the value lay in the lack of an original—Aleem's signature on signed copies was the real collector's item, and people paid dearly for it.

I looked away from the cats and caught Aleem glancing at me. Her neutral expression flickered for an instant, and I thought I saw longing, fear, perhaps anger, in her face. Then the mask slid back into place. I sighed and nodded, wondering what she might have seen behind my own bland façade.

"Ah, Aleem!" Grinning, the ambassador stepped toward her, arms outstretched, to congratulate her. As well he might: His party was made. The showing would be talked about for months, and he would gain political clout in small but definite ways.

The many-headed creature that was the party rumbled and broke into approving voice, a cacophony of praise acknowledging Aleem's latest triumph. I turned and worked my way through the throng, heading toward the sleep rooms. I could feel Aleem's stare against the back of my neck, pressed there like a hot hand.

* * *

Most of the sleep rooms were empty. I picked one and entered, pausing only to jab the "Occupied" LCD button. I sprawled on the gel cushion and closed my eyes in the soundproofed room's nearly tangible quiet. The soft red light faded out as I adjusted the sleep-trode mesh over my temples.

Sleep: needed for normal recharging and lately grown fashionable in high-density areas as a means of removing one's self from the effects of overpopulation. Scientists had recently documented that the vibrational level of a city past optimum density levels of electrochemical beings—people—was unhealthy. It was a constant stress, invisible, but as real as wind or smog. Want to add ten years to your life? Sleep more. No need to feel guilty about sacking out. Enjoy the deep slumber that sleep-trode pulse-units offered.

Lately I used sleep for yet another reason.

To remove myself ... from myself.

* * *

Within a warm fog, a buzzer scolded me.

I blinked. The dim light of the sleep room was on. I rolled over, not yet fully awake. Sleep's small death released me reluctantly, leaving me without dreams to mark my passage back into life.

I had almost never dreamed, at least not dreams I could recall upon awakening, since I'd stopped writing and started using the sleep-trodes heavily. Jerrod the poet, once sought after by publishers and generally commended by critics, no longer had dreams to commit upon his public. My time had passed. The spark had drowned—who knew that I had poured water on it myself? I had climbed an artistic mountain—and leaped off.

It wasn't Aleem's fault. I had gotten to the end of my song. That was all. As she was coming to the end of her song.

"Jerrod?"

Aleem was outside. She'd come looking for me. I nodded to myself. I had something she needed.

"Come in."

She eased inside, followed by the party's noise, and shut the door. I glanced at the room's chronometer. I'd been asleep only a couple of hours. Nearly 2400, the witching hour.

The thick quiet came back. She settled on the end of the cushion, and for a moment we looked silently at each other. I drew up my feet and sat cross-legged. The gel gently undulated.

“You’re missing your party,” I said at last.

She shook her head. “You know what I think of those ... people.”

“It’s a zoo out there.”

“You’re not funny, Jerrod.”

“I know. I wasn’t trying to be.”

She touched my knee. Her fingers were long and slim and delicate-looking, the first thing I’d noticed about her all those years ago. She looked sallow-cheeked in the weak light. Her eyes brimmed with tears. “I know what you think of the showing,” she said. “But one of us has to work. The residual rights from the tigers will—”

“—keep us fed and housed much better than my poetry,” I finished. “As did the residuals to the chimp and the piranha and that stupid, ungrateful toucan—”

“Jerrod ...”

I shut up. We were slipping into that old hateful dance, its choreography too familiar, almost boring for all its internal violence. I’d tell her the money wasn’t important. We could live without it; and if only— She’d say I couldn’t understand any longer. I had given up that right. And if only—

The fight had been good the first time, alive and raw, and we’d made love afterward in our haste to reconnect ourselves. But the fight had long since become etched into dusty, mindless grooves. Always it seemed we started with better intentions, hoping somehow to exorcise our demons, but it never went that way. The troops were entrenched too deeply. *She* had sold out. I had given up. Somewhere, somehow, we had lost everything. Each of us; and both of us.

“It ... it was a good showing, wasn’t it, Jerrod?”

The ritual question. And my answer, the one she had to have, the one small thing I could still give her: “The tigers were the best yet. I mean that.” And they were—for what they were. More complex than the chimp or piranha or toucan, the tigers were better; not risky, not art, but excellent craftsmanship. She had discovered the formula her public would nurse on for as long as she wanted.

She nodded, put her head in her hands, and began crying. We were helpless together now. There was nothing I could say or do for either of us. I stepped from the now-oppressive silence into the babble of the party, leaving Aleem behind.

The party saddened and angered me even further. Couples and threesomes rutted in various forms of sexual activity on cushions and the rug. The curtains had been thrown open to the L.A. lights. The bulletproof glass kept out the city’s accepted violence and suffocating, overcrowded chaos, the spin addicts and eight-year-old prostitutes and gangs willing to kill for black-market kidneys.

It kept in the terror of feeling lonely in a crowd.

Naked as a newborn, the ambassador staggered past me, waving the ultrasonic stimulator and grinning at the tigers, his electronic birthday present. A statuesque blonde gowned in glittersilks touched my shoulder and smiled. He/she was a morpho conversion, able to please with whatever genitals one might desire, but I turned away. I didn’t want to be distracted by sex. I wanted the silence of a crematorium or a walk alone in cold acid rain. Quite the martyr.

I made my way past the animals, *all* the animals, to the bar. The tender suggested smoke, capsules, or needles, but settled for a drink the ambassador had had created especially for the party: an orange-on-orange mixture with the too-cute name of Annie’s Amphetamine Antidote. It came in a pair of bulbs. The tender said you really shouldn’t have one without the other.

Like certain tigers.

* * *

Two months passed, a listless time suffused with ennui. Aleem and I seldom saw each other. When we did, I made small talk about how I might fly up and see my dad, but I never packed. She spoke of a new curry she intended to cook. She never cooked it. She hated cooking. Neither of us mentioned tigers. During those rare times when one of us felt desire and tenderness, the other never seemed to. We spent most of our time in our penthouse in the quakeproof high-rise that jutted above the heavier ground smoke, and in our own rooms. Me in the bedroom, with the 'trodes. She in her studio, with whatever new animal masterpiece she'd undertaken.

On the evening of Aleem's next show, I heard crying from behind her door. I didn't know what she was working on. There'd been no cheeps or barks, and she never allowed anyone to view a work in progress. I hadn't seen her in four days. The quiet sobbing was like that of a child huddling in a closet after being punished for something she didn't do. Paradoxically, the sound triggered a memory of a time without tears. Standing outside the plastic door of her studio, I remembered our laughter when we'd visited the Mato Grosso and the Mbaya Indians—and saw the macaw.

* * *

We had been young and twenty then, and answers were simple because questions were simple. Aleem was just out of CalArt, and I was flunking med school. We had little money and no prospects, just each other and a passion for art. We spent the summer living in the tiny apartment I'd constructed in the barn loft of my father's dairy near the base of Washington's Mount Adams. Between writing and painting and lovemaking, I helped Dad run the milkers while Aleem cooked—yes, cooked!—and canned and picked berries and exulted in the greenery and clean air. We were happy and stupid and in love, and we told each other we had it all; we had the world by the tail.

In the fall, we returned to L.A. so I could give med school a final try. We could always reboard the shuttle, we assured ourselves. Washing-

ton would always be there. Somehow, on a lark, we ended up heading to Brazil, to photograph hawkmoths and parrots and naked natives. Our cameras, though, were loaded with more than holoplastes: I stole a few grams of the new drug, myelinglow, from my chem lab. It was being tested for visualization of nerve tissue. Though the drug could produce intense pain if not countered by chemical or electrical means, it was also psychoactive and psychedelic, and we had heard Brazil's Mbaya Indians used a cruder form of it in their religious ceremonies. The Indians, it was said, would pay almost anything for the pure stuff. We figured to take it up the Cuiabá River to trade for organic cocaine and mushroom dust and animistic art.

The Mbaya had ruled much of Brazil's interior centuries ago, keeping slaves and considering the conquering Portuguese unworthy of trade or even talk. Most remaining tribal members now lived in squalid towns bordering the bush. They sat on the dirt floors of their prefab huts and drank maté and watched the holoproj and rarely talked of *awyu*, the spirit of life.

Sometimes, though, as when someone smuggled in myelinglow, they slipped into the forest. There, in the old village, they danced and dreamed.

* * *

The jungle air was humid, a dense medium that hung like damp smoke amid the quebracho and soviera trees.

Sunlight that managed to break through the forest canopy seeped through the palm roof of the *biatemannageo*—the communal house—and dappled the native dancers. Reddened with *urucu* clay, they moved counterclockwise step and step, following the soft, lilting chant they all droned. Aleem and I lay naked together, stoked on the myelinglow the Mbaya shared with us and stoned on the barbiturate vapors we used to ward off pain. Wearing crude Kirlian shatterglasses the Indians made of jacu shells treated with rare organic earth and phosphor compounds, we watched the dancers' nervous systems

flicker and spark, a dazzling nervebeat dance Aleem was later to translate and commercialize with her pulse-painted skin tracings on animals.

The Indians grinned and reached for us. Trippy, we jumped to join them, their electric dances and ecstatic dreams spiraling us down to pleasant exhaustion. Then we sprawled on the ground outside the communal center. We watched spider-limbed coata monkeys chatter among the lianas and tendrilled vines overhead. Under the drug's spell, we felt a thirdness between ourselves that went beyond simple synergy. Aleem would speak, and the words would appear as a thread between her lips, but I would have already sensed her thoughts, primary colors, that clicked and squawked on a branch above us, watching me as I watched him.

"Other people need to ... see this, Jerrod."

I watched an insect crawl across her stomach.

"I have to *show* it to them! In my art!"

I nodded. "But when we come down, you'll have ... forgotten." The words, hard to push out, seemed useless and misleading. "The colors will dull, go ... flat."

She turned toward me, all warmth and flesh. I was filled with desire. "No, there's a common de ... nominator," she said, her words slurring. "Art, astronomy, philosophy, architecture—they're all expressions of the ... same thing. Don't you see?"

The sheen of sweat on her flesh fascinated me.

"It's like the difference between the medieval worldview," she went on. "Geocentrism, inductive reasoning, flat and one-dimensional paintings and cities without ... interior design and—that of—God, I can't hold the thought; I'm losing it!"

I watched the shadows along her cheekbones and under her arms and

shiny breasts break into shards as she ran her fingers through her long, ashen hair.

"And then ... then there was the heliocentric Renaissance with deduction and perspective and long avenues leading to the gardens of Versailles. Can't you understand, Jerrod?"

I lay my head in her lap and looked up at her face. "I love you."

She slid her fingers into my hair and smiled and kept talking. "Then, let's see ... the nineteenth century. Structured. Steel girders and Spencer and Darwin—" She squinted, as if to see the idea better. "Then cubism and Einstein and skyscrapers with entrances but no front doors. The multisided universe. It all connects, Jerrod!"

I kissed her belly.

"Aren't you listening to me?" Her eyes seemed so clear and wide I could drown in them.

"You don't need to tell me in words." I had to force the words out. "Thinking and art change together. So as an artist, you need to discover how things fit, and flow with them—right?"

She took my face in her hands. "No, Jerrod—*lead*. That's what an artist does ... *leads*."

I knew that. I nodded.

The macaw laughed so hard he lost his perch and had to flutter to another branch. A feathered rainbow in the hot, diluted light.

* * *

The memory faded. I was staring sadly through our hallway's partially polarized window, down at the sad gray city, and listening to Aleem sob in her room. We had come too far since those days in Brazil, I realized. Not just Aleem and I—all of us. There seemed no

room for art in a world where people did little but sleep, eat, use one another, and—

Yet another cry.

“Aleem?”

She didn’t answer.

“Aleem!”

“Go away Jerrod.” I could hear the pain in her voice.

“I won’t. Open the door.”

Quiet again, save for the soft crying.

“Open up, or I’ll kick the damn thing down!”

After a time, the latch hummed. The door slid open, and she stood staring vacantly at me.

I wasn’t ready for what I saw.

She had depilated her entire body—head, crotch, axillae—and was erotically, hairlessly nude, except for the pulse-paint, which throbbed with a rhythm equal to her heartbeat. Her head was egg-smooth, even the brows and lashes gone. Her art was her only adornment. My anatomy lessons came rushing back: red higher brain, blue medulla oblongata and cervical, blue thoracic, red lumbar, ending in a blue-tipped filium terminale. Each pair of spinal nerves alternated likewise.

She’d also somehow managed to trace her peripheral nervous system. Hundreds and hundreds of lines decreased in size until they were hair-fine, a nearly invisible netting, from back to pulsing front.

I stepped back, startled, and the red and blue blended to purple with

the extra distance.

It was incredible.

“I didn’t want you to see it,” she said. “Not yet.” Her voice was strained, as if the words had trouble passing through the mesh of color that covered her lips. “But I don’t know if I ... if I can make it to the showing. I feel so tired ...”

Her eyes rolled up into their glowing sockets, and her knees buckled. I lurched forward and caught her as she collapsed, and her weight pulled us back into her studio. I struggled to drag her to the couch, kicking aside expended hypostat tubes and paint-smearred towels. As I lay her down, the paint pulses began speeding up, going much too fast.

Aleem!

She gasped, her face distorted by more than paint. I realized what must have happened. The myelnglow would have caused her tremendous pain, especially with the doses she’d need to keep taking to paint herself. She’d been popping painkillers along with the myelnglow so she could work. Either she’d overdosed, or the combination of chemicals had thrown her system out of whack.

Her eyes fluttered open. “I had to trigger it for you, Jerrod. I know what you think of my work, but I had to—”

“It’s all right. Easy now.”

Her face was pale where I could see it beneath the paint. Her skin felt clammy, and her pulse was rapid and thready. Even a med-school failure could recognize shock.

I propped her feet on a pillow and pulled the pink chenille cover from the back of the couch over her. I punched in the emergency code on her phone, babbled that I needed stat medical help, and started rubbing her arms and legs, trying to circulate the blood.

Far in the back of my mind, I heard something from a South American jungle, laughing at me.

Don't die Aleem. We haven't yet finished paving the road to Hell.

* * *

She came home five days later. She was polite and quiet, but there was something different about her. I couldn't tell what it was, and she wasn't disposed to tell me about it. The brief connection we'd had when I'd thought she was dying was gone.

That night, in my room, the sleeptrodes dangled over my bed like the pincers of a malevolent crab. The headset's platinum mesh looked alive. I could hear it calling: *Sleep, Jerrod. Let it all go. Forget. Sleep.*

I reached for them, with their easy, dreamless answers.

And remembered Aleem pulsing nakedly, dying.

I turned away from the sleep machinery. No. Not this time.

I walked across the hall and tapped on Aleem's door.

"Listen," I said, at a loss for the right words when she answered. I, the poet. "I—we have to—there's got to be some way—" I waved my hands mutely, feeling like an idiot.

"I know." She took my hands in hers and looked at me solemnly. "We have to go back." As if that were possible.

I shook my head. Thomas Wolfe said it. You can't go home—"I mean really go back," she said. "To the jungle. It all changed there, Jerrod. Somehow we got part of it, but we missed something. I don't know what. But *something*."

After a moment, I nodded. Maybe she was right.

* * *

We flew in, rather than hydrocrafting up the Cuiabá. The once-lush jungle was a patchwork of logging operations and farmland. The Mbaya Reserve, when we found it, had shrunken to a small fraction of its former size. It featured air-conditioned huts for the tourists, complete with jaguar-skin rugs and mint maté in frosted glasses decorated with little green parasols. A concrete macaw as large as a house hulked above rides such as the Amazonian Fear Wheel and the Barrel O'Monkeys. Mustached boys in parrot-colored suits and girls wearing baskets of fake fruit on their heads sold tickets and trinkets. Dances were twice daily, the dancers fully clothed. No drugs, no shatter-glasses, no *awyu*. The grandsons of Disney had entered the jungle and given it a G-rating.

Aleem looked as sick as I felt. I thought about the 'trodes in my luggage and started toward the reception area. I'd get a room—and sleep.

Aleem grabbed my arm. "Come on!"

I stared at her. "Where?"

She helped me grab our stuff and led me to a dock where big plastic canoes were lined up. We rented one and pattered out into lagoon. "Aleem ..."

"Look for a stream. There's bound to be something feeding this concrete pond."

I looked. Eventually I spotted the feeder stream. A metal gate of wide mesh blocked the entrance to the fake lagoon. Aleem found a heavy plastic paddle in the bottom of the canoe, raised it over her head, and began smashing the small lock. She swung the paddle as if it were an ax and she were back on my father's farm, in another life. There was a fury in her, a passion I hadn't seen in years. The lock stood between her and escape.

After eight or ten blows, pieces of the green plastic flew off into the

too-blue water, but Aleem kept hammering away. I could only watch, frozen by her passion.

The lock gave before the paddle did.

Aleem sat back, flushed and sweating, and dropped the ruined paddle into the bottom of the canoe.

I pulled the gate aside. It squealed in protest. I gunned the motor—we were through!

We didn't speak, but I felt close to her.

We passed through kilometer after kilometer of narrow channels infested with swamp grass and gnats. We twisted the canoe around logs, down steamy passages, over lilies and thick scum. Finally the stream widened, and we came to a clearing with several collapsed huts in it. I pulled the canoe onto the shore and got out. It was twilight. Mosquitoes buzzed around us but didn't alight—the canoe had a portable repeller, which we carried ashore. In the distance the lights of the park touched the gathering darkness. We were not as far away as we'd thought or hoped.

I sat on a log and stared at the destroyed huts.

"It's the old village." Aleem gazed at the tipped-down roofs of shriveled palm thatch and broken bamboo rafters. "There's the *biatemanageo*." She pointed. "It had aluminum casings where the poles fit together."

"I didn't think you remembered those days all that clearly, what with the drugs and all."

"You don't know me very well."

"Maybe I don't." I felt like laughing bitterly. We were back but were different people—as different as the village. And perhaps as deterio-

rated.

She started propping up a roof for a lean-to. I watched for a while, then took out luggage from the canoe and started a small fire. We were staying by unvoiced consent.

We didn't talk much as we worked, but whenever I looked at her she smiled. We rethatched the roof and raised it at an angle to shield us from the distant carnival lights. We picked plantains and dug *cheebo* root and boiled some of the mucky water to cook the plantains and make tea. We laid down part of the roof as ticking. That night, Aleem put a scarlet liana blossom in her hair and settled down beside me. "We're back," she said. Back together, I knew she meant. "Do you remember how it was then, how we danced? How we used the shatter-glasses to watch each other's nervous systems? Wonderful. And I told myself, 'If I can capture this in art, then surely I'll have discovered our age's common denominator, the symbol of a self-centered world.' No one touches anymore. Not really. No one touches nature or each other. If I could show people that, by letting them view the nervebeats of animals and—" Her voice broke slightly. "—and finally of the artist herself—but I didn't get it right, Jerrod. I know that now. All I got was easy repetition, without risk."

I said nothing, and we lay looking up at the dark, moon-drenched foliage. "I think I'd like to try the 'trodes tonight," she said at last, softly. "And I'd like you to try some myelinglow. A light dose, like the Mbaya used to take. Like we used to take."

"I hope you're kidding."

"We've rarely experienced each other's addiction. Maybe that's been our trouble."

If it would placate her, if it would help us—O.K.

Aleem used the 'trodes. As I waited for the injected myelinglow to take effect, I watched her restless sleep. She tossed and turned on the

ticking, and I wondered if her 'trodes-spun slumber was dreamless, as mine always had been.

“Dancers!” I heard her mutter once.

Then the drug brought its bright dreams, wonderful splashes of color that swirled through the darkness, meaning everything and nothing. In the center of those reds and blues, I briefly envisioned Aleem emerge from a restored *biatemannageo* and walk toward me, a gold-and-honey twenty-year-old who was unselfconscious of her nude beauty. “I think I’ve found something, Jerrod.” She smiled as she spoke, the words serpentine from her mouth and winding up among the quebracho branches. “It has to do with the myelinglow. The Mbaya are vague about it. I can’t always follow what they’re saying for all the riddles and laughter, but it has to do with shared experience and dreams—”

Then I heard the squawking of a macaw and the gibbering of monkeys.

I opened my eyes. Aleem had hung an old fashioned 3-D easel from the corner of the lean-to and was busy with a holoproj painting. It was a smear of color, blues and greens intertwined with silvers. An abstract, and Aleem never painted abstracts.

She looked troubled, frowning at the painting. “You slept nearly fourteen hours.” She didn’t look at me, only at the picture.

“It’s the heat.”

She eyed the holo across the top of her aerosol brush, and suddenly her face flushed with anger. “Just not right! I thought I—Damn!” She threw down the brush and stalked off between the trees.

“Aleem?”

“Leave me alone, Jerrod. I mean it!”

That evening, she emerged from the jungle and returned to the easel. She pressed the recycler; the colors vibrated and were sucked into the easel’s base. She didn’t speak. Just stood staring at the blank screen.

I hooked up a 'trode set to our luggage’s power pac, turned the intensity to high, lay down on the ticking, and awaited oblivion ...

* * *

A macaw called from a tall tree whose fronds were swept-back scythes. I stood on spongy ground, my arms extended toward the bird. His rainbow wings beat the air slowly—oh so slowly!—and his talons released the limb as he rose through the gluey air. I wanted to speak to him, touch him, feel his feathers under my fingers. I yearned upward—

—and found myself in the trees, clutching the limb where the macaw had been. My hands slipped, and I hung upside down, my legs looped over another limb; I was a giant sloth.

—Monkeys gibbered around me. Jacus and japim burst cawing from the treetops.

—On the ground, mop-headed and urucu-reddened Mbaya yelled and waved their spears. Did they want me? The macaw? Maybe the monkeys?

—Rainbow bird returned and alighted on the limb by my knee. His big beak explored its shoulder, searching for lice. He preened, smoothing down feathers on his left wing. He had Aleem’s green eyes.

—With one hand, I reached for the macaw, lost my grip with my legs
—

—Tumbled down through a star-speckled universe, lost, alone, desolate, despairing—

—Aleem caught me! She wore a rainbow-colored dress, and her green eyes glowed with supernal light. She swept us sideways, and we became a comet blazing through cobalt-blue skies. She smiled, and her face shattered into twinkling shards of diamond and ice and love—

* * *

“Jerrod.”

I blinked and saw Aleem standing over me. The sun was high, and she looked tired but never so alive.

“You dreamed,” she said.

I rubbed my eyes. “It was so *real*, so incredibly vivid!” I sat up. “I—I never dream on sleeptrodes.” I stared up at her as the second part of the question came to life. “How’d you know I dreamed? How could you?”

She knelt and turned up my forearm. A small red circle showed inside my elbow. The print of hypo-pop.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I had to do it.”

I shook my head, and she answered my unspoken question.

“Myelinglow.”

“All right. But—why?”

She pointed at the easel. The spun acrylics were still wet and glistening and—

It was the macaw.

My macaw, from my dream, perched in a quebracho tree.

Impossible!

“I dreamed that,” I said. I pointed at the holo. “That painting—triggered my dream?”

She shook her head.

“What, then!”

She was quivering, her gaze intent as she looked at the bird. “It’s the myelinglow. It allows you to share someone else’s dream. That’s why the Mbaya used it, not to watch the dancing nervous systems! We got caught up in the externals and missed the point. We assumed the mild hallucinations were just that, pleasant little drug dreams, and that the real artistic value was the viewing of the pretty lines of nerve tissue. How self-centered could we have been!” She sighed noisily. “It must be a kind of telepathy, perhaps strengthened by the participants seeing each other’s nerves. Like biofeedback, maybe. I don’t know. I know only that when I wore the ’todes the night before last, I had a lucid dream. I knew I was dreaming—and I *felt* I was dreaming someone else’s dream.”

“You probably still have myelinglow in your system, as much as you shot up back in L.A.”

She nodded. “That’s what I figured, too. I got up and tried to paint what I was seeing, but I couldn’t sustain the images.” She glanced at the macaw and looked away angrily. “Then, last night, you opted for the ’todes, and I realized that with a direct link, a second mesh tied into that of the sleeper, and the delta filtered out ...”

I stood and studied the macaw.

The implications began bubbling up in my brain.

“I took a small dose of the drug and let my mind blank, linked to your sleeping mind,” she said. “That’s what I saw. The macaw. And

it's ..."

Her voice filled with quiet horror.

"Oh my God."

Her eyes suddenly looked as lifeless as the afternoon in her studio. I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "What's wrong!"

"It's awful, Jerrod. The whole idea." Her eyes welled with tears. "I wanted to share something with you, but it's more than that. Can't you see? I painted the bird, but it's your macaw—*your* vision!"

Then I understood. If the painting wasn't a fluke, if it could be repeated, then Aleem had discovered another, and even more dispiriting, art form symbolic of our self-centered age. By combining myelnglow with the sleeptrodes, an artist would be no more than an instrument to actualize the dreamer's conception.

"People will swarm over the idea," she said. "They'll fall all over themselves to get their thoughts into paint. It's just like the last time we were here, when we rushed back to L.A. so I could paint nervous systems—only to end up repeating myself and hating myself. I acted without thinking things through. I should never have hooked into your dream, Jerrod. I should never have painted that ... *thing!*"

I said nothing.

"Wipe it," she said.

"Aleem ..." I looked at the painting. It was beautiful.

"Clean the damn thing off! We have to keep this to ourselves, Jerrod. No one must ever know."

I reached for the tab on the easel control. In an instant the spun colors would blend and run back into the reservoir, to be reused again—

I saw it then.

The macaw had blue eyes. Blue, not green.

"I'm not going to do it."

She moved toward the easel. "Then I will!"

Again I grabbed her. "Wait, look at the bird's eyes!" Now I could see other differences from the macaw I'd dreamed. The colors weren't quite the same, and the patterns and saber-shaped tail were different. "It *is* your vision!"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"My macaw had *green* eyes. And the tree had broader leaves. The sky, too—it was darker, and without that hint of reddish sunset. This bird is cleaner, sharper, much more than the one I saw. It's yours as much as mine. It sprang from both of us."

Aleem looked from the painting to me, and back again. "You're sure?"

"Yes! Do you know what that means?"

She gazed at the macaw a long time, a look of hope growing in her eyes. She nodded, put her arms around my waist, and smiled.

Maybe it was the myelnglow, and I was being a dreamy optimist, but I decided that—at least for Aleem and me—the macaw symbolized more than a manifestation of a self-centered world. It was a reaction against it. No longer could viewers recline before their holoprojs and admire or criticize without seeing a work's essence. Perhaps someday the artist and audience would no longer enjoy the easy freedom of separation. A painting might be a participation.

And the sleeptrodes coupled with myelnglow? What if that was an

initial image for what the world sought and might soon realize: not self, but sharing? Perhaps civilization did indeed possess the hope, and the beginning of the capacity, to arrive where the Mbaya had come from.

My heart pounded with excitement. For the first time in years, I felt a desire to put words on paper for others to read. (An old art form, I know; but then, I felt older than when I had awakened.) Not the lifeless lines I'd been writing before I'd quit, but something squalling and squawking, imbued with energy and verve, precarious, out on a limb.

A poem in Aleem's honor—but not for her art.

For *us*.

Words about a winged rainbow whose colors were blended.

And splendid.



Charmed by Carl Scharwath

The Snake Tree

by Andrew Hughes

Lucas Green had known Samantha Meadows for seven years before he realized he was in love with her. They'd grown up together, gone to school together, played ball together, and yet, he'd never noticed. Maybe most important to this eventual discovery, they'd trudged the creek together.

The Green and the Meadows families lived in a rural collective with two score other households on the outskirts of Jackson. The area was surrounded by a dense forest of oak and loblolly pines, infested with bugs and deer and rodents, and most families resided in trailers. This never bothered Lucas or Sam. It never crossed their minds that they were poor, because they possessed the secret. A secret that all the other dirty, greasy haired, tank top wearing kids before them had discovered, and they indulged in it often. They knew the creek.

It was a narrow body of water that twisted its way through the forest, deep enough at some points to engulf a preteen, but mostly shallow enough that their boots would not get waterlogged. Lucas and Sam trudged the creek on their neighborhood famous crawfish hunts. Lucas led the way, his long, broken shovel handle staff brandished at the rocks, protecting them, and Sam followed, carrying her yellow bucket, the water curling up her long legs and splashing the hem of her denim shorts. There were snakes, oh yes, there were snakes. They'd run into them before, but each time a water moccasin had slithered its way from a hole in the muddy embankment, Lucas had thrashed down with the staff, striking the snake and stealing enough time for the pair to escape to shore. After these encounters, they'd always sit on the grassy embankment breathing heavy and ranting hysterically, and Lucas had felt like a hero when they ran back together, bucket and stick swinging in the wind.

Seven years he'd lived like this, growing up with her, countless days wading the creek plucking the fattest and most delectable riverbed crustaceans from beneath the rocks and plopping them into Sam's yellow bucket, the one decorated with pink easter eggs and ordained with a thin white handle. And then, one day when he was twelve years old, the cusp of his golden teenage years, or freshmen hell according to his older brother Danny, a light had flashed and he realized that his feelings for her were not like the ones he felt for anyone else. It wasn't the adoration he felt for his mom, or the begrudging love for Danny, or the annoyed disapproval of Danny's flower petal girlfriend Missy, and it wasn't the camaraderie he felt for his friends he played ball with at recess. It was something else. Smooth, warm, and comforting, a feeling that he wanted to touch and hold as a physical thing, something he wanted more of. It was not a feeling that built over time, not consciously, it just appeared.

It was a Saturday and Lucas set out for the creek. He stopped at Sam's trailer, knocked on the door, but the family minivan was gone and no-one answered, so he picked up the bucket from the shed and walked into the backyard and along the forest path. She'd told him that he was welcome to use the bucket any time, even promised to leave it out by the washing machine shack, and whenever he came looking, it was always there. Lucas thought that was pretty cool. The path curled into the woods and he stepped past cigarette butts and discarded beer cans, evidence that the older kids had been out the night before.

Lucas walked the path whistling "Surrender" by Cheap Trick, one of his mother's favorites. He'd just finished humming the last guitar chord when the path deposited him at the creek. At this inlet, there

was a bridge of sorts, a series of ten heavy stones connecting the path on either side, but Lucas didn't bother with it. He tucked his hand-me-down jeans into the bullfrog green wading boots and trudged into the water, heading upstream.

He walked for thirty minutes without stopping and when he did, he flipped over a rock, plucked two fat crawdads from the sifting dirt, and plopped them both into the bucket. Then, he whistled and walked some more. When he stopped again he realized he'd gone past where his mom had always told him to stop. The water seemed to be stiller here and he was studying the rock formations when he heard something splash behind him. Musta been a monkey brain, he thought, and continued studying the creek bed, but then a chilling thought formed. He hadn't seen any of the tall trees with the bulbous, spongy yellow fruits hanging from them. Slowly, Lucas turned and looked at the widespread, thin branches of the white alder sprawling above him. For a moment, nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but when he squinted, he saw them. Hundreds of them. Shining, curling snakes of every variety. Thin ones, thick ones, white ones, grey ones, wrapped up in the branches twisting around each other, slithering and flicking at the air with their forked tongues. Lucas screamed, stumbled backward, and fell. Sopping and sputtering, he picked himself up and saw four serpents gliding towards him. He let go of the bucket, grasped the staff, and swung with a downward chop.

As the water settled, he saw that he'd hit two of them, fazed them and sent them floating limp down the stream. A third one was zigzagging its way to shore, back towards the towering snake tree. Lucas drew the staff up, and saw it. The fourth snake. Menacing, thin, and striped with alternating vibrant blue and white bands. It was curled around the butt of his staff. Lucas tried to swing down, but the halt in his momentum detached the creature. It flew through the air and landed flopping and convulsing onto his shoulder. Lucas screamed and fell sideways into the water, and when he resurfaced the snake was gone. But it was too late. He'd felt the searing sting of its fangs. It had gotten him.

Panicked and huffing, he abandoned both bucket and staff and ran

back downstream, his boots splashing through the current. He sprinted, throwing cascading droplets high into the air until he tripped and was swimming, then he was back on his feet again, disoriented and stumbling. Snakes had poison. It would work its way into his bloodstream. He'd collapse face first in the water and the rest of the serpents would descend to feed on his flesh while he still felt pain. Sobbing, Lucas made it to the bridge and ran the rest of the way home.

By the time he rounded the back of his house and came clomping in through the laundry room, he was out of breath and his side pierced with stitches. Lucas knelt over and tried to take in a deep breath, but his lungs stung and his chest ached. He lifted his damp shirt. The bite mark pulsed, his left pectoral swollen and distended, poking against the tight fabric. Lucas whimpered and went inside, walked up the stairs and into his bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him. He didn't think to take off his muddy boots until he was safe in bed and had the covers pulled up to his sandy blonde hair. He sobbed for a minute and fell into an exhausted daze.

Lucas woke to the horrifying realization of what he'd done. He breathed heavily as he got out of bed and turned on his bedroom light. Sure enough, he was doomed. Muddy boot prints ran from the door right up to the mattress.

"No," he said. "No, no, no, heck no, shit no, no." Lucas stumbled out into the hallway, his chest stinging, inflicting fresh doses of anguish. He felt like crying but forced himself not to.

The tracks ran throughout the house, from the tile at the back door, in through the laminate kitchen, down the sliding hardwood floor slats of the living room, and up the white carpet steps. The prints were brown and sloppy, and Lucas knew he was dead. "She's going to kill me," he breathed. The bite pulsated again, radiating a new wave of warm, paralyzing pain. Standing in the pool of sunlight shining through the kitchen window, Lucas rolled the shirt up his stomach. The movement agitated the wound and he clenched his teeth. When it was up over his chest, he bit the shirt tail and pulled it flat so he

could see the bite.

The left side of his chest was a dark, unorthodox purple. His entire left pectoral was swollen noticeably larger than the other. A veiny, stellate pattern stretched beneath the skin, the strings of nerves and blood originating from the bite itself, a two-pronged indent. Each of the punctures had swollen over with a bulbous, yellowish pus capsule reminiscent of a pimple but much larger, nearly the size of a dime. His left nipple was black, absorbed by the discoloration of his breast. Lucas moaned, involuntary tears dribbling down his cheeks, when he heard the quartet of anxious raps at the front door. Lucas let his shirt roll into place. Pale and clammy, he stumbled toward the entrance.

“Hey,” said Sam. She stood on the step with an ice cream sandwich in each hand, one unopened, the other half eaten. Dry chocolate spotted her fingertips and stained her thin lips. She took another bite, lapped the white dribble of vanilla, and outstretched the unopened sandwich to Lucas. “We got ’em at Walldrin’s. Want one?”

Lucas shook his head.

“What’s wrong dude, you love ice cream.” Sam squeezed past him. “Don’t worry, I’ll put it in the fridge.” She walked into the kitchen and a drop of vanilla plopped to the floor. Lucas groaned. “Hey, are you all right dude? You look pale.”

Lucas followed her into the kitchen, a hand clasped to his chest. He couldn’t put much pressure on it; he feared popping one of the blisters. But the pain was excruciating and pressure felt good.

Sam placed the sandwich on the bare bars of the freezer and shut the door. “Hey, you know it’s a real mess in here,” Sam said. She studied the floors and another drop of vanilla fell from her sandwich.

Lucas groaned. “Sam, the ice cream.”

“Oh,” she giggled and tossed the rest of the sandwich into her mouth.

“Ahhhh,” she moaned and slapped the back of her hand to her forehead with an audible thwack danced on the tips of her toes. “Brain freeze.”

Lucas walked around her and opened the cabinet beneath the sink. He was sifting through the cleaning products frantically, pushing away air fresheners and pulling out soaps until he had a collection of bottles by his side.

“Dude, are you all right? It looks like you got kicked in the balls.”

Lucas slammed the cabinet door shut. “Sam. You need to leave. She’s going to kill me so I have to clean all this up.”

Sam looked flabbergasted. “What are you talking about?”

Lucas pointed at the prints. “They go all the way upstairs.”

“Oh shit. You didn’t get the carpet, did you?”

Lucas nodded.

“Okay, then you need more than that. I’ll be right back!” She stepped on the drop of vanilla on her way out, smearing the melted ice-cream across the front step. Lucas took a deep breath, steadied himself against the pain, and began to work.

He started with the back room and he scrubbed the tile clean, rinsed the rag and moved to the kitchen. Each boot print he covered in thick, yellow Lysol before laying into it with a wet rag. He was just rounding the kitchen counter when he heard the front door swing open again. His heart thumped fast and the hair on his neck tingled, his eyes locked in place on the current boot print. But the footsteps faded upstairs and then he heard Sam yell. “Oh God, it is a mess up here. A real freakin’ mess.”

Ten minutes passed and he’d nearly finished a particularly caked step by the pantry when the back door opened and he fell back against the

wall, frightened and clutching his chest.

It was Danny. He was laughing, long hair greased back beneath a ball cap, his thin frame clinging to his skeleton, stretching with each gasping holler. His eyes were red, as if he'd been crying. "What are you doing down there, Douche Fag?" Lucas could smell something strange in the air, and it grew stronger every time Danny opened his mouth.

"Hey, be nice to him," said Missy. She wore a red sundress decorated with dancing green leaves and long stalks of yellow flowers. She smiled and waved. "Hey Lucas."

"Move," said Danny. He kicked Lucas's legs out of the way of the pantry door and Lucas erupted with a pained cry.

Danny laughed and shut the door. "Oh my god," he scoffed. "Are you crying? What's wron- ..." He noticed the bootprints. "Oh, you're so dead." Danny squinted down at him. "Oh my god, you are crying. You little pussy. She's not going to actually kill you, you know that?"

Lucas had crumpled into a fetal position and he shook with every haggard breath. The pain was everywhere and tears streamed down his cheeks, the first drops beginning to pitter into a puddle on the floor.

"What's wrong with him?" Missy knelt beside him.

Danny leaned back against the kitchen counter and ate a handful of Oreos. "It's nothing, he's just being a pussy."

Missy shot him a stern, corrective stare.

"What? You know, being a baby?"

All of a sudden, there was a thunderous crash of footsteps followed by an Amazonian yell.

Danny flinched, dropping a cookie. "What in the hell?"

Sam tore around the corner. She brandished a mop at Danny like a caveman preparing to spear a Sabertooth. "You stop being mean to him right now."

Danny pointed a finger at her and looked down at Lucas's twitching form. "This is cute. Your boyfriend's sticking up for you."

With a birdlike scream, Sam raised the mop handle and brought it down on Danny's outstretched hand. The wood cracked and he howled with pain.

"I told you to stop being mean."

Danny clutched his hand to his chest and glared at her with eyes that catapulted fire. "Oh you little bitch."

With a snarl, he was upon her. Sam tried to raise the mop high enough to jab him back against the counter, but she was too slow. He grabbed her wrists and squeezed hard enough that she dropped the mop.

"Bastard," she breathed through gritted teeth, straining against his weight, but there was no helping it. He had her pressed against the wall and she could smell a burnt, repulsive odor wafting from his mouth.

"That hurt," he growled, lips inches from her ear. Sam tried to swing her head back, but Danny moved out of the way. He squeezed harder and it was all Sam could do not to cry.

"Danny," Missy said.

"What?"

"There's something wrong with your brother."

"I told you, didn't I? He's fine. Just faking it."

“No. Danny Green, you need to look at this right now,” she said, a dormouse scolding the barnyard cat.

Sam let out a relieved groan when he released her. She leaned against the table and kneaded her wrists, opening and closing each palm and rubbing at the red marks that would soon turn into bruises.

Lucas was lying on his side with his knees curled and his back and bare feet pressed against the wall. The whites of his eyes were tinted red and the pupils themselves had rolled back out of sight. His mouth hung open and a pink, frothy foam bubbled out. His fingers were clenched into tight, nubby fists so tight that Sam thought his fingers might snap under the pressure. There was a slow, rocking shake that seemed to originate in his chest and spread throughout his labored body as if he'd been galvanized.

Danny leaned against the kitchen counter, his mouth agape.

“Do something,” Missy whimpered.

Sam moved around the table, toppling one of the stools. She knelt next to Lucas. His breathing was agonal and short and when she touched his face he began to shake all the more. “Snake,” he said softly with each exhalation. “Snake. Snake. Snake.” His hand shook in hers and she grasped the fist tighter, trying to decipher his gasping utterances.

“Move.” Danny shoved her to the side. “Okay,” he said. His eyes frantically scanned his brother's seizing body. “Okay.” He looked at Sam. “Go call 911. Now. Go. And get your ass back here.”

Ten seconds later, the front door smacked shut and Sam was running across the front yard, pumping as fast as her long legs would take her.

“What do we do?” asked Missy. She was chewing on her hair, a lock of it curled around her neck and up into her mouth like an endotracheal tube.

“Shut up.” Danny had to think. Think. What happened? Lucas had been muttering something, something about a safe? Danny's thoughts flashed to a cartoon image of the Roadrunner walking beneath a city window where the coyote, whatever the fuck that guy's name was, hoisted a large black safe on a rope. Danny cleared his thoughts.

“Is he breathing?”

“I thought I told you to shut up.” That was right though, that wasn't a bad idea. Breathing. He had to keep Lucas breathing. Danny held a hand over Lucas's sputum-covered lips and when a second passed without a flutter of breath, he lowered his ear and listened. Still nothing. “Go get me a rag.” Danny rolled his brother onto his side.

“Does it need to be wet?”

“Get me a gosh damn rag!” He clasped his hands together flat, palm first, and pressed them down dead center of Lucas's chest. There was a pop as something burst. The left chest pocket of Lucas's t-shirt grew wet with a clear, viscous liquid, but Danny pressed on. He pushed down hard with stiff arms, no bend at the elbow. When Missy knelt by his side with the outstretched rag, he instructed her to wipe Luca's mouth clean. She did, but when he told her to breath into Lucas's mouth she leaned away. “You're useless,” he yelled. He shoved her aside and huffed six deep breaths into his brother's mouth. When he returned to the compressions, Sam was back.

“Ambulance is coming. Said they'd be ten minutes.”

Danny pressed down deep into his brother's chest and twice he felt the something snap beneath his force. Sam knelt by his side and breathed into Lucas's mouth. When they heard the sirens, Danny slung the limp body over his shoulder, and with aching arms ran into the front yard. The ambulance pulled up to Sam's trailer, but when they saw the panicked teens, the two paramedics ran the stretcher out to them.

“Hello, my name is Chris from AMR, this is my partner Max. Is he

breathing?”

“I don’t know.” Danny lowered Lucas to the stretcher and while Chris continued his questioning, Max ran a vitals check. After a minute of routine information gathering, Max looked up.

“We gotta go.” He cut Lucas’s shirt down the middle with trauma sheers.

“What is that?” asked Danny.

“Snake bite,” said Sam.

“She’s right,” said Max. “Let’s go!” The two paramedics wheeled the stretcher to the back of the box, loaded it, and Chris rounded to the cab.

The three teenagers stood in the Green’s front yard and watched the flashing lights disappear. When they were gone, they faded back inside.

Sam paced and Danny sat at the table, his fists curled in frustration. Missy studied the floor. They had been inside for some time, fifteen minutes or so, and twice, neighbors had come knocking. The first time, Danny went outside and told them off, but the second he let them knock until they went away. In the interim silence, they sat at the table and waited for his mom. Sam paced the counters and Missy plucked at the hem of her dress, looking ashamed. She felt as if she had let them down, caused this whole mess by not speaking out when Lucas had first toppled over.

“What was he talking about?” said Danny. He was wringing his fists open and closed, squeezing imaginary water from imaginary rags.

“He must have gone to the creek. You saw the bite. And my bucket, it wasn’t there when I got home.” Sam stopped pacing and placed her hands on the plastic countertop.

After a moment, Danny banged both fists on the kitchen table and stood up. “Screw this. What hospital they taking him to?”

“I don’t know,” said Sam.

Missy reached back through anxious thoughts and plucked the name out like she was picking a tomato from the vine. “Wilmington,” she exclaimed. “They’re taking him to Wilmington.”

“Sounds right,” said Sam.

“It said Wilmington on the side of the ambulance,” Missy said. She felt proud for a moment, and then the anxious regret returned.

“I know how to get to Wilmington,” said Danny. “It ain’t far.”

“Maybe two miles,” chimed Sam. “That’s where my mom had knee surgery.”

“Yeah,” said Danny. He walked past her and opened the door to the laundry room. “We’ll ride there. You have a bike?”

Sam shook her head.

“You can take Lucas’s.”

In the dimming light of the Mississippi sunset, Missy climbed onto the seat of Danny’s bike, while Danny himself stood high on the petals. Behind them, Sam rode Lucas’s fire engine red Mountaineer. They rode out of the cul-de-sac and through the neighborhood to the main road.

When they reached Saint Wilmington’s Memorial hospital, it was dark and Danny’s calves ached. They’d pushed hard down the freeway, as fast as they could to avoid being stopped by the cops. Missy’s rump hurt from the ride, but she said nothing. Sam trailed them into the parking lot, past the security office and toward the tow-

ering building with a thousand glowing portals to sickness.

The doors slid open, ushering them into the frill air conditioning that propelled the smells of chemicals and disease. Sam lead the way and Danny and Missy followed once the bikes were stowed in the bushes abutting the building. The waiting room was full of soon-to-be patients. Ahead, there were two parallel sets of double doors and a big olive-skinned woman sitting behind a desk.

They made their way to her.

“Hello ya’ll, how may I help you?”

“We’re here to see Lucas,” Sam said.

The woman smiled, clicked something on the computer monitor, and shifted her full attention to them. “What’s Lucas’s last name?”

“Green,” said Danny. He pushed Sam to the side and placed his hands on the grey speckled counter. To their right, a woman emerged through the doors of the ER, walked to the front desk, and took a chart from a clear slot on the wall.

“Okay, I see a Lucas Green here. What’s his date of birth?”

“July sixteenth, 2004. He’s short, with brown hair.”

“Sandy brown hair,” Sam corrected.

“He’s here with a snake bite.”

A minute passed as the woman clicked on the computer, then a soft, embarrassed smile split her cheeks. “Yes, I’ve got him right here.” She looked back up. “He’s in an operation right now, but if you’ll wait a moment, I can see how long it’ll be.”

Danny growled under his breath and before the woman could offer consolation or protest, Sam darted through the doors of the ER.

“Ma’am, you can’t-” the woman yelled, but the doors smacked shut before the sentence was finished.

Sam raced through the white halls, stretchers laden with the wounded forming obstacles in her path. There was a large, open island of a cubical in the center. Nurses and doctors in blue scrubs chattered throughout. There were operations going on in some of the rooms. She could see the nurses crowding around open tables, piercing white overhead lights beaming down on still bodies.

Behind her, the doors sprung open, and the desk nurse jogged down the hallway, pointing and shouting. Sam ran faster, pausing to glance into each of the rooms before dashing farther down the hall. The nurse was gaining on her now and people were starting to look.

Danny and Missy had slipped into the ER as well and had started around the other edge of the hallway, circling the cubicle in the opposite direction. Sam rounded one corner and was running full sprint, the nurse nearly on her heels, when she saw him. It was Lucas. He was lying on a gurney, his feet propped high in the air, an oxygen mask strapped to his mouth. Two orderlies were pushing the stretcher away from her.

Sam kicked off, sprinting faster than before, when a large hand closed around her shoulder and her momentum gave way to a backwards yank. She looked up at a security officer standing above her.

“Thank you, Mark,” said the nurse. “What do you think you’re doing girl? Don’t you know there are sick folks here? Look at you, covered in mud and muck. Your hands are black.”

Sam ignored her and watched as Lucas disappeared around a bend in the hallway. Another officer had a struggling Danny by both wrists as Missy trailed behind, apologizing. They were led back to the waiting room.

They sat in silence and watched the nurses come in and out of the clapping double doors. One officer stood by the doorway to the ER

and watched them with disdain. After an hour, Tammy Green arrived. She still wore her work clothes, the black smock of a dietary aid. Her eyes were red with tears and her hands clenched and released anxiously. She approached the counter, shared words with the nurse, and took a seat between Danny and Sam. She put an arm around each of them, and they could feel her shaking.

Another hour passed and the nurse approached them, introducing herself as Sherry. She beckoned them through the double doors parallel to the ER and down a long corridor. When they reached Lucas's room, all four rushed inside to his bed. He was unconscious and a monitor beeped meekly. Tearfully, Tammy found the doctor.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked, glaring at the man’s handsome, clean-shaven face.

“Mrs. Green.”

“Don’t. Don’t you do that. What’s wrong with my son?”

“The venom, whatever bit him. ... We don’t have it on file here, it’s nothing that’s ever been recorded at our hospital or at any of our sister hospitals.”

Tammy’s worn features sagged and she glanced back at Lucas through the open doorway.

“Whatever it is, we’re going to find it. We’ve sent the samples off to the Poison Control Center in Chicago. They specialize in snake bites. We’re going to do everything we can.” Tammy turned back and took a step towards the door. “Mrs. Green?”

She looked back. “Yes?”

“Your son, before he got here, while he was in the ambulance, they got him conscious and talking for a moment. He said something about a snake tree.”

“A snake tree? What is a snake tree?”

“We’re not quite sure. He said something about a snake tree. He kept saying blue and white, blue and white. Do you know anything about this?”

She shook her head.

“I see. Well, I’ll make my way back here as soon as I’ve finished my rounds.” The doctor reached out, squeezed her shoulder, and strode off down the hallway.

With a sigh, Tammy went back in, and on her way to the bedside, she passed Missy, who had been waiting in the doorway.

After a moment, Missy motioned Danny and Sam to follow her.

They stood on the sidewalk by the ashtray. Although Missy slapped his arm, Danny selected a particularly long butt and sparked it with his pocket lighter.

Sam spoke. “I know exactly what he’s talking about. The creek at least. We wade it every other day.”

“Yeah,” Danny puffed and coughed. “We all know about the creek.” He took another deep inhale. “There’s a rumor that there’s a big tree with all these snakes in it down toward the sewer tunnels.” He took the last drag and tossed the smoking filter back into the ashtray. “I don’t know nobody I trust who’s seen it though.”

“Well Lucas has,” Sam said, starting to pace.

Danny poked around for another butt. “What snake is blue and white?”

There was silence.

Finally, Missy spoke. “What are we doing?”

Danny and Sam looked at her.

“We need to go look for this tree. It’s his only shot and we are wasting time.” She spoke fiercely and when she was done, she looked to the ground once more.

A silent moment passed, then they went back inside.

Danny said that Missy and Sam had to get home. When Tammy offered to drive them, he objected, insisting that she stay.

Eventually, she gave in.

They rode their bikes into the fresh evening darkness, the brisk wind buffering their faces and the draft from passing cars nearly knocking them off balance as they pedaled madly down the side of the freeway. People honked and Missy clung to Danny, her arms clenched around his thin chest. She kept imagining that they would hit a pebble wrong, keel over into the street, and both their heads would be crushed like melons under the thick rubber tires of an eighteen-wheeler. Pulp and rind, skull and blood. Splattered across the thin white line. Behind them, Sam pedaled furiously, struggling to keep up.

They turned off the freeway and coasted downhill, the wind swirling around them as they diverted into the neighborhood past the little convenience store with the burnt-out florescent lettering. As they rode, Missy looked to her side and saw a mangy, skeleton-thin cat slink into the tall grass.

When they reached the Green’s house, they pulled into the dirt driveway and Danny kicked off, running with the bike until it came to a halt with Missy still sitting lopsided on the raised seat. Behind them, Sam crashed over a gopher hole and nearly toppled off. She skidded across the yard and landed against the shed.

“Are you okay?” asked Missy.

Sam grunted.

“She’s fine,” Danny said. “Put the bike in the shed. I’ll be back.”

Five minutes passed and he came back out the laundry room with a collection of items cradled in his arms. “Put these on.” He handed both girls a pair of wading boots. Sam took Lucas’s froggy green ones and Missy hesitantly put on Danny’s old ones. She’d never worn boots like this before and she could smell the musty bog as she pulled them on her bare feet. Danny put on a backpack and handed her a flashlight. “We’ve got two, but the batteries ain’t too good. Only use em when we’re in the woods.” Missy pointed the mag light across the backyards and clicked it on, illuminating the Benson’s clothes line. “Hey, what’d I just tell you?”

She clicked the light off.

“Had to check and make sure I know how to turn it on.”

Danny grunted and handed Sam a milk jug full of a pungent, slopping liquid.

She unscrewed the cap and took a deep whiff of the contents. Her nostrils furrowed and she outstretched it from her body. “Jeez, is this gas?”

“Lawnmower mix. Gas and motor oil.”

“Why do we have gas?” Missy asked.

“Because.” Danny attached a sheathed machete to his belt. “We don’t know what we’re going to find out there. Do either one of you two know how to shoot?”

Missy shook her head.

Danny handed her a butcher knife.

“I can,” said Sam. “My pawpaw has a bunch of shotguns out on the farm. When I was a kid, he paid me a dollar per squirrel.”

Danny handed her an antique .22 caliber rifle. The weapon was loaded with a five-round magazine.

“You cover our back, I’ll take point with the machete, and Missy, you shine the light and make sure nothing sneaks up on our asses. That clear?”

The girls nodded and they set off through the backyards, slinking past the glow of televisions through open windows until they reached the forest path. Danny walked ahead, a commander leading his troops into battle.

As they entered the woods, Missy asked what was in the bag.

“PB&J’s and Koolaid pouches,” Danny said.

They walked into the mouth of the forest and he stopped to pick up a cigarette butt from where he and his friends had hung out the night before.

He’d grown up in these woods, knew every shanty cabin and creek crossing, but he’d never seen the snake tree. As far as he knew, only one person had. Chuck Madison. A farm kid, when his parent’s live-stock ran off and the barn burnt down, the Madisons had moved to the neighborhood. Chuck was a couple years older than Danny, but none of the older guys liked him very much, partly because he always told big lies, like he had a girlfriend back in Dickson or that he could get a fake ID for anybody. So, when the lies caught up with Chuck, he stopped hanging out with the high school kids and instead started bugging the younger ones, trying to be their leader. Danny hadn’t liked him much, but he could get cigarettes and the girls thought Chuck was hot, so he’d stayed a while.

One afternoon, Chuck’d met up with them in Hickman’s barn, and when he barged in through the doors, Danny and Mack Pilsner were

playing foosball. Chuck was all out of breath and when he calmed down and everybody had gathered around, he told them he’d seen a hundred snakes all tangled up in tree branches like vines. He’d taken a picture with his cellphone, but it was blurry and just looked like a tree. They’d bought into it for a minute though and they’d followed Chuck into the woods, but sure enough, he couldn’t find it. After that, Chuck’s family went back up north and some people said Chuck went crazy.

Danny took long drags on the cigarette butt, and when it was out he struck another. When they reached the creek it was half past eight, the moon was in the sky, and he’d smoked three to the filter. Danny flicked the smoking butt into the water, heard it sizzle, and watched it float away. “Alright. You guys usually go upstream?”

“Usually.”

“We go upstream then.” Danny reached to his belt and drew the machete. He held it in one hand and directed the flashlight beam with the other. Behind him, Sam held the rifle like she was about to disembark a Higgins onto Normandy Beach. Missy held the flashlight in one hand, the gallon of gasoline in the other.

“Let’s go,” he said.

It had rained the day before and the water was high. Even in the shallows, the current caressed Danny’s bare shins and behind him, Missy whimpered. The water had already seeped into her boots, making each step a tedious effort.

Danny told her to stay near the bank as he slid his lighter in his backpack. He didn’t know what was coming, but he sensed they were in trouble if the striker got wet.

They walked for an hour. Above, the moonlight was distorted and stolen by dark clouds and thunder boomed and boasted. Before long, a heavy rain began to fall and upon Missy’s request, they slunk to the shore.

“It’s really coming down,” Danny said.

“We need to keep moving,” Sam said. They were standing on the shore and behind them, Missy leaned against a tree. Danny shone the light at every treetop, but noticed nothing peculiar.

Below, the water was rising and the playful creek was growing to a river.

“Yeah,” Danny agreed.

“If she can’t keep going, I’m gonna go myself,” said Sam. “I’ll meet up with you guys on the way back.”

“Hold on. I’m going to go talk to her, don’t go nowhere.” He turned and walked to where Missy knelt, grumbling as he went.

Sam watched them for what seemed like an hour, picking up some hints of conversation through the roar of the downpour. Missy worried about the rain making her dress see-through. Danny said that was fine. Missy said it wasn’t. Danny said that she should stay there then. Again, Missy refused, saying that she would worry too much. And then they were back at the beginning again. Sam shook her head and picked up Missy’s flashlight and the rifle. She didn’t understand girls. Silently, she slunk down the riverbank and into the rising tide.

Sam walked for ten minutes, sticking to the shore where it was shallower. She studied the treetops for any sign of serpents. Nothing. Soon, the storm subsided and she thought of turning back, but decided against it.

“They can catch me,” she said and marched on through the tide.

Before long, it grew too deep. She found herself standing on her tiptoes, both her hands thrust up high into the sky to prevent the precious cargo from getting wet. It only grew deeper and she began to slush back to shore, when her foot struck a rock and she fell face first into the water.

It was lukewarm and swirling and Sam sputtered a moment before finding her footing. When she surfaced, the flashlight was gone, fried and tumbling along the bottom of the creek. The rifle was still in her grasp, but she doubted it would fire. Sam wiped water from her face and waded across the riverbed to an inlet of rocks.

As she walked, she felt her lips quiver. She had no flashlight. It was too dark. She couldn’t do anything to help Lucas. She cursed aloud, words she’d never said before, a long stream of them, and although she felt guilty, they felt good coming out of her fiery lungs. She took a seat on a flat rock, looked to her left, and saw the bucket.

She leapt up. It was her bucket alright. Even though the white handle had snapped off, the Easter bunny stickers had clung to the yellow plastic like a man on a windy ledge. She reached out for it and felt her heartbeat quicken. It had gotten wedged in the inlet, trapped in some rocks. She picked it up and sat back down, the rifle laid across her lap. A warm smile spread across her face. This meant Lucas had come this way.

She stood and gave a tapping dance on the wet stone.

That was when they began to descend upon her.

She couldn’t see it, but the snake tree loomed above her, and while she was blind in the darkness, they were not. Two score curling, slithering serpents descended down the bark, some finding a way to hold traction, but many flopped off, most landing in the underbrush on the riverside. Some decided against the straight descent and instead slithered off the long branch and plopped into the murky depths, where they jackknifed their way back and forth towards their unassuming prey. They were not the smartest creatures, but somewhere along the evolutionary line they’d developed memory. It was a collective thing, and shortly after they’d populated the forest, they’d made their colony in the big tree, the snake tree. They were not the strongest of creatures, but they’d brought down big prey before. The biped man. The four-legged dog. The naive buck. Yes, they’d found a way to fill their gullets, but it had been a while and they were hungry.

They'd almost brought down game earlier that day, the boy, but he'd managed to get away. That would not be the case with this one. No, they would bite and she would fall. And if that couldn't finish it, Mother would.

Sam stood, the rifle slung over her shoulder and the bucket clutched to her chest, the mouth facing upwards and catching the dribbling drops of rain. She'd taken a step off the rock when something brushed her foot.

Her heart clenched in terror and she squinted through the darkness.

Nothing.

She'd let out a soft chuckle of relief when she felt a second something whip over her boot.

Sam felt the scream building up in her chest.

Behind her, something splashed from the treetop into the water, then another and another, each accompanied by a subtle spray.

Maybe it was a stick, she thought, but still her nerves tensed.

Up ahead, there was a small patch of creek bed free of tree cover. It was illuminated in bright, pale moonlight.

With a quick inhale, Sam made a break for it.

As soon as she kicked off, it happened. An adolescent serpent fell from the treetop and landed half in, half out of the bucket, convulsing and fighting to get up the smooth incline.

Sam screamed.

The diamond-headed snake blinked through green slits, curled back into the bottom of the bucket, and launched.

Sam hurled the bucket and ran sloshing through the creek. As she went, she felt a hot dagger of pain latch ahold of her calf, and she moaned in agony but kept running toward the moonlit patch.

"Danny," she bellowed. "Missy! Mom! Lucas!"

She splashed through the moonlight, saw no suitable place to climb to the shore, and continued downstream, yelling louder.

When she looked back, she saw them. A slithering horde following after her. And in their wake was something massive, black, and curling, ten feet long if it was an inch.

Petrified, she pushed harder, yelling madly into the night for whoever might hear. She'd recognized that shape, had seen it before on the Discovery Channel. Anaconda.

She'd heard the rumor, that one had escaped from the zoo a few years back, but she hadn't believed it.

She did now.

The energy welling in her chest began to fade, as the burning of the bite grew numb. She felt fuzzy.

"Venom," she mumbled. "They kill you with venom."

She reached up to clutch her chest and felt the strap of the rifle.

She stumbled to a halt along the shoreline, pulled the rifle over her shoulder, and pressed the butt into her armpit. Even wet, it was her best chance.

The water was dark, but she could make out the sideways ripples.

"Alright," she said. Her words sounded distant and her head felt heavy. She racked the lever, loading the first bullet, and pointed it at

the rippling water.

She took a short breath and squeezed the trigger.

The burst of gunpowder lit up the night for the slightest moment and in the brief explosion, she'd seen the reality. The snakes were almost upon her now, but the big, dark shape was gone.

She didn't have enough bullets. They would get her. She was going to die here.

A beam of light flashed over her shoulder and she turned to see Danny and Missy in the belly of a canoe. He was at the oars and she was at the helm shining the light. They were coasting towards her.

"What are you doing?" he bellowed.

As the gap between them shortened, Missy screamed out.

Sam felt another burst of pain as a snake drove its fangs into her thigh. Teeth clenched, she groaned in agony and fell forward into the belly of the boat.

"Get her in," Danny said. "And don't you flip us!" He dug his paddle deep into the water as Missy dragged Sam by her belt loops onto the middle seat.

"Oh my God," Missy said. The snake was still attached to her thigh by its fangs.

"Kill it," said Danny.

Missy did. She delivered a quick slice of the butcher knife and the convulsing segments flopped into the bottom of the boat.

Sam's bite pulsated and a pinprick of blood formed at each incision hole. What at first was agony had faded to a numb discomfort. She laid back with her head resting on the gas jug, her feet splayed out

across Missy's seat. Behind her, Danny back-paddled downstream towards another inlet.

"Where'd you get the boat?"

"We went to wait out the storm in Rickman's barn," Missy said. "We'd got there before we realized you'd left. We found it hanging on the wall. Did you find the tree?"

"Yeah," Sam winced, shifting her leg to the side.

"How many times you get bit?"

"I think two."

"Give me that," Danny said, snatching the flashlight. He shone it upon the water. "I don't see them."

"There were so many," Sam said. "And it gets worse. You remember the anaconda that escaped the zoo last year?"

"It was two years ago," Missy said quietly.

"Whatever," said Sam.

Danny's face grew ashen.

"It's here," Sam said. "I swear on my great grandma's grave I saw it. It was swimming right at me when I shot that bullet."

"Maybe you hit it," said Missy.

"I didn't hit it."

The canoe rocked gently back as they struck the shore and drifted against the rock wall separating them from the current. Danny laid the paddle down next to Sam and held out his arm for the rifle. Sam passed it to him. He inspected it, checked the magazine, and handed

it back to her.

“Alright,” he said. “We need to figure this shit out.” He ran a hand through his thick, greasy hair. “Do we take you back or do we keep going?”

“Daniel,” said Missy. “You’re kidding. She was bit. By a snake.”

“Don’t you dare,” Sam growled.

“Okay,” Danny nodded and picked up the paddle. “Little snake, blue and white bands.”

The canoe crawled against the current. Missy resumed shining the flashlight and from her prone position Sam trained the rifle on the treetops.

“A little further,” she said.

Danny plunged the paddle deeper into the water, grunting with the exertion.

“Oh my God,” Missy said.

They all looked to where the light was shining.

“Holy shit,” Danny muttered.

The beam illuminated the pale bark of the snake tree where the serpents were receding back into the branches. They cooperated with one another, slithering over each other as they ascended up the trunk and into the low-hanging branches. Higher up the sprawling topiary, the snakes were larger and paler, a caste system in the treetop. As the beam fell upon them, the large serpents hissed and withdrew from the light that wavered as Missy’s hand shook.

“Hold it steady,” Danny said, squinting at the branches.

“There.” Sam pointed at the blue and white banded snake hissing in the middle branches. “That has to be the one.”

“You think so?”

“I’m sure of it.”

As if they had comprehended her words, snakes from all branches began to descend, releasing their curled position and falling with convulsing twists until they flopped into the water. Each splash was a dark omen, and when a thick yellow one plunged, Missy followed it with the light until it landed in a tiny geyser.

“Keep it in the branches,” Danny said.

“On the blue one,” Sam said. She lay back in the belly of the canoe, the rifle pressed to her shoulder. The snake that had bit Lucas hadn’t moved, and in the piercing beam it seemed to be staring back at her, tasting the night with its flicking tongue.

Sam took a sharp breath and pulled the trigger.

The rifle boomed and kicked and Missy yelped in surprise. The flashlight beam wobbled and Sam caught a slicing glimpse of the mutilated snake’s thrashing descent.

“Follow it,” she cried out.

Missy brought the light down on the water’s surface and the blue and white corpse bobbed in the current toward them.

More and more serpents fell from the snake tree, splashing into the water. The severed fragment of snake floated closer and Missy leaned out and plucked it out. The body dripped water and blood.

As she pulled back, something massive hit the starboard side, sending the boat lurching. With a scream, Missy fell over and disap-

peared, thrashing, beneath the surface.

All at once, the night went dark.

“Missy!” Danny yelled.

She resurfaced with a choking sob, her arms splashing as she fought to find her footing. She still had the snake clutched in her fist.

Sam leaned over the lip of the canoe, reaching as far as she could stretch, just far enough to grab hold of Missy’s hand. Her fingers curled around the wet, scaly corpse right as the anaconda struck for the second time and Missy disappeared again.

Sam fell back into the canoe, the carcass flopping into the floorboards.

Danny bellowed and smashed the surface with the paddle. “You give her back!”

“Danny,” Sam said and pointed at a pool of moonlight. Beneath the surface, the black thing was dragging Missy along the bottom of the creek.

“What do I do?” Danny said.

Sam grabbed the rifle as Danny let out a guttural yell.

Sam looked ahead and saw it. The anaconda had dragged Missy’s limp form onto the shore beneath the snake tree. With each muscular compression, it moved forward, foot by foot toward the base of the tree.

Without thinking, Sam raised the rifle and fired the three remaining bullets at the monster. Only one found its mark, drilling into the thick, scaly flesh a foot down from the head.

The snake expelled a high pitched, hissing squeal, but it continued to

drag Missy through the mud and underbrush towards the towering tree.

“Give me the rifle,” Danny yelled at her.

The canoe had stopped in the gully where she’d found the bucket.

A snake dropped from a long branch into the belly of the canoe. It curled over itself a moment, trying to find its bearings, and Danny severed it with the machete, leaving a shallow gouge in the canoe’s bottom.

“It doesn’t have any bullets,” Sam said.

Another snake hung down from the branch, and she struck it with the rifle hard enough to send it flying.

“I’ve got a few loose ones,” Danny said. He reached into his bag and retrieved three bullets and his lighter.

Sam understood. She handed him the rifle and picked up the milk jug.

“Can you run?” he asked.

“I think so.”

“Okay. Set the bomb, but don’t you fucking dare light it before I get her. You got that?”

Sam nodded, took the lighter and the jug, and splashed overboard.

She held the items above her head as she sullied to shore. As she stepped upon the earth, a snake landed on her shoulders. Before it could sink its teeth in, she dropped the jug and hurled the beast into the underbrush.

Another fell beside her and she kicked at it. There was a searing dag-

ger of pain on her shoulder blade as a third landed, but she ignored it, grabbed the jug, and sprinted the last ten feet to the tree.

They were everywhere. Closing in like demons. She kicked out with her boots, batting them away one after another.

Behind her, she heard the first gunshot. It faded with echoing ambience to a silence that was quickly ravaged by a second shot, then a third.

Sam heard the anaconda's screech and something massive fell into the water with a pluming cascade. Another snake drove its fangs into her thigh and she bellowed, ripping it away.

"Do it!" Danny yelled from the creek.

She did.

In a surge of adrenaline, she removed the cap from the jug and splashed it haphazardly on the trunk of the snake tree. When she neared the end of her supply, she ran a little stream down the bank, tossed the carton back at the trunk, and lit the pungent fumes.

All at once, both the bank and her hands burst into hellfire.

Sam howled and dove headfirst into the water, swallowing deep gulps as the cool liquid extinguished her hands and soothed her burns. When she resurfaced, the night was alive with an orange blaze that reflected off the creek like a mirror.

All through the branches, the serpents screeched in pain and anguish.

Sam smiled.

"Get in the damn canoe," Danny yelled. He'd already pushed off from the rocky inlet and out into the center of the stream. As Sam clung to the side of the boat, she could feel the heat from the burning

tree. In the licking firelight, she could see Missy lying in the belly of the canoe, her eyes open, both hands clutched to her chest. Danny paddled furiously, the veins in his thin arms bursting.

Sam kicked behind the boat.

When they grew closer to the forest path, she ran her hand along the bottom of the canoe and found the wet, bloody fragment of the blue and white banded serpent. With the severed bit clutched in her fist, she watched the licking tower of flames fade out of sight.

In total, they suffered thirteen snake bites between the three of them, all from local specimens. Missy, who had been dealt the most, was also afflicted with three broken ribs, one of which punctured her lung. Pink froth filled her mouth as the canoe came to the bank where a mob of neighborhood residents had already gathered to investigate the fire.

When they saw the three children, they rushed the boat.

Two days later, Lucas Green woke. With a gasp, he clutched his chest and felt the tubes attached to his arms. Above, bright lights blared and he began to scream.

"Oh my God," Tammy cried. "It's okay. Sweetie, it's okay."

Lucas took a series of short, huffing breaths, blinked through the glare, and saw her leaning over him.

"Mom?"

"I'm here baby," she beamed.

Behind her, a door opened and a nurse entered. "Everything okay?"

"Yes," Tammy nodded, tears flowing freely. "He's awake. He's

alive.”

“Mom?”

“What is it sweetie?”

“Where am I?”

“We’re in the hospital,” she said, letting his hand go long enough to wipe her eyes. “You ... You got really hurt. But you’re okay now. I’m here and you’re okay.”

“Where’s Sam?”

“She’s here too.” Tammy reached into her purse and pulled out her phone. “Let me call Danny.”

Lucas lay back and closed his eyes. Nothing made sense. Last he remembered he’d been walking the creek.

“It happened,” Tammy said. “Uh huh. He’s awake.”

A few minutes passed before the door swung open again.

“Well look who decided to wake up.”

Lucas sat up to see Danny and Sam enter the room. She sat in a wheelchair wearing a hospital gown. Danny pushed her. He wore jeans and rubber wading boots.

“You look terrible,” Sam laughed as Danny wheeled her to the edge of the bed. “But I’m so glad you’re alive.” She reached out and squeezed his leg.

For a moment, Lucas was silent, too stunned to speak. Her black hair braided to the side. Her freckled cheeks. Her dark green eyes the color of pine needles in the fall. He felt a soothing warmth radiating through his chest.

“If you don’t shut your mouth a fly’s gonna land in it,” Danny said.

“Oh, yeah,” he chuckled. “Hey, why are you in a wheelchair? You fall off Daryl’s trampoline again?”

Sam fell silent and looked down at the floor.

Behind her, Danny glanced at Tammy.

Their mother smiled. “I’ll give you guys a couple minutes. Should probably go call gram.” She picked up her purse and left the hospital room, shutting the door softly behind her.

Lucas watched her exit, then looked from Sam to Danny. There was something missing in his brother’s face.

“What happened?” Lucas asked.

“Well,” Sam said, looking back up at him. “How much do you remember?”

Lucas shut his eyes and thought back, trying hard to concentrate. He was wading through the creek. He had the bucket and his stick when...

He remembered the snakes. A tree full of snakes.

His eyes shot open and he felt the breath catch in his chest.

“It’s okay,” Sam said, grabbing his hand.

“You were walking the creek when the snakes got you,” Danny said. “You remember that?”

“Yeah,” Lucas said.

“Well your girlfriend here and I and Missy.” Danny shut his eyes. “We went to go find the one that got you.”

“Did you find it?” Lucas asked.

Danny nodded.

“You guys saved me?”

“Yeah,” Danny said.

“That’s crazy.” Lucas chuckled until he felt the pain in his chest.

“Where’s Missy?”

No one spoke. Lucas looked from Danny to Sam and back again. They both averted their gaze.

“What?” Lucas asked.

“She died,” Sam said. “Her lungs got crushed.”

Lucas felt a wave of tingling emotion wash over him. “Oh.”

Danny stared at a chart of the human muscular system.

“I’m sorry,” Lucas said.

“It’s alright.” Danny took a deep breath. He reached down and patted Lucas’s leg, then walked toward the door. “I gotta get going.”

“Danny,” Lucas said. “Where are you going?”

“Well,” he said, looking back. “Newspaper said they found the bones of about fifty snakes. But they didn’t find the one I’m looking for.” He offered a fabricated smile. “See you at home.”

As he left, Lucas looked over at Sam and felt the pleasant warmth burn in his chest again. In that moment, he understood what Danny had lost.

Cat's Life

by Christina Sng

The transformation began slowly.

First, my eyes dilated and changed
From jet black to emerald green.
I could see things in absolute darkness.

By day, everything appeared monotone
And soon, I began sleeping at dawn
And waking up when the sun went down,

Prowling the house like my cat did,
Checking the locks and the windows,
Making sure we were safe.

We began to patrol together.
I didn't realize it but my skeleton
Had changed. I walked on fours now,

Lithe and strong, tautly muscled.
I could leap from the ground
To the roof without a second thought.

Winter arrived but I was no longer cold.
Thick fur grew, covering my entire body.
I gave up shoes and clothing,

The tactile pads on my feet could
Sense an avalanche rumbling from
A continent away, reverberating.

My tongue craved the salty taste
Of blood and meat, not the bland
Dry breads I normally relished.

My cat taught me to hunt.
We stalked the forestlands together,
Communicating in the language of cat,

Each moment of enlightenment
Resonated in me like the low hum
Of a faintly familiar melody,

Our purrs dulling the pain
Of a thorn in a paw or immersing
In a sea of pure contentment.

By springtime, I no longer cared
When they repossessed my house and
Took away everything I once cherished.

Kitty and I lived in the forest, curled up
Together like mother and daughter,
Safe beneath bushes and up in tall trees.

I protected her from the larger predators
And she taught me how to live like a cat,
From grooming to scratching to nipping fleas.

We scarcely noticed when the apocalypse
Descended, turning humans into ravenous,
Violent creatures only driven by hunger.

By then, Kitty's magic to transform me
Was complete, her love for me alchemic,
Fuelled by the loss of her own cat mother.

It was a peaceful life, out in the forest,
Far from the chaos of the big cities
Where humans tore each other apart

In so many terrible ways, screeching
And screaming from being bitten
And eaten, civilization toppled yet again.

We basked in the sun and chased squirrels
And rabbits, slept the days away, perched
On trees, and dreamed of our exact lives,

Perfect and so worth living.

Sea Change

by Emily Crook

The sea overspread

Forests and fields—deep-drowned land

Lost souls wander there.

Nastaran winced as memories not her own tore through her mind. Wild water ripped trees apart, the roaring flood inescapable. A dark surge crashed down, devouring. Deadly.

“I hear you,” she whispered. “I understand. You can’t free yourself from your untimely end. Not alone. Let me help you?”

All around her, the dreaming world was in chaos, the only constant the flickering light of tormented, sundered spirits. It took all her willpower to concentrate, not to fear the waves that built and built around her, then disappeared into mist-filled glens and mighty trees of massive girth, dissolving into a wreckage of sea-bed filled with the rotting corpses of those same trees . . . and the other beings that had lived and died there.

Fear surrounded her. “I know,” she murmured. “I know. But—you’ll only be going home. That’s not so bad, is it?”

Surrender. As she reached out, the wavering form in front of her solidified for a split second into a young girl, scarcely older than five, her ebony eyes wide with wonder. She smiled, fading, and Nastaran’s hand closed on nothing. More spirits crowded around, and she was buffeted by their final moments as she sought to share their burden. The crowd began to thin. By dawn, the last figure had faded, and she sighed with relief as she woke.

I’ve lived at least three lifetimes’ worth of suffering these last few months, she thought as she shivered in the clinging damp. Rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands, Nastaran knelt and composed her thoughts. It had become increasingly difficult of late to separate her own from those the drowned dead pressed upon her.

“I am Nastaran,” she said aloud, her eyes tightly closed, her knuckles white as her fingers interlaced in her lap. “I serve Kirian, who guides all lost souls home. I am a Dreamwalker by blood-right—therefore I may walk in both realms freely. And *I did not drown in the sinking of Shavarash.*”

Opening her eyes, she sat back on her heels and looked around her reassuringly solid room, so different from the Dragomir’s shifting landscape. Weariness pressed in upon Nastaran as she contemplated the vast concourses of souls yet to guide from their watery grave. She was grateful for the mundaneness of her days, her only respite from the mournful night.

Though her main work was accomplished in the dreaming world, her own realm had also been affected by the sinking of Shavarash.

“How’s it coming?” called the village head, as she emerged from the shell of a house destroyed in the aftershocks, dragging a filthy rug filled with jars and bottles from the half-collapsed cellar.

“There’s plenty to do,” Nastaran called back.

They allowed her to stay with them for now because she had proven herself creative in salvaging whatever was left—furniture, pottery,

food, even rocks and timbers from tumbled walls. It was slow work, and those with any kind of harvest left were called away to the fields.

“How long will you be here?” asked the householder she stayed with. Nastaran squinted at the woman.

“I’m not sure,” she said cautiously.

“I’m afraid it will be a lean winter,” the woman said, and Nastaran nodded, sighing in agreement. “Even with the fall crops we’ve put in, it’s going to be a struggle,” she continued, and Nastaran listened to the woman’s litany of worries as she helped sort through the remains of her stores. In light of the villager’s fears, each unbroken jar would be a brick in the bulwark against starvation’s assault.

* * *

Night came after a hard day’s work—and with it, dreams.

Sunlight shone into shadow under vast canopies of leaves, and for a few brief moments she enjoyed the memory of Shavarash unmarred. But all too soon the surge engulfed her once more, reminding Nastaran of her appointed task.

Outward, ever outward she traveled, careful in searching despite the tumult, but found nothing until well after midnight.

In the midst of the oncoming waves to her left stood a man, his arms outspread as though to stop the unstoppable. Nastaran paused and watched, astonished, as the waves crested, then foamed around him. The ground beneath her feet sank until she stood underwater. As far as she could see, the Dragomir had ceased its convulsive changes; all had sunk into the depths of the encroaching sea, memory yielding to a new reality.

The man lowered his arms and turned away, his shoulders slumping.

“Who are you?” she asked, and he spun in the strange un-water of the Dragomir, hands clenched.

Nastaran stepped toward him on the sea-bed, reaching out even as he turned. Taller than most mortals, he had the look of the Shavarashan. Some had survived, of course, though not many.

He watched her, wary, his eyes glinting in the wavering light.

Trying again, she asked, “How did you do that?”

“There are others?” the man whispered to himself. “But no, you are not Shavarashan.”

“I am not,” Nastaran agreed.

“Then where . . . ?”

“I was sent,” she told him, “to guide lost souls home. I call no realm or country mine.”

The man looked at her, mystified. “You have no home, yet guide others to it?” he scoffed. “What a riddle.”

Nastaran blinked. “I have a home,” she told him. “But you would not find it while you yet live, unless you were to achieve ascension.”

“Ah. That answers your riddle not at all.”

Nastaran stared at him. “You are a Dreamwalker, yet know nothing of the Way?”

“What?” His puzzlement was clear as he stared back. “No, you are not one of the dream-creatures,” he muttered after a moment, shaking his head.

A thought came, and Nastaran blurted, “Did you know your parents?”

The man tilted his head, his shaggy hair swirling out in the currents of the dream-sea.

“Do you always ask strange questions of strangers?”

She blushed and looked around—anywhere but the man.

“You are clearly a Dreamwalker, and have some Talent I have not seen before, to quell the torment of the Dragomir,” she mused. “And yet . . .”

Turning to him, she leaped forward and landed close enough to see that his eyes were so dark that pupil and iris seemed to be all one.

“What is it,” he asked, inching backward, clearly wary.

“I wonder what—”

* * *

Nastaran woke shivering. She felt as though she’d been swimming, though her bed was warm and the blankets dry despite the chill in the air. As she stretched, she took a deep breath and considered her encounter, and whether she ought to report it.

I forgot to ask his name, she realized, slumping over and hiding her face in her hands. *And I was so rude!*

Nastaran shook herself out of her embarrassment. There was nothing to be done about it now. If they met again, perhaps . . .

That day, she salvaged usable timbers until early afternoon, then took a hike away into the narrow-ridged foothills to the north. They now ended abruptly in a raw new cliff high above the ravenous sea.

She reached the ridge just before Okothe began his descent from the swift-moving storm clouds that piled in the air like battlements. His membranous wings glowed like sullen embers in a sudden shaft of

sunlight as he dropped from the air, claws reaching for the cliff.

“I can’t stay long with that storm brewing,” she said, breathless, and looked out at the horizon.

Okothe folded his wings back neatly and turned his long sinuous neck to look out across the troubled waters. “There is no danger in this,” he hissed, his fan-like ears quivering at full stretch. “The airs do not mingle as they would before a thunder-match among the hLost.”

Nastaran nodded, her heartbeat slowing after a long scramble along goat-paths. “Still,” she said, “I would prefer not to get drenched.”

Peering down at her, Okothe sighed, steam coming from his nostrils. “I forget how fragile you humans are.”

“As are you, in ways that we are not,” she said amiably as she sat down on the ground and pulled out her record book.

“Hwhat progress in the hwork?” asked Okothe, coming around to sit behind her. Nastaran suppressed a shiver and reminded herself that dragons didn’t eat humans, despite their teeth.

“Just two nights ago I sent a whole village home,” she said, and could not suppress a weary sigh.

Okothe growled deep in the back of his throat, molten ember eyes narrowing. “First General Azare’s deeds have caused much sorrow. There are many innocents whose blood cries out against the one who sunk Shavarash.”

Nastaran looked out across the newly-formed sea. “There are.” Then, hesitating, she breathed deep and said, “Okothe . . . I met another Dreamwalker.”

“There are no others here,” Okothe rumbled. “If there were, you would not have been sent alone.”

“Not true, for I came upon a man walking in the Dragomir,” she countered, “and he has a Talent I’ve never seen before. With only a gesture, he brought the Dragomir to quiescence, as close to this—” she flicked her hand out at the water below, “—as the dreaming world can be.”

The dragon hummed. “The name of this Dreamwalker?”

“. . . I didn’t ask,” Nastaran said. “By his speech and looks he is Shavarashan.”

Okothe grumbled thoughtfully, but said nothing. Nastaran turned to look at him narrowly.

“How many?” she demanded. “How many have slipped through from Ryndari to the Dragomir?”

He was silent a long moment, the tip of his tail flicking over his claws like a cat’s. “Do you not know well?” he said at last. “Tis the other hway around.” His deep voice rumbled, an echo of the distant thunder. “A few from the Dragomir found passage to Shavarash.” His glowing eyes closed, and with a steamy sigh, Okothe whispered, “Such tales rarely end hwell.”

Nastaran bowed her head in tacit agreement, then finished her report. She did not return before the storm swept through.

* * *

Days passed, and nights, and Nastaran widened her search to the limits of her range, but she did not move on. Not yet. She’d found a swathe where the Dragomir had settled into its new shape, no longer tormented by fractured memory. It made her glad, for her own work was easier there.

A fortnight passed before she met the other Dreamwalker again. This time the Shavarashan noticed her first.

“Strange lady, wait,” said someone from behind, and she turned to see him walking among the broken remnants of an ash grove. He smiled hesitantly when she waited for him to approach.

“I was discourteous,” she blurted, at the same time he asked, “Why did you call me—?”

They both paused, and Nastaran chuckled, gesturing for him to continue.

“What is a Dreamwalker?” he asked.

She gestured to their surroundings. “A Dreamwalker may, by birthright, walk out of their own dreams and into the Dragomir, the dreaming world where all souls rest in sleep. I asked such strange questions when last we met because only those who have a parent from each realm may walk in both.”

His eyes widened, mouth opening. Nastaran waited until it was clear he would not speak.

“Will you walk with me?” she asked. “I would teach you more.”

He hesitated. “Why?”

“Dreamwalkers are rare,” she said. “And there is danger for those who walk the Dragomir unwary.”

“Danger?” the Shavarashan’s lips twisted disdainfully. “I know the dangers of this place. *I am dangerous here.*”

Nastaran looked up at him. “I daresay you are,” she said, taking in his size and the lean strength of his frame. “But do you understand why, or what the Dragomir is?”

After a long silent moment, he looked away from her and shook his head. “Teach me,” he mumbled.

Nastaran learned that his name was Talis, but he said nothing more of himself, content to ask her questions until it was nearly dawn. He promised to meet her again in the ruined ash grove the next night—was waiting there when she came to it.

“You said that there are three realms but only one world, and that the Dragomir is both a realm and the world’s dream,” Talis said, his brow furrowed. “You live in a different realm than me, so we cannot meet outside of dreams. But—Dreamwalkers are born from parents of different realms. Meetings must be possible, yes?”

Opening her mouth, Nastaran paused. There were deep secrets here, not hers to share. “They are possible,” she said carefully, “but such meetings rarely end well. The realms were created for souls of different strengths, and those who move from a lower realm to a higher often find it . . . difficult to adjust.”

Talis considered this. “You also said that the reason I can change the dreaming world is that I have a Talent?”

“Yes,” Nastaran said quickly. “Every soul has been given two Talents: one which changes your own perception of reality, the other giving power to influence the physical world. But in Dreamwalkers, the Talents mix with their blood-right gift in unpredictable ways.”

The Shavarashan eyed her. “How do you mean?” he asked.

She shrugged. “It differs for every Dreamwalker,” she said, “but in my case, my perceptive Talent is to share others’ memories. However, I must touch their soul, and I can only do that in the Dragomir.”

Talis pulled back involuntarily.

Nastaran frowned. “If a soul is unwilling, I cannot cross the bounds which are set! I would never delve into a living soul’s memory for—for mere curiosity. Would you?” She shuddered, and Talis looked down.

“I was rude,” he muttered. “I did not mean it so.”

Nastaran laughed weakly and the conversation turned to a discussion of Talis’ own Talent. She kept her distance, unwilling to frighten the wary Shavarashan away.

They walked together often from that night on, Talis dispelling the chaos of the Dragomir around them as Nastaran searched for lost souls wandering.

“It hurts you to send them on,” Talis observed after one such encounter.

Nastaran shook her head, hair flying in a ruddy cloud around her. “It’s not pain I feel,” she said, passing a hand across her face. “Not my own. But I remember final moments that are not mine, and —”

He looked around the broken remnants of a village now buried beneath the sea. “I think I understand. We are both trapped by memories not of our making. If only I could forget . . .”

Glancing at him, Nastaran was caught by the blankness of his eyes and dread crept softly into her heart.

She had asked Talis nothing of his past except his name, but it clearly cost him to set the Dragomir to rest, its new reality a burden he could hardly bear. And he was breaking.

At their next meeting, she told Okothe about her meetings with Talis.

“He wishes he were Lost,” Okothe observed, and Nastaran bowed her head.

“I know,” she said, her voice low. “I know. Yet he continues to use his Talent, though it brings him nothing but sorrow. I do not understand.”

Okothe shrugged his mighty shoulders in a strangely human gesture—wings spreading, then resettling against his sides. “I cannot counsel you on human matters,” he rumbled, “for I understand them less than

you yourself.”

Nastaran left despairing.

* * *

When she met with Talis again, she asked him, “Why do you set the Dragomir to rest, when it causes you such pain?”

He looked out at the desolate seabed. They stood beneath the skeleton of what had once been a mighty oak of many generations.

“There is nothing left for me in the waking world,” he said bleakly. “The sound of the sea haunts me, and yet I cannot leave its shores. Each night I find myself here, watching as the waves overtake me again and again.” Talis laughed, a dry bitter sound.

“I cannot bear the sight; I’d rather everything were drowned as when I wake, than watch it happen one more time. It is an agony for me to relive the coming of the waves, as it is to let them stay.”

Tilting her head back, Nastaran looked at the rippling of waves far above them, the faint light of the stars warped out of their constellations. Her throat closed against further speech.

The next night, Talis spoke not at all; Nastaran watched him walk through a grove of tall spreading beeches, their branches stripped bare, stark in the uncertain starlight undersea. His eyes were desolate, and when he turned to her at last he seemed to flicker weakly as if he were one of the wandering spirits she had been sent to guide. She did not know what guidance she might give to one so lost when she felt lost herself.

As always, she took refuge in the daylight hours, seeking to ground herself in the ordinary tasks she was given. It was three nights before she met Talis again.

At the furthest reaches of her searching, Nastaran came upon what

must have been a settlement of farms, families living in clusters, spread in all directions. Even now, their sundered spirits kept close together, traveling in drifts like fireflies.

Nastaran reached out to one of the quivering forms, whispering, “Show me,” and sank into memory, fragmented perspectives made still more confusing as they converged.

Terror had overtaken them all the day before the waves claimed them, the King’s Hunt sweeping in like a harbinger of the flood. The men had been out in the fields when the wall of water came crashing through, and many of the women, waiting for the hunters to return, or not.

Nastaran showed them the way home, weeping as brother followed sister; mothers, children, with fathers close behind. She wept so hard that she didn’t notice exactly when the dreamscape around her turned from forest and field to a graveyard sea.

Talis stood before her, but his eyes were empty.

“T-Talis?” she gulped, smearing tears away as she shoved her wildly floating hair back behind her.

He showed no sign that he had heard, stood still as though rooted, looking through her as though she were not there. Slowly he paced to one of the ruined, quickly decaying houses, its stone foundation crumbling from the force of the waves upon it.

Then slowly, ever so slowly, he knelt before the threshold, prostrating himself with fingers formally crossed beneath his forehead.

Nastaran, who had followed him, suddenly felt that here was a private grief, one she should not intrude on. She began to turn away.

“. . . if only I had been strong enough,” she heard him murmur, before his voice sank so low that Nastaran could not hear it over her own heartbeat swelling in her ears. With sudden new understanding,

the memories the drowned dead had shared with her were suffocating in their immensity.

To Nastaran, it seemed as if she had been set adrift in a sea of sorrows, unable to escape its hungry depths. She was drowning, crushed under the weight of pain not her own.

“Kirian,” she choked, sinking to her knees.

What troubles you?

It was a mild voice, more felt than heard. She looked up, relief flaring into panic.

Nastaran, it sounded, and was silent. Waiting.

Her head bowed to her chest, and *Nastaran* breathed his name once more, heart thundering.

“Kirian.”

Your cry is heard. What troubles you? he asked again. Not just a voice—a visitation.

Shaking her head, *Nastaran* felt tears begin to burn, unshed. She swallowed a few times before she spoke.

“I—I am sorry,” she said haltingly. “I did not mean to call you, lord.”

He was illumined with a remote inner light, bright as a star yet near enough to touch, if she’d dared.

You are weary, said Kirian. *Though there was no one else to send, your appointed task lies heavy on you.*

Nastaran bowed her head, rebuked, though his voice held no condemnation.

“I am weak; I cannot bear the burden of memory which the sundered souls have given me,” she said at last.

It is more than any mortal can bear, Kirian agreed, his straight dark brows drawing together. He turned to look at Talis, still prostrate before the threshold of his ruined house. *And this Dreamwalker’s grief is as a wound unhealed. But sorrow for suffering is not weakness.*

She stole a quick look at Talis, then lowered her eyes to her hands, which twisted together painfully tight, her fingers pale and bloodless. “He has much to grieve,” she mumbled, “and I know not how to ease his pain.”

Nastaran. Kirian waited until she looked up at him again. *Of you it is not required to make all things right. Do you not remember? That price has already been paid; he must choose his own path.*

“He is almost Lost,” *Nastaran* pleaded. “How—how can I keep him from losing his way?”

Be the burning beacon which lights the Way. See the sorrows before you. Forget not that joy which is their reward. As you guide others along the Way, remember that you must follow it yourself.

Looking over at Talis, *Nastaran* asked, “You mean for me to teach him the Way?”

Is it not given for the ascension of mankind? The Dreamwalker wanders purposeless. Give him something to strive for and he will heal, given time.

Taking a slow breath, *Nastaran* let it out slowly and bowed deep. “Thank you,” she said, and gave a single weak chuckle. “I . . . I will try. But I have no experience.”

All shall be well, Kirian assured her, his eyes tender as his mouth curved into a soft smile. His countenance, already bright, began to gather brilliance until *Nastaran* knew she would be blinded were she

not dreaming. She blinked and Kirian was gone, and Talis was rising from the threshold of the ruined house.

He saw her kneeling there and came over to stand before her. “What is wrong?” he asked, the terrible emptiness of his grief displaced by mere mundane concern.

Nastaran rose, shaking her head. “All will be well,” she told him, “in time.”

“I wonder,” Talis muttered, casting a glance behind him.

“I sent them all on,” she said hurriedly. “Before you came. They are no longer trapped in that last terrible moment.”

She paused, swallowed, and asked, “Are you?”

Talis blinked. His face darkened, anger furrowing his brow. “It may be easy for the dead to forget,” he hissed, looming, “but what of the living?”

“But the dead do not forget,” said Nastaran, refusing to back away. “I take no memories; I only share the burden of them, for in sharing I lighten their load. Then they may fly free to the home which awaits them.”

After a moment of silence, Talis whispered, “Then they will . . . remember me?”

“Assuredly.” Nastaran gave him a hesitant smile, and though he did not return it, Talis no longer seemed devoid of feeling or filled with fury, but rather thoughtful.

“They will remember, but they can do no more. You, though—you have the chance to make your bonds with them more than mere memory.”

Talis’ eyes narrowed. “You speak of your Way.”

“Yes,” Nastaran confirmed. “Are you willing to walk it?”

“What of those you call the Lost?” he asked, turning aside from the subject.

Nastaran shook her head. “They forget all that made them human,” she stated. “They become mere vessels of power, controlled by that which they should have mastered.”

He turned away from her, head bowed, and said, “I have much to think on.”

“And I have work still to do,” said Nastaran, standing. “Will you come with me?”

Talis paused, then flicked a glance behind him. “I will,” he said. “Another night.”

Noting the tension in his stance, Nastaran sighed. “Certainly,” she said, and, “Thank you.”

* * *

*The brink of despair
Is edged by slow-healing wounds
What price the abyss?*

More days passed, and nights. She met with Talis often, and where they walked the Dragomir settled into its new shape and the trapped souls of those lost to the waves were set free. Slowly, the blankness in Talis’ eyes faded.

“I no longer wish to forget,” he said one night, and Nastaran let out a breath she felt she’d been holding since he had first wished so. The un-water of the Dragomir rippled with the force of her sigh, and Talis looked at her sidelong.

“I have been afraid that you were becoming Lost,” she admitted. “I have found . . . met them from time to time. It was not—not a comfortable experience.” She turned to him and studied his face. “What you would become, I cannot imagine,” she added, “but the Lost are ever alone. I would not wish that. I would not wish it on anyone else.”

Talis looked down at her silently until she turned away, an inexplicable shiver running through her.

At last, Nastaran reached the end of her work in the south-facing foothills of the borderlands. All the drowned dead were at rest, the Dragomir quiescent. She roamed restlessly, Talis at her side.

“You have finished your work here,” Talis observed as they paused beneath the bleached, bare branches of an oak.

Nastaran flicked a glance at him. “I have,” she said, “but there is more than a lifetime’s work still to be done elsewhere. Shavarash is—was—a large country, and many lived here.”

“And died here,” Talis added. Loneliness and grief still haunted him; he had yet to let go his burden of guilt.

“Yes.”

She took a deep breath, then blurted out what she had stayed one final night to ask.

“Will you come with me?”

Talis gave her the same puzzled look he’d given when they first met. “We live in different realms,” he pointed out.

“I’m *aware*,” she said with exaggerated patience, then paused. “I phrased that badly.”

“What did you mean to say?” Talis asked, and Nastaran stared. She

was almost sure that there had been a hint of stifled laughter in his question.

“We may not be able to travel together,” she said, looking down and fidgeting with her shirtsleeves, “but so long as we move in the same direction, we will still be able to meet in the Dragomir . . . continue to work together?”

He was silent for so long that Nastaran looked up, wondering if he had woken early for some reason.

Talis’ entire body was taut as a drawn bowstring, fists clenched, shoulders rigid as he looked out at the bones of the forest. She could almost hear him thinking, *More pain in remembering, because you wish your own work eased?*

“I was wrong to ask,” said Nastaran slowly. She fled to the waking world, her thoughtlessness choking any other words she might have said.

* * *

She traveled northward three days’ journey, across the foothills, hugging the dizzying drop into the sea. There she found a camp full of Shavarashan refugees. Their dreams were dark, their waking hours darker.

“There is nothing,” said one of the women, “nothing for us here or anywhere else. The Kiriiothans have their own troubles. But where can we go? What can we do?”

Her eyes glinted large in her already starveling face, and Nastaran stood silent—for truly, there was nothing she could do to ease their suffering.

It was not long before she traveled on, unable to bear the unremitting anguish that hung like a pall in the air. It was almost better, thought Nastaran, for the dead. They had been swallowed in an instant by the

ravaging flood, and that single moment, shared, was enough to set them free. The living had been forced to bear the loss and continue on.

The memory of Talis' sorrowful eyes came often to her; Nastaran shied away from it as a burning brand and tried to continue her work. The Dragomir's fragmented memory mirrored her own as she took in ever more experiences from lost souls.

Where will the healer find healing? she wondered, as she sat and shivered one morning in the autumn frost—trying to remember herself, when all she could think of was the pain radiating from Talis' soul when she had last spoken with him.

Slowly, she bowed her head to the ground, echoing the gesture that Talis had made at the threshold of his ruined house. "Forgive me, Kirian," she groaned. "I who arrogantly sought to guide have instead led a man astray. Watch over him wherever he is. Keep him from harm."

But hard as she tried, she could not trust that her prayer would be answered. She herself had caused Talis' hurt, then run from it, too self-absorbed to mend what she had broken. The gods could work mighty miracles, but Nastaran knew painfully well that they could not take away the consequences of human error.

So she continued on, settling into a small community in the northern foothills where the mountains met the sea in a sheer forbidding cliff. Autumn's harvest had ended and winter begun, far harsher than any in living memory. But the people of this hamlet welcomed her eagerly. Haunted by a Nightmare so glutted on broken souls that it had strength enough to wound unfortunate dreamers, they were willing to pay any price for safety.

Though Nastaran's work was to guide souls, she had also been taught to defend them. The third night she slept there, predator became prey as she chased the Nightmare through the Dragomir until it cried for mercy. She bound it with strict oaths and sent it on its way.

Time would heal the wounds it had inflicted. Here, few of the drowned dead were within the range of a night's dreaming—the forest had grown so deep and thick that it had been set aside for hunting. No one had been there when Shavarash sank, so there was little work to do.

Nastaran roamed the chaotic dream-realm of the Dragomir by night, restless with wishes she dared not utter.

* * *

One night she found a stretch of the Dragomir where there was no chaos of memory, and she waited there, expectant, fearful.

He came with the crashing waves, his tall form strangely sleek as he cut through the un-water that surrounded them. Nastaran did not recognize him at first, for he had become something *other*.

No longer did despair deaden his eyes; instead they were pure liquid darkness, inhuman. His hair swirled like seaweed about a mask—no, not a mask: his face was covered with delicate scales, and tucked beneath frilled ears, gills fluttered in his neck, torso narrowing to a tail and fins instead of hips, legs, feet.

"Lost," Nastaran whispered as Talis paused in his course, flicking a glance at her. "How did it come to this?"

But he was not totally immune to curiosity, for he stretched out a webbed hand to catch at the ruddy cloud of her hair that swirled in the illusory water around them. Nastaran looked into his glittering eyes and stretched out her own hand, fitting palm to palm, his large enough to enfold hers.

"Will you allow me to see what led you down this path?" Nastaran asked slowly, keeping eye contact with this strange new creature that had once been Talis. She didn't know if he understood human speech still.

His hand clenched around hers, and his eyes widened, darker than the sunless depths of the sea. And Nastaran remembered what she had never known.

* * *

Talis had fled to Kirioth only hours before the cataclysm, pursued by the war-dogs of the Third General. He'd done his best to draw the attention of the General's army away from his kin, for they were reputed to indulge in cruel sport with all unable or unwilling to join their ranks. When he finally lost the pursuit, he'd turned back. From the mountains of Kirioth, Talis had watched as the earth tore itself apart just moments before the waves came roaring over forest and farm. Indeed, he had nearly died himself as the mountains were shaken to their foundations.

Too late, Nastaran heard, a lament that ran like a thread through all his memories from that moment on. *Everlastingly too late* . . .

He'd wanted to die or to forget, yet could not bear to leave the shores of the drowned land, grieving wildly for his kin. He was drawn into the tormented, fractured memories of the Dragomir, watching the waves overcome his homeland, all around him consumed by the graveyard deep. Endlessly the shattering of his world was repeated—each night, every dream.

I'd rather everything were drowned forever, he'd thought. Finding the rift between memory and truth, he'd mended it, and the waves rushed in upon him one last time before the dreaming world stilled.

Though it brought him no peace, Talis had thrown himself into this strange new work with near-frenzied pace, like one who reopens a wound to feel pain—to feel *anything*; he still feared the numbing grasp of forgetfulness more than the wound-throb of memory. Even as he laid the memories of the Dragomir to rest, his own he kept raw by battling the chaos each night.

Why? How could you bear to continue like that? Nastaran wondered,

bewildered by the torrent of conflicted, conflicting feelings that swept around her as she shared Talis' remembrances.

Want to forget, cannot forget, must remember, cannot bear to remember . . .

And then Nastaran saw herself, red-gold hair flying in the strange unwater of the Dragomir. A faint light of stars was about her, and there was wonder in her eyes.

In that moment, Talis had forgotten his anguish for a time; in its place grew curiosity, for in all his wandering he had never yet seen another living soul in the dreaming world except the strange dream-creatures that sometimes crossed his path.

Seeing their meetings from his perspective made Nastaran's cheeks burn. She relived her ill-considered words and clumsy attempts to draw Talis out of his self-destructive state, and saw him slowly edge back from the abyss.

Until . . . until their final meeting, when she had fled, her courage only so much after all.

Nastaran flinched, wishing she could pull back from this one moment, but need spurred her on.

"I must know," she said aloud, and her grip tightened against the grip of the Lost one's slick webbed fingers. "What did I do to you, Talis? Was it I that drove you to lose yourself?"

The Lost one's hand clenched, and Nastaran remembered.

"Will you come with me?" asked Nastaran, and Talis stared.

"We live in different realms," he said, for she'd told him as much herself.

"I'm aware," she said, exasperated. "I phrased that badly."

Talis felt his lips twitch. “What did you mean to say?” he asked, surprised at his own amusement.

“We may not be able to travel together,” said Nastaran, looking down as she grew uncharacteristically fidgety, “but so long as we move in the same direction, we will still be able to meet in the Dragomir . . . continue to work together?”

That was when Talis realized two things. He could not bear never to meet Nastaran in the waking world. And he would never do so.

The thought staggered him, for immediately following was an awful clarity of thought. How painful would it be to meet but never touch? Yet how much worse never to have met? He tensed as though to receive a long-anticipated blow.

And then Nastaran looked up at him, saw something in his face that made her cry out, “I was wrong to ask.”

Before he could react, she disappeared.

Talis searched recklessly far to find her, spent his nights, consumed his days in restless waiting. At last he was forced to admit that she had gone, and there would be no more meetings.

Despairing, he loosed his hold on the raw power within himself, the Talent that Nastaran had explained so carefully to him. The loss of that which he had barely found, added to what he had already lost, was too much to bear. *If everyone I love is to be taken from me, better to forget how to love.*

* * *

“Fool,” Nastaran whispered miserably as she drooped, her forehead touching the back of his hand. “But which of us is the more foolish? I also—I didn’t—I assumed that I knew what you were thinking, instead of asking.”

She laughed bitterly. “And now a mere apology is even less able to right what has gone wrong. Yet . . .”

Nastaran looked up. “Forgive me my failure to ask what troubled you,” she pleaded. “I should have when I had the chance. Instead, I fled, fearing to give you the truth.”

Taking a deep breath, she whispered, “I wished you to come with me in order to make my work easier . . . that was what I told myself, and felt guilty for making such a selfish request. But that was not what I truly wished.

“I—I had hoped to keep you close, so that perhaps we might someday meet in the waking world.”

Nastaran swallowed the rest of the words that threatened to spill out as she lowered her eyes. What good would they do now? Talis was Lost.

Slowly, the Lost one reached out with his other hand and caught her chin, raising it until she looked him in the eye. She stared into his inhuman face, fascinated, as his grip slowly tightened to the point of pain. Letting out a tremulous breath, Nastaran held his gaze until his black eyes slid away and he released her.

* * *

Nastaran woke with a gasp, half-expecting to meet the Lost one’s gaze once more, but she was alone.

She was clumsy and slow about her daily chores. Always before, she had taken refuge from the night in the toil of day, but now her meeting with the Lost one consumed her.

It was a sennight until her next meeting with Okothe, and waking or sleeping, Nastaran could not erase the memory of the Lost one’s eyes. She had looked deep into those black wells, and seen not even

a hint of what had once been Talis.

Though the day was cruelly cold and the wind from the new-formed sea cut through her like a flurry of blades, Nastaran climbed to the highest cliffs. Okothe waited there, hunched so tightly around himself that he seemed merely part of the landscape.

He unfurled a little when she put a tentative hand on his neck. Cold as it was, Okothe was warm enough to make her frozen fingers burn.

“Hwhy have hyou come to such a remote place?” he asked, looking down at her with narrowed eyes. “Surely there hwere few who lived here even before the flood?”

Averting her eyes, Nastaran said, “I . . . have found the limit of my strength of late, Okothe. And I cannot travel in this weather, so I am taking my rest here for a season.”

Okothe hummed softly. “Hwhat else?” he asked.

“There was a Nightmare here,” she said. “And . . . I made a mistake, which I must amend.”

The dragon waited, still and silent, as Nastaran gathered her thoughts, slowly shifting closer as his heat overcame her natural caution. She explained Talis’ transformation, and the memories he had shared.

“Is it impossible to restore the Lost?” Nastaran asked, folding her arms as she shivered—from cold or softly held hope, she could not tell.

Okothe regarded her for a long, long moment, his umber eyes bright. “Kirian’s charge is to guide lost souls,” he said at last. “*All* lost souls.”

“Then —”

“I have a message from Kirian,” Okothe interrupted, and Nastaran

closed her mouth and waited.

“He says, ‘*redemption cannot be given to those unwilling to receive it—and hyou, Nastaran, will find forgiveness only when hyou seek it.*’”

Nastaran bowed her head. “I don’t understand,” she admitted, “but I will think on it.”

* * *

Through the winter, the Lost one crossed paths with her frequently. Most often, his blank black eyes slid over her as he passed. Sometimes he stopped to watch her.

Once she held out her hand. He pressed his own to it as he had before, a sort of greeting. Nastaran remembered all that the Lost one had shared of Talis’ memories, and her heart clenched.

I wish I could make amends, she thought, and, *oh. So that is what Kirian meant.*

She puzzled over how she might seek forgiveness from one who was Lost. One night as the wind blew soft and almost warm, Nastaran walked through the sea-scoured remains of the wildwood. She turned at a sound and saw a now familiar figure swimming through the unwater of the Dragomir, twisting gracefully to avoid the ensnaring tangle of dead branches.

Like a wild thing, the Lost one sensed her gaze and stilled, turning its inhuman eyes on her, those eyes of well-deep black. Carefully, Nastaran moved toward the Lost one.

“I—I beg your pardon,” she said, coming to stand before the Lost one, whose tail waved gently in the water. Slow, soft, Nastaran knelt, looking up at him. How could one ask forgiveness, or give it, when one could not speak, the other could not understand?

“My Talent is of no use here,” Nastaran said, a bitter chuckle welling

from her throat. “After all, I already know what happened to you. It does me no good to—share—”

Struck by a thought, she reached out a hand impulsively, and the Lost one fitted his own against it. The gills in his neck flared wide.

“Whatever you wish to know,” she whispered, “ask for it and I will try to give it to you. I owe you that much.”

Reversing the flow of memories was difficult; she had done it only rarely, and certainly never with one who was Lost. But she persisted, her thoughts turning to the moments she had shared with Talis.

Their first meeting—her awkward questions, and subsequent embarrassment at their second meeting. Her growing fascination with him.

The fear she had held for Talis as he clung to his sorrows.

Kirian’s answer to her distress.

Nastaran allowed the Lost one to see the hopes she had harbored, the misunderstandings caused by her firm belief that she understood him, the sorrow for the pain she had caused him. Soon, it seemed that their perspectives met and melded, and each was part of a still larger whole.

Indeed, I had not thought to share my own burden of memory, she thought, surprised. The strain she’d borne up under for so long began to lift as understanding grew between them.

At last, their shared memory reached the final moment. Nastaran’s hasty interpretation of Talis’ expression merged with his sudden realization, and as Nastaran looked into the Lost one’s inhuman eyes, she thought she saw a flicker of surprise run across his face. Breaking away, the Lost one arched into a somersault and whirled upward through the stark, stripped branches of the thicket.

“Wait!” Shaken by the sudden loss of contact, Nastaran was too slow

to prevent his leaving. Panic surged through her. *I thought he was beginning to understand,* she thought as she lurched through the grasping undergrowth, trying to keep pace with the ever-more-distant figure of the Lost one. *I thought I was beginning to understand!*

She followed, tearing through the forest like a hunted hind—or perhaps the hound that hunted. At the edge of her range, the Lost one paused.

“What—what is this place?” she asked, bewildered.

Before her rose an edifice of red stone. It had clearly been damaged by the flood, its towers tumbled, its windows empty and staring—yet still it retained something of its former glory.

The Lost one flicked its tail, waiting on the threshold before warped double doors, intricately carved of dark wood. She walked forward and peered inside. The faint light of the stars did not penetrate the murk.

Nastaran followed the Lost one inside, feeling her way like one struck blind. The faint movement before her was her only clue to the Lost one’s whereabouts.

“What are we doing here?” she asked aloud. “What am *I* doing here?”

A webbed hand grabbed hers, slick and strong. She stumbled in the direction it pulled her—up stairs to the second floor, where a little more light came through the windows—and the gaping holes in the ceiling. The Lost one led her through what had once been a high-vaulted apse. Once they reached the altar, miraculously untouched amid the destruction, the Lost one stopped. Enfolding her hand with both of his, the Lost one waited.

Timidly, Nastaran reached out in memory, and the Lost one responded in kind, impressions mingling. It was easier now, and Nastaran bowed her head as she relived the moment when she had fled.

“You thought me strong,” she whispered, “but I am weak as ever a mortal could be. Forgive me.”

Light flared red beneath her closed eyelids, and she opened them in shock.

A flame burned on the altar, bright as a star come down to earth. The Lost one’s hands tightened on hers, but he did not turn away. His head sunk to his breast, hair swirling around him, hiding his face. Then he looked up at the pillar of impossible flame, and his mask-like face stretched into a smile, row on row of teeth filling his mouth, delicate scales wrinkling at the corners of his eyes.

Nastaran stared at the fire on the altar, and saw at its blue-white heart a face she knew well.

“Kirian,” she breathed.

Forgiveness has been sought and granted by the one whose was the hurt, he said. Seek no further for redemption.

Nastaran turned to the Lost one and stood soundless, for his eyes were slowly changing, white creeping back into their corners, iris and pupil turning the black of Talis’ own eyes. She glanced down at his hands holding hers; the fingertips had flushed a human hue once more, the scales receding more and more quickly.

“How?” she asked, amazed, pulling away to stare as the rapid changes revealed Talis’ true form once more, now clothed in tattered rags. His dark eyes were dazed, eyebrows twisted in confusion.

“What happ—why are you—where, where are we?”

Talis looked around, and his gaze stopped on the flame above the altar. He took a step back on newly restored feet, turning to Nastaran.

“Wha—what?” he stuttered as he glanced warily at Kirian.

Nastaran’s smile was wide enough that her cheeks tinged. “Talis,” she said, and stretched out a hand. “Talis, shall I show you what you missed?”

Hesitantly, Talis reached out, and Nastaran’s most recent memories—the Lost one’s webbed hand reaching for hers, his flight to the abandoned temple, Kirian’s words, the Lost one’s transformation back into Talis—all rushed through her in a joyous jumble.

“I was Lost?” he blurted as her recollections ended. Nastaran nodded. “The last thing I remember was—” He paused and looked down at their clasped hands, and Nastaran watched, fascinated, as his ears turned scarlet.

“—Was searching for you,” he said at last.

“I am sorry that I left,” Nastaran told him, her mood turning somber. “—I was foolish, and afraid, and . . .” This time, she was the one who blushed.

They looked at each other awkwardly, hand-in-hand. Nastaran turned to glance at Kirian, who was smiling at them, amused.

Show him, Kirian urged. Teach him the Way. His smile turned knowing, and he added, *Walk it together.*

Nastaran was sure her face was aflame, and not from Kirian’s radiance.

“Am I still able to follow your Way, having fallen so far?” asked Talis.

As you were restored to humanity, so you may continue to ascend, if it is your will, said Kirian. *Nastaran will show you.*

With that, Kirian left them, and Talis turned back to Nastaran.

“What did he mean?” he asked, all his attention suddenly centered on her.

Nastaran gaped. “Uh—um,” she stammered, biting her lip as she looked down, then away, taking a deep breath that shuddered through her sleeping body’s lungs.

“Why did you ask me to walk the Dragomir at your side?” he persisted, hand clenching around her own.

Slowly, Nastaran looked him in the eye once more. “I’d hoped that someday we might find a way to meet,” she said, “. . . meet in the place where only those who have ascended by the Way may go.”

“Is that so?” asked Talis quizzically, tilting his head.

Nastaran’s lips curved into a wondering smile. “I hadn’t thought it possible, but you are no longer Lost.” She reached out as if to trace Talis’s cheek—stopped just short. “Forgive me?” she asked again.

Talis bit his lip and tangled a hand in her wild hair, letting it play out between his fingers. “You left,” he said.

“I did.”

“I found you, though I was Lost.”

“Yes.”

“I already tried giving up,” Talis told her.

“I noticed,” she replied drily.

“I won’t again,” he said, his fingers weaving through hers. “If there is even the smallest chance that we might meet, I will seek it out.”

Nastaran watched him carefully. “You do not fear me anymore,” she observed.

“How could I fear the one whose sorrow restored me?” asked Talis, a crooked smile spreading across his face. “I would have remained Lost if our paths had not crossed. If you had not pursued me.”

“You might not have become Lost in the first place,” Nastaran felt compelled to point out.

Talis said nothing, but his lips twisted skeptically.

Here in the ruins of a forgotten temple, the Dragomir was still and silent, and Kirian’s radiance was slowly fading. Looking at one another, they turned to leave.

“I am a broken vessel,” said Talis, as they walked out the warped front doors together. “I cannot contain all the sorrows I have seen.”

“If you are a broken vessel, then what am I?” asked Nastaran. “My work is to share the burden of remembrance with souls that have lost their way, to help them walk paths I have not trod. I am filled to overflowing with memory not my own, so much that I scarcely remember who I truly am.”

She paused, and Talis waited.

“I want to walk beside you here,” she said at last. “I want you to walk with me in the waking world. Help me learn how to lift your burdens, as you have done with mine.”

“If you are willing,” said Talis, settling his palm against hers as he smiled tentatively. “Walk with me now?”

“Certainly. Until we meet in truth.”

*Pilgrims meet in dreams
Broken, but still enduring
Lost, found, remembered.*

Lady of the Lake with Rings and Stars

by R. Mac Jones



Maidens of the Sea

by Wendy Nickel

Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky in morning, sailor take warning.

The day dawns as red as fresh blood on a fishing boat's deck. I know when I see it, we'll have to work quickly. The grandmothers rouse us from our beds—Molly and Magdalena and Midge and me—and before we can rub the sand-sprinkled sleep from our eyes, they've bundled us up in our slickers and boots and rushed us down the sand-speckled beach.

"First day of spring!" Grandmother Gertie throws her hands to the skies, her hair flailing behind her. The others join in, all three looking every bit the part of *Macbeth's* Weird Sisters.

"And what a fierce one it will be!" Grandmother Ginny licks her fingertips to taste the breeze. "You're sure to find some vigorous catches today!"

We shiver against the biting wind and nod to one another, still in that surreal, half-dreaming state that so often accompanies a much-anticipated day. Yes, our task will be more difficult this year, but those creatures caught amid the peril of a spring squall *are* generally the strongest and healthiest. It's a good omen, one I tuck close to my heart among all my hopes and wishes and dreams for the day.

The hands into which I gather my supplies are red and raw, each blister a lesson in patience and perseverance, each scar a test of my strength. Today we will find out if it all is worth it.

"Bet you'll catch the best one, Moira," Magdalena whispers in my ear. Even after an entire year of bearing that name, it still takes a mo-

ment to recognize it as mine.

* * *

"We'll call you Moira," Grandma Gertie said exactly one year ago, a day that was both sharp and hazy in my memories, forever ago and just past. She handed me a bundle of supplies—woven lengths of scratchy sheep's wool, spools of thread by which to bind it, sandals of leather, a rain slicker, boots, and a single brown bowl and a spoon.

"You're welcome to call me by my real name," I said, testing out the boundaries of this strange, new place. Wondering what they'd called Lydia here. She'd trusted these old ways, the ways of her mother and grandmother and the generation before, but this world was still new to me, and I still had my doubts.

"We encourage the young women who come to the village to take on a new name," Grandma Gertie said in her matter-of-fact way, "as a symbol of your new life. Now go on and get settled in. It's almost time to bring in this year's catch, and you're not going to want to miss that."

* * *

"Well, go on then!" Grandma Greta says now, prodding us with her umbrella in sharp, rhythmic jabs until somehow, we're at the end of the pier and clambering aboard the *Marieur*.

In the bottom of the fishing boat lie four nets—one for each of us—woven by hand on the winter days when ice and hail kept us from the sea. My net contains cords the same shade of red as my hair and

beads of amber to match my eyes. Each bit of glass represents a characteristic or trait, and I hold it up, examining each segment one final time. The net is strong, the bindings firm. It's of better quality than the nets we usually use, for today we wouldn't be bringing home cod or herring or mackerel. No, we have bigger, more important catches to snare on this, the first day of spring.

We push off from shore, far across the sea, taking turns with the ropes and rigging, working in synchronization as we've practiced for the past twelve months. Even Magdalena does her share today, which was half a miracle in itself, considering her usual tendency to day-dream or sit on the railing, plaiting her ebony locks and singing morbid sea-shanties rather than joining in the work.

When we're far enough out, so far that the grandmothers' village is but a dull, dark stone on the shimmering beach, we throw down the anchor and set out our nets. They will be approaching soon, those strange, mysterious creatures we've only seen once before—on this day precisely one year ago. Only this time, the prize will be ours. Anticipation burns through my blood with each furious beat of my heart. The boat rocks steadily, as if to calm and soothe us as we watch the horizon, awaiting that which will change our lives forever.

* * *

"There's a contract," Lydia had warned me as she wound her station wagon through the narrow mountain pass. "Read all the terms carefully. Make sure this is what you really want. That you're willing to pay the price."

She glanced into the rearview mirror to check on her sleeping son, bundled in the car seat in the back. A maternal gesture, easily dismissed, at least then.

"Don't worry; I've got this." I'd been in ROTC and gone through boot camp with guys twice my size; if I could handle that, I could cer-

tainly handle this.

I'd told my other friends I was spending the year overseas, somewhere secluded, without WiFi. The truth was just too much to believe—even for me, sometimes. Coming from anyone but Lydia, I wouldn't believe it, either, but I knew her too well. I'd known her family since I was small enough to pedal my secondhand tricycle down the block while my own mother put on her makeup and headed out on the town with her friends, leaving me behind to watch *Sesame Street* alone.

Lydia's dad was a handsome, hardworking man who wouldn't step foot outside the city, a quirk that I'd never thought to question. He doted on her mom and brought her flowers each week to brighten her desk—giant, smiling-face sunflowers or perfect, marbled tulips that made the whole house smell like spring. His gentle devotion never waned, not even when Lydia's older brother turned eighteen and disappeared, leaving everyone to speculate what dark secrets the family kept hidden that would make such a boy want to flee.

"If I didn't think you could do it, I wouldn't send you," Lydia said, her voice warping and bending under the words' weight. "But it isn't just about being tough and strong; goodness knows you've got that down."

"All I need to know is whether it's worth it."

"Every day."

Around us, the mountains opened and gave way to the sea, and the taste of salt filled the air. I inhaled deeply and thought one last time of the world I was leaving behind: not much more than a 9 to 5 job, piles of leftover take-out boxes, and a tank full of goldfish I always forgot to feed.

Lydia pulled her car off the road, the gravel crunching beneath the tires. "See that path that disappears around the cliff? Walk along

there until you reach the village."

We said our goodbyes and I set off toward the sea, my bag slung over my shoulder and the crashing of the waves muffling all other sounds. I didn't look back to see how long Lydia would wait. It didn't matter; no matter the terms of this contract, I'd take it. I had to take the risk. I had to at least *try*. It'd worked for Lydia and it'd worked for her mother, why shouldn't it work for me, too?

"You should know, though," Lydia called after me, her words hurried, as if she'd tried to cork them up, but they'd burst out anyway. "Happiness comes with its own price. You can't lose that which you don't have."

* * *

They arrive with the storm.

No sooner do we see the odd ripple on the surface, the bright glimmer of scales beneath the waves, than the wind picks up and the rain pours down, mixing with the rolling waves.

"Hold onto your nets!" I shout over the crashing sea. Closer and closer, the creatures come, moving together as a single mass of silver.

Beside me, Molly whimpers. "Maybe we should wait until the storm has passed."

I don't answer. We've asked before, and the grandmothers had answered in their matter-of-fact way. It has to be today.

"When fate comes knocking, you can't put it on hold," Grandmother Ginny had said.

"This," Grandmother Greta had said, "is nothing more than a test of your dedication, your daring, your resourcefulness, your determination, your *faith*. Those who fail at this would have been unfit for the

reward." The other grandmothers had just nodded knowingly.

Now the time is upon us.

The rush of swimming creatures rock the boat more than the storm, and they swirl around, as if curious about what would bring such a small boat with four young women out to these waters on this first morning of spring.

"I've got one!" Magdalena calls out first, the muscles in her arms bulging under the strain of her net. "I got one! Someone, help me pull it in!"

Midge and I exchange a glance. She can't be serious. Grandmother Greta has warned us of once, long ago when one woman had assisted another in pulling in her catch. The end result was a tragic tale of misplaced loyalties and burning jealousy. It was far from the happy ending we've been promised. Perhaps she'd told the story for Magdalena's sake—beautiful Magdalena, whose cheerful disposition makes us love her despite her shortcomings and weaknesses.

No, there can be no question as to whose catch it was, so Midge and I pretend not to hear, averting our eyes to our own nets and the fierce, silver creatures swarming beneath us.

When something finally snags in my net, the tug bites my palms, reopening old calluses. Tears stream down the corner of my eyes. Is this it? Is it time? Has all my work and waiting paid off? The grandmothers' lessons echo in my head. My elbows rattle against the edge of the boat. I grit my teeth, straining against its power.

Magdalena struggles with her net and I with mine, with Molly between us, looking back and forth, frightened and agape. Her fingers are entwined in the corner of her net, but her attention is on me, on Magdalena, on the rain-streaked skies. Everywhere but where it should be. She looks back to the shore and beyond, her eyes betraying her reluctance, her doubts.

"Molly! Pay attention!" I cry, but it's too late.

With a swift, almost graceful *swish*, Molly—still clinging to her net—is swept off her feet. Before any of us can react, she's gone, deep into the sea, where even her mustard-yellow slicker can't be seen.

* * *

Molly had sat beside me that first day of spring a year earlier, my very first ally in this strange place. We'd sat on the dune at a distance with Grandmother Ginny, watching that year's maidens bring their catches ashore and talking about what we'd hoped to find here.

"I'm most afraid of failing, aren't you?" Molly confided with an openness and ease that startled me. "It doesn't seem quite fair, does it, that the ones who fail should have to stay here, apart from the rest of the world? Just look at their little village out there on the peninsula. Doesn't it look like such a lonely place?"

"If I had to be banished from the world, this wouldn't be the worst place to live out that sentence." My apartment back home with its stack of dirty dishes and the couch bottomed-out on one side seemed a lot lonelier than the tidy, wind-swept village.

Molly laughed. "I suppose you're right. And someone needs to ensure the grandmothers are taken care of."

The terms of the contract were not what I'd expected, but that hadn't stopped me from signing. If I failed, I'd spend my days walking the beach and tending the grandmothers' huts, which didn't sound like a half-bad life when compared with what I was used to, but the price of success. ... I'd felt like the maiden in Rumpelstiltskin as I'd put the old-fashioned quill pen to the parchment.

"Oh, look! They're back!" Molly said, jumping to her feet and pointing. "But three went out; where's the other?"

"Dangerous monsters swim among them," Grandmother Ginny said.

"Hunters lurking in the shadows, hiding themselves in the flurry of scales and fins."

"How will we know which is which?" Molly frowned, shading her eyes against the sun's glare.

"Simple: the monsters are those who wish to harm you."

* * *

"Molly!" I scream into the wind and sea, as if somehow my voice could overpower the storm and demand it return her to our boat. I lean over the edge, reaching out toward the waves, grasping for those moments just past when she was here and safe and alive.

Midge shakes her head fiercely, gesturing to my net. Just in time, too, for the next tug would have been too much for such a tenuous grasp.

Molly is gone. Gone forever as if she was never here. And despite the aching, jagged hole it'd punctured in my heart, there isn't a thing I can do. I focus my attention on the net before me, hoping to forget, even if just for a moment. Slowly, ever so slowly, my determination returns. Hand over hand and blinking back tears, I pull the net in.

Vaguely, I sense Magdalena and Midge struggling with their nets beside me. Magdalena pulls her catch into the boat, and it thumps around near our feet. She throws a thick burlap blanket over it so that it won't flop out and collapses, panting, at the back of the boat.

I make steady progress. With each rock of the boat, each crash of water against the side, I pull my net further in until I can nearly touch the creature's shimmering scales, pressed against the amber beads. At the sight of them, my heart thrums with anticipation.

Midge cries out. She kneels at the boat's prow—arms outstretched, hands empty, face raised pleadingly to the sea. I have to look away.

She's dropped her net.

Midge's defeat fans the fire in my own heart. I didn't come all this way to end up alone and empty-handed. With one mighty tug, I haul the creature into the boat. I pant, gasping, my head mere inches from its own. It stares at me with unlidged eyes, its gills opening and closing, gasping for breath. It's nearly six feet long and healthy and strong. A fine catch, from all appearances. I close my eyes. The worst is over.

"Come on, then." When I catch my breath, I tug a burlap blanket over my prize. "Let's get to shore."

Midge sits, weeping, as we struggle against the wind, making our way, slowly, slowly to the sandy beach.

The grandmothers meet us with cheers and consolations, their umbrellas shielding their gray heads from the diminishing rain. With a *tsk*, Grandmother Ginny tucks Midge's blanket around her shoulders and leads her down the beach toward the village on the peninsula—her recompense for the opportunity.

Magdalena and I watch her until she disappears. I stand there, my hands bleeding and calloused, the salt and sand of the sea sticking to me as a hundred thousand thoughts swirl around my head, as hot, angry tears of grief cloud my vision.

I understand now, for the first time, what it means to truly lose someone. Yet how could the rending of my heart after losing someone like Molly or Midge, whom I'd known for such a short time, possibly compare to losing someone after years of happiness together? How could it compare to losing a husband ... a child ...?

I understand now what Lydia had meant. I understand the silent pain in her mother's eyes that summer her brother went missing.

"Grandmother Gertie," I say, grabbing her wrinkled hand in half-panic. "Is everything settled? There's no going back?"

The grandmothers' wrinkled countenances may read like well-loved

books to each other, but they are a mysterious, forgotten language to me.

"Cold feet, Moira?" Grandmother Gertie asks gently. "I thought you were the strong one."

"I don't know that I'm strong enough to bear this. Is there still time to change my mind?"

"You can walk away at any time, but first, consider what you'd be missing."

Tired of gasping with aqueous gills, the creatures flopping in the bottom of our boat complete their transformation. Gills disappear into their necks. Noses form to breathe air. Muscular legs take the place of tail fins. Arms grow, thick and strong. Faces morph, developing eyelids and chins and noble brows, until what once were strange and magnificent creatures of the deep now look something like us.

* * *

Lydia had returned from her sabbatical accompanied by a tall, dark stranger. He held open doors, he got along with her friends, and in every quirk and freckle and shade of his personality, he seemed utterly, perfectly suited for her.

I brought Sean to their wedding—Sean whom I'd met on Tinder, whom all my friends thought was a catch because he liked skiing and his parents owned a vineyard out west. Sean, whose old girlfriend happened to be a waitress at the reception hall that day. After cake was served and her shift was over, she joined us at our table ("You don't mind, do you?"), and when the dancing began, he brought her on the floor ("For old times' sake"), and before the final dance, he slipped out with her without even saying goodbye.

Lydia caught me crying into my fifth glass of wine long after the other guests had departed.

"What's the secret?" I asked. I pleaded. I begged.

And finally, reluctantly, she told me.

* * *

The man holding my red-corded net looks at me with eyes that are kind and gentle, full of mirth and faithfulness and all the qualities I'd woven into it to attract him. In the waves, I hear Lydia's answer when I asked her if it was worth it: "Every day."

"The time has come to take your husband," Grandmother Gertie says, looking pointedly at me. "Take him far from the sea, so that he will not be tempted to return to it. Take him over the mountains to the city where you were born, and remain there. Raise children of your own as you were raised, until the time comes for your sons to return to the sea, for they were not meant to spend their entire lives on the land, and one day, its summons will be too strong."

He holds out his hand, and I know that, in taking it, I will be taking the biggest risk yet—bigger than leaving my home in the city, bigger than all the dangers of the sea.

For you cannot lose that which you don't have, and the price of happiness is the knowledge that you'll one day lose it.

But some things are worth the risk.

I clasp his hand, and together we walk up the mountain. The journey is long, but it will give us time to become acquainted. As we reach the ridge, I glance back at the grandmothers' village. The storm has passed, and sun shines down upon the shimmering sands of the beach.

"One last glance?" he asks in a voice as deep and soothing and vibrant as the sea.

"One last glance," I say, though I know it's not forever. The seasons will pass; joys and sorrows will come and go.

The losses will break my heart.

But one day, when he is gone and I'm alone once again, I'll return, a grandmother, to pass on to my own granddaughters the ancient knowledge of life, of love, of the sea.

Crackle Ball

by Marisca Pichette

Cinder is always dying.

She rolls away from the rest of us,
her neat waist studded with
pearls the color of ash, her
delicate feet splayed
in the hopes that she can hold on
just a little bit more.

She is dying even when the flames are bright
windows around dancing princes
and princesses glowing red
and orange
and yellow. She dies
while we pirouette
to the music
of her burning.

Cinder falls away, away
onto brick, over iron,
crusted, corroded,
her feet crumble as the fire
leaves her, her footsteps a trail of ash
at midnight.

While Cinder falls, her sister stands
at the window
and watches.

Ember burning bright, her gown
rash red, her hair licked purple with heat.
She blinks her blue eyes slowly
as she accepts her sister's
defeat.

Cinder screams as she rolls,
her white dress
fading grey,
lace crumbling to dust.

When she finally hits the bottom
her head smacks down
hard, charcoal hair smearing the ground
black.

Ember doesn't cry.
Her face is dry,
flames tucked neatly
behind her ears.

We let the ball continue after Cinder's fall.

She was not one of us,
dressed as she was in colorless clothes.
She was
too skinny, too round.
How did she expect to stand?
How could she expect not to fall?

Her dress was patched from dreams and delusions,
her hair nothing like ours. She was an outsider,
gifted but naïve.

Ember stands at the window until the last light
fades from Cinder's body.

We keep going,
twirling over the coals, our feet stained
black
by the ground
as we dance.

You Will Be Better

by Alexandra Grunberg

Azealia did not know why her mother made such a big deal about her travelling in a ‘horseless carriage’ until she saw the monstrosity parked on the road in front of their house. It loomed, an indistinct but hulking shadow in the sick grey light of the early morning. Thick black smoke rose from the rear of the vehicle, accompanied by a rhythmic panting sound, like the carriage was a horse itself, over-exerted and quite sick. Azealia preferred the carriages she transported her sisters in when they travelled across the countryside.

A man in a coat the same colour as the soot that stained it at cuffs and collar gently helped her into the space within, leaving black smudges on her pale pink gloves. It was like being fed into the mouth of a dying creature, the inside not wet but as hot as fevered breath. She could have believed the man’s hand had trembled because he was afraid of Azealia’s fate once she entered the claustrophobic interior. But from the way he nearly ran to the front of the carriage, turning too much attention to various levers and wheels that clicked and spun nimbly under his attentions, she knew that the truth was he was afraid of her.

Her mother’s face peered in through the glass window of the carriage’s shut door, eyes as wide as they were when she caught Azealia and her sisters returning from one of the little trips.

“It’s going to be better,” she said. Azealia nodded, though it seemed like her mother was trying to reassure herself more than her daughter. “The School will make you better.”

Azealia did not wave to her mother as the carriage’s panting grew in intensity and it began to rumble away, leaving a billowing trail of

thick smoke behind them. It obscured the last views she could have had of the place she had lived in for the entire fifteen years of her life. She did not have any strong feelings for the towering building that always seemed too small with so many girls running up and down the great staircases. She did not wish for the smoke to clear to see if any of her sisters had realized she was gone and were perhaps peeking out of their windows at the strange creature that was carting her away. But she could clearly see the trees that lined the road away from her home, gnarled with twisted branches that made perfect steps and handholds to carry her to new heights. She knew the best trees, and they knew her.

Azealia thought her crying had been silent until the man passed back a soot-stained handkerchief to her. She wiped her tear-stained cheeks with it, feeling the grit stick to her skin.

“What’s yer name, kitten?” asked the man.

“Azealia,” she sniffled. “Azealia Penn. And you?”

“Carver,” he said, though she could not tell if that was his fore or surname.

“Pleased to meet you,” she whispered.

Carver twitched in his seat. She wondered if she sounded different than other girls. Girls who did not have their own hidden wrongness. If she did, she could not hear it.

“The city is a marvellous place,” said Carver. “You could see somethin’ new every day. And interestin’ people are always arrivin’, full o’

stories to tell.”

Azealia tried to think of herself as an interesting person. She felt small and dirty.

“Do you live in the city?” she asked.

“My ’ole life,” said Carver, nodding.

“Do you like it?”

The man brought the carriage to a halt as several cows crossed the road, the sound of their lowing almost completely covered by the coughs and sputters as the carriage released an even thicker plume of smoke into the air.

“You get used to it,” he said.

* * *

Azealia used to think her house was tall. It was taller than most of the trees. But it would have been dwarfed under the gaze of the glass-lined towers that rose on either side of the road, displaying the people running around within the floors she could see, promising hundreds more on the levels that soared above her head.

The transition to the city was sudden. They crossed under a tunnel, a tunnel that Carver helpfully and frightfully informed her carried them beneath a great lake, and then emerged into the light and the bustle. There were many carriages like their own, all belching their black smoke, the same kind of smoke that rose from the tops of several of the buildings. She was surprised she could still see the sun barely cutting through the streaming swirls. She shuddered to imagine what it would be like to walk outside here when it rained.

“What causes all that smoke?”

Carver laughed until he realized she was serious.

“It’s the coal burnin’,” he said. “Surely you ’ave a coal oven at ’ome?”

“This city surely isn’t run on one little coal oven,” she said and did not understand why Carver laughed again. “How does this all work?”

Carver went into a long explanation, the words familiar, the order unfamiliar. She knew coal, she knew it burned, she knew that somehow it created the energy that lit up the world around them, but when he tried to explain in detail his voice turned to an incomprehensible drone. It was all so much more complicated than it had to be. But, looking out the window, she had to admit that the results were wondrous.

She had a television at home but had never seen those same advertisements displayed in billboards that covered entire blocks and were sometimes reflected right onto the smoke in the sky. She had her own personal sonic that could stream bands as they played from their distant concerts, but she had never seen the concerts themselves, live performances on every corner broadcasting across oceans and continents. The songs blended in a cacophony that she could neither tune out nor tune in to. She did not notice her favourite band, four sisters who shared the same artificially red hair like poisoned apples from a witch-centred fairy tale, until the carriage was already turning the corner away from them, leaving their wild crooning behind.

Everything here was bigger, more real. She felt like, until that moment, she had only been exposed to the shadows of life. The glare of the sun on glass made her clasp her hands over her eyes, smudging her face further, but comforting her in the darkness.

Azealia heard the engine cough before they shuddered to a stop. She dropped her hands from her eyes as Carver opened the door of the carriage.

“Is this the School?” she asked, panic rising in her throat. “Is this where I’m going to live?”

There were people squished together outside and inside the building,

not just young girls, but grown women, men, families, workers. It looked like a jail, one that could not contain its inhabitants. They must have been too dangerous to control. Like her.

Carver chuckled before the lump in Azealia's throat could press out tears.

"This is just a teashop," said Carver. "We 'ave a bit o' a ways to go on our journey. I thought you might like somethin' to eat."

Azealia's stomach rumbled louder than the panting carriage.

* * *

They squeezed inside, the bulk of Carver's body acting as a kind of protective forcefield around Azealia, though he tried to keep space between them. When she tripped on the lip of the door and gripped his arm for balance, she felt the man flinch. But before she could apologize, Carver began to laugh, and his booming voice echoed through a room already filled with the conversations, arguments, and gossip of the groups squished around tables inside.

"Davey, m'boy!" Carver shouted.

A thin boy looked up from where he hunched over a cup of tea and did not seem entirely pleased to see Carver. If Carver noticed, he did not let on, and guided Azealia to the table where Davey sat.

"I see you've brought another freak for the School," said Davey with a nod toward Azealia.

He looked about her age, though he was much thinner and shorter than she was. Sandy hair escaped a loose knot at the base of his neck, trailing to a soot-stained shirt. She was distracted by the image stitched on its front. It was a black and yellow lamp similar to the ones that hung from the ceiling of the shop, though the iron of the lamps above her was wrought into twisting fantastic designs, while the one on his shirt was all straight, hard lines. There was no logo on

it or advertisement, but it seemed too stern to be a strictly creative choice. Fairly boring, poor artistry, and for some reason that last realization filled her with dread. She was so busy puzzling that she did not catch Davey's use of the word *freak* until Carver had already started talking.

"Azealia is startin' up at the School," said Carver, waving down a waitress with deep bags under her eyes and hair as greasy as her apron. "Davey works there when 'e can, does odd jobs for the Headmistress, repairs and such."

"You're one of her *servants*, then?" asked Azealia.

She had no real disdain for servants, but she felt cheered by the way Davey's face twisted before he responded.

"I do maintenance--"

"A pot of Earl Grey, please," Azealia smiled at the waitress, silencing Davey, who glowered and shrugged lower in his seat.

"Black coffee," said Carver, and the waitress nodded before weaving to the back of the shop. As she slammed a door that must have led to the kitchen behind her, Azealia saw a crack grow in the wall behind a group of women, possibly nursemaids with their wards. A thin line of smoke swirled out of it. "It'll be nice to 'ave a friendly face when you arrive, right Azealia?"

As the women laughed over prams that seemed too large to have fit through the front door, the crack grew longer, wider. Azealia frowned.

"You one o' those ones gets feelin's?" asked Davey, curiosity softening some of his natural leer. "There's a girl there now like that. She 'elped me win a fiver at the races."

"I'm sure she doesn't 'elp you like that anymore, though," said Carver, and Davey nodded to agree.

“No, no *feelings* for me,” said Azealia, shaking her head. “I ...”

She realized that both Carver and Davey were sitting straight up, stiff, as they listened. They were afraid of her. It should have bothered her more. It definitely should not have helped soothe the dread she felt or made her blush with a strange sense of pride.

“If all goes well, you’ll never know why she’s even ’ere,” said Carver.

Azealia did not think she would be forced to contain herself all the time at the School, just more than she could manage at home without professional help. But Carver looked very sure, and Davey looked very smug, and she was not relishing the way their relief made her feel smaller.

“Is it okay if I stretch my legs for a bit?” she asked. “They’re still rather cramped from the trip.”

“Sure, sure,” nodded Carver. “I’ll give a shout when the tea’s set.”

Azealia nodded her appreciation, though she doubted the other patrons would appreciate Carver’s voice interrupting their tea. Though, maybe they did not notice. No one even looked up when Azealia inevitably bumped into them as she walked by, making her way to the back of the room, to the crack in the wall. One man even spilled some of his tea on his suit, but he did not acknowledge Azealia’s whispered apology. Azealia felt bad, though she supposed the brown stain was barely visibly against the layer of soot that dusted the man, from the tip of his top hat to the shoes he tapped anxiously on the grimy floor.

None of the women seemed to notice the crack in the wall, all invested in their conversation or quieting the little ones in their prams, who seemed as distressed by their surroundings as Azealia felt. She hovered by the edge of the group and wondered if she should warn one of them about the crack, if they did not notice. If it was even

something to worry about. Maybe it happened all the time. As she deliberated, her gaze was drawn to one of the soft, round faces in their pram, the only baby who was not crying or babbling their upset and confusion. Two large brown eyes, as dark as her own, stared up at her.

“She likes you,” said the woman sitting closest to the pram, wrapped in a sickly yellow shawl.

“She’s beautiful,” said Azealia. “Is she ... Are you her nurse or-”

“I’m her mother,” said the woman.

Her voice was sharp. Azealia blushed. The woman sitting next to the mother, tall with long black hair done in a French braid that rested over her shoulder, smiled.

“With the coal price increase, we all had to fire the superfluous help,” she said.

“I would have said Nanny Rae was necessary staff, but the old man sure deemed her superfluous,” said a curly haired woman at the far side of the table with an especially rowdy babe.

Everyone in the group laughed and nodded their agreement, and the mother softened in the shared discomfort of her friends.

“You think they could come up with a solution for the coal problem,” she said, tightening the shawl around her shoulders.

“They don’t want a solution,” said the curly haired woman. “They want us to keep paying for the coal.”

“Are you and Davey courting?” asked the woman with the black braid.

Her attention had never left Azealia. She smiled at her like the two

shared a secret.

“Perhaps you’re already thinking of your own babe and pram,” teased the mother.

The women giggled as Azealia grew red.

“No, no, I just met him,” Azealia stuttered. “I just arrived here, and he works ... well, I’m here because-”

“You’re going to the School?” asked the black-haired woman.

Her eyes flashed with something that was not the fear Azealia felt travel through several of the women at the table. Her cheeks went red, though did not seem embarrassed. She seemed angry.

“That’s okay,” said the curly haired woman. “It ... The School makes you better. It made me better.”

“You were sent there, too?” asked Azealia.

“Many of us were students at the School,” said the black-haired woman. “More than you’d think. More than anyone in this city would care to think about.”

“Hush now, Ellen,” said the mother, swatting the woman with her shawl.

“Did you like it?” asked Azealia, sure she should not ask questions, unable to stop herself.

“I wouldn’t have the life I do now without the education I received,” said the curly haired woman, smiling into her pram. “It’s necessary. Don’t you want a family someday? A baby of your own?”

Azealia was not sure if she really wanted a babe for herself. She was not sure what other options there were. But she did notice that the black-haired woman, Ellen, did not seem to have a pram to watch

over.

“Did you like the School?” Azealia asked, taking care to direct her question to Ellen.

Before the woman could respond, the waitress entered the room, balancing a tea tray in one hand, before she slammed the door shut behind her.

The crack widened and with a harsh breaking and tearing sound, the wall began to fall towards them, releasing soot and smoke and a wave of heat.

Several of the women screamed. The mother threw her body over the pram, but Azealia could see the smoke wafting through the gaps in her shawl, the bend of her waist, filling the space that housed the babe. Tears sprung from Azealia’s eyes as ash burned her lashes. The waitress dropped the tea tray, and the already-chipped cups and pot broke into shards at her feet as she tossed her apron over her face. In the midst of the chaos, as patrons began to scream behind them, pushing each other to flee the small shop, Ellen stood up, her face calm. She lifted her hand and turned it, slightly. A gesture of dismissal. Like she had judged the scene in front of her, deemed it below her standards, and expected it to retreat from her presence.

And it did.

The smoke had only been filling the room for a moment, a few seconds at most, and at the twist of Ellen’s hand it retreated backwards into the wall. The wall itself reset to its former, semi-straight position, and the crack decreased in size to an eyesore, instead of a danger. The pot and cups on the ground found themselves back together on the tray, which in turn found itself back balancing on the now baffled waitress’s hand. The crowd that had begun to stampede were now sitting in their seats with expressions that ranged from dazed to frightened.

Azealia had seen women who had *feelings* before, who knew when a

disaster was coming. But she had never seen anyone do what Ellen had done. It was nothing like anything Azealia herself had done. It was fascinating, but most importantly, it meant that Ellen had gone to the School, and it had not made her better.

Before Azealia could say anything more to Ellen, Carver had grabbed her arm and was pulling her towards the exit.

* * *

Azealia entered the dark building, smelling like vinegar from the fish and chips Carver bought them at a drive through. Rain dropped in hard rhythms on the roof and Carver rushed to finish bringing in her luggage. Though lamps lit the small room, lamps built on harsh lines like the picture on Davey's shirt, the air was tinged with darkness, like the inside of the building housed its own personal raincloud.

"You must be Azealia."

The woman's voice was high and breathy, and when Azealia turned she expected it to be coming to her from some distance away, so she was surprised that the woman who spoke was already by her shoulder, peering down at her from an almost unbelievable height. Azealia stumbled a curtsy, but the woman's face did not falter, remaining impeccably neutral. Azealia suppressed a strange urge to spit in her face, just to see if she would react. She suspected that the woman would not.

"Nice to meet you m'am," murmured Azealia, and the woman nodded her approval.

"Headmistress Willoughby," said the woman. "I trust you found the School without issue?"

Azealia nodded. They had to drive through the city, across another river (over it, on a real bridge this time, to Azealia's relief), and up a hill where the School sat like a monument to some ancient, unending war. Azealia's family home was much more isolated, but after the

claustrophobic atmosphere of the city, the solitary building felt terribly lonely in its quiet, dark glow.

"Carver knew the way," said Azealia.

She looked behind her, to a pile of her luggage, a shut door, and the sound of the gasping and huffing of the carriage disappearing. She told herself that she did not even know Carver, not really. There was no reason to feel such a loss at him leaving without saying *goodbye*.

"Men do not like to linger here," said the Headmistress. Down the hall, another door swung open, and Azealia leaned around the woman to see a handsome man dressed in all black hurry down a hallway, not looking up from his feet. The Headmistress's expression faltered, but only for a moment, before she ran her hand across her lips, smoothing her expression. "Most men do not linger here."

A group of girls in dresses that Azealia supposed were white a long time ago but had turned a sickly grey ran inside. They jolted to a halt when they saw the Headmistress and sunk into clumsy curtsies.

"She's new," said one of the girls.

"How very astute, Sydney," said the Headmistress. "Why don't you help her bring her things to her room? You two are dismissed."

The two girls ran up a staircase formed of heavy, dark wood, leaving Sydney below them, frowning at the pile Carver left for them.

"But she's on the fourth floor," said Sydney, fists planted on her hips.

"Surely there are servants who can help?" asked Azealia.

"Helping yourself builds character," said the Headmistress. "The two of you working together will have everything tidied away in no time."

"It would be much easier if I could just ..." Azealia trailed off as the

Headmistress frowned, her eyebrows two sharp lines like dark cracks across her forehead. Azealia's gaze dropped to the floor. "I only meant ... I just got here, you all already know, and it wouldn't hurt anyone."

She did not see the Headmistress's hand move. The pain that burst on her cheek seemed to come from nowhere. But though she had never been slapped before, Azealia knew what had happened. She was too stunned to cry.

* * *

"Never offer to *help*," said Sydney.

It was their final trip up the stairs, carting the last of Azealia's luggage. Sydney plopped down on Azealia's bed. Azealia leaned against one of her cases.

"My mom said the School was going to make me better," said Azealia. "I didn't think anyone would expect perfect. I mean, I can't turn it off completely. That would be like turning off my sight."

"You mean closing your eyes?" asked Sydney.

"No," huffed Azealia. "Maybe more like ... learning how not to walk."

"We're not walking right now."

"Never mind! You don't understand."

"The girls in this School are probably the only ones who understand," said Sydney, sitting up. "If they tell you that you're not allowed to see, close your eyes. If they tell you that you're not allowed to walk, sit down. If they tell you that you're not allowed to breathe, hold your breath until you faint. And if they tell you that you're not allowed to *help*, even if it would make things a lot easier if you did, then you don't help."

Azealia wiped her hand on her skirt. The soot had mixed with the rain as it landed on her luggage, and the combination had formed a thin black paste that coated everything they had to cart to her room.

"What if I don't know how to turn it off?"

"None of us knew how," said Sydney. "That's why you're here. I can help you unpack if you'd like. I'm supposed to be cleaning out the kitchen, but if I'm helping you then they won't make me."

It took much less time to unpack than it did to organize all her life into transportable compartments. The closet was small, but it fit all the dresses she decided she liked enough to keep. A part of her regretted bringing the ones she liked. She could imagine the rejected garments hanging in her closet at home, perhaps gathering dust, but a much cleaner kind of dust than what they had here.

"You'll get your uniform dress tomorrow," said Sydney. "Think of it like an apron. Or armour."

They finished folding her t-shirts and jeans for the weekends into the drawers of a dresser that doubled as a side table, stacked paper and ink on the desk in the corner, and lay the woven blanket on top of the drab grey bedspread. Azealia and Sydney sat down on the edge of the twin bed, looking out the single window in her room, watching the rain fall in an opaque curtain. There were several other rooms on this top floor, and though Azealia could not tell from their stark closed doors if any were occupied, she thought she could hear the muffled sound of crying from behind one of the walls.

"Are you better now?" asked Azealia, and Sydney shifted her gaze away from the rain. "I mean, obviously you're not perfect or you would have graduated. But ... is it better here?"

Sydney shrugged.

"Better in some ways. Growing up, my parents were sure I was a boy, no matter how much I tried to tell them that they were wrong.

They didn't believe me until the *issues* started." Azealia nodded. Only girls had to deal with these issues, the wrongness. Boys did not need to be sent anywhere to be made better when there was nothing that made them wrong to begin with. Sydney was a girl, no matter what her family had once assumed. "Nobody here questioned what I already knew."

"Makes the issues seem more like a blessing, then," Azealia proposed.

Sydney laughed.

"It mostly felt like they only recognized me as a girl when they had a clear way to punish me for being one," said Sydney. "But there were a few nice days before they shipped me out. I went on a hunting trip with Dad that I actually enjoyed. I had good feelings about where to lead the group. I think he was a little pissed when Mom made plans for me to come to the School."

Azealia remembered when she slipped up in front of her father, the moment he knew. The moment he started screaming. He did not complain when her mother decided to send her away. He had not been in the same room with her since he found her out.

"You won't be much help to him on your hunting trips after you graduate," said Azealia, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice, sure from the way Sydney raised an eyebrow that she had not completely succeeded. "I mean, if the teachers here actually help you—"

"The teachers aren't here to *help* you," said Sydney. "Everyone here wants to *fix* you. They're going to make you into something else because they can't stand what you are. No one can. Don't think of them as people who can help. Don't trust them when they say they want to help. Don't give them anything you don't want them to take away. Your smile. Your kindness. Whatever you want to keep, keep it close and quiet."

"Everyone?"

"I think the Headmistress has already shown you her brand of help," said Sydney, and Azealia's cheek burned again. "But she's not the worst one here."

Azealia thought of that man in black and shivered, though she was not sure why.

"If *everyone* here wants to fix me, does that include you?" said Azealia. "Would it be better if I wasn't friends with you?"

Sydney flashed a smile.

"Definitely don't be friends with me if you want to get *better*," she said, and it sounded like a joke, but Azealia did not get it.

* * *

Azealia thought there would be lessons. She thought they might have classes on control, or meditations on mindfulness, something her mother went on and on about even before Azealia's wrongness manifested. She even harboured a small fear that there might be *experiments*, doctors in grimy coats injecting questionable solutions into her arm or force-feeding her pills or cutting inside her to extract the wrongness. Instead, there was work.

It reminded Azealia of the time her grandmother's cousin was coming to visit, a distant relative who had secured herself a fancy title through marriage, and for a whole week every staff member worked tirelessly to make their house look as un-lived in as possible. In the School, there was no cleaning staff, just the girls on their knees scrubbing the floor, nearly crawling into ovens to scrape away layers of soot, wiping down windows and bannisters, and always bringing up more black dirt. No matter how long they worked, one opened window or door would invite in another layer of smoke that adhered to every surface, demanding they rework the same pieces over and over again. Azealia was sure there was no special guest coming, but they were still forced to tackle a list of chores that had no apparent end. The tension that hung in the air threatened some grave conse-

quence if they did not finish.

Azealia had almost polished a doorknob to something resembling a shine when the man in black swept through, not looking at the girls as he rushed up the stairs to whatever business he had in the School. He left a trail of dirt behind him that dulled the knob to its previous matte grey finish. When she woke that morning, she could still hear a girl crying from somewhere on her floor, though no one emerged from the other bedrooms. Perhaps the man was going to check on her. Azealia wondered what he could do to fix sadness.

The Headmistress interrupted Azealia's wandering mind to ask for a volunteer to help in the stable, and Sydney jumped up and said the two of them would be happy to go. It was not until they were running hand-in-hand through a drizzle that splattered their dresses into a pattern like swirling smoke that Azealia realized that she had never even considered trying to help in her easier, wrong way. She was too busy. There was too much work with too strict instructions to suggest another method, and the mindlessness of the tasks made it too hard to think.

They ran down the side of the hill and Azealia saw a sturdy wooden building nestled at the base. An unpaved road curved from the main entrance of the School down to the stable's great door, and the rain had turned the path to mud. Sydney banged on the door, laughing as she pulled her feet out only to have them sink back in, and Azealia laughed with her at the absurdity of their fruitless efforts to protect their shoes. When the door opened, they both stumbled inside, muddy up to their ankles and hair matted with the thick rain.

"Davey!" Azealia gasped.

She was so pleased to see a familiar face she ignored the way he stepped back from the girls, his arms crossed over his chest. There were several hulking carriages lined up behind him.

"Azealia," Davey nodded.

Davey and Sydney ignored each other.

"I thought this was the stable," said Azealia. "Where are the horses?"

"No horses needed for horseless carriages," said Sydney, quickly, cutting off Davey.

Sydney knelt on the floor of the stable, and Azealia realized that there was an array of mismatched objects on the ground. They seemed to be made out of metal, but all were coated thickly in the grime Azealia was starting to get used to. They were in worse condition than any of the bannisters or floors the girls had spent the day cleaning. She wondered if the School would be this dirty if they ever rested.

"What are these things?" asked Azealia, picking up a long, bar-like object that was surprisingly heavy.

"It's a carriage engine," said Davey. He took the object out of her hand, fingers pressing into the grim at one end, and Azealia was surprised at how deep he could dig into the debris. She realized that the object was a pipe, and it was supposed to be hollow, but the inside was packed solid. "They need a complete disassembled cleaning every month or so. When they get this clogged, they can't work."

"It only takes one of these doodads getting stuck for the whole engine to shut down," said Sydney, already wiping off a rough rectangular shaped piece using the hem of her dress. "Some of these engines get pulled apart once a week."

"Wouldn't it just be easier to use horses?" asked Azealia.

"It's not about doing things the easy way," said Davey, passing the pipe back to her. "It's about doing it the *right* way."

The way he emphasized *right* made Azealia sure he was implying Azealia was wrong. Not just her opinion. Her.

Azealia knelt next to Sydney. Davey did not offer them any rags for cleaning, so she copied Sydney's method, using her dress, staining it

darker and darker as she went. Davey sat up on top of one of the carriages, watching them, apparently bored.

“You could help,” Azealia suggested.

“I’m not supposed to,” said Davey. “You girls are meant to stay busy.”

“Seems inefficient,” Azealia muttered.

“Get used to it,” said Sydney. She smiled up at Davey, a wicked glint in her eye. “You might not want to sit so high up. Something bad could happen.”

Davey hopped down like he had been burned. He leaned against the carriage, hugging himself, eyes wide, before he paced to the carriage at the far end of the stable and began disassembling its engine as well. The pieces he removed were not in as rough a shape as the ones the girls cleaned, and Azealia was sure he was just looking for a reason to stay away from them.

“Did you have a bad feeling?” Azealia whispered. “About Davey?”

“No,” Sydney whispered. “But he’ll never be sure. I’ll get in trouble for teasing, but it’s just too fun not to. The boy scares so easily.”

“I’m not scared!” shouted Davey, too loud for the enclosed space, and he ducked his head, embarrassed. “I’m not scared. I’m used to all o’ that nonsense.”

“How can you be used to it?” asked Sydney, smirking as she continued to clean. “You run away from us every chance you get.”

“My mom was a freak, too,” said Davey.

Sydney paused, only briefly, before she continued cleaning. She no longer seemed interested in Davey, but Azealia’s curiosity was peaked.

“Did your mom attend the School?” asked Azealia.

“Yeah,” said Davey. “I was six. I came with ’er.”

“When did she graduate?”

“She didn’t.”

Sydney was putting more effort than necessary into her cleaning, acting like the work consumed her entirely. Azealia tried to copy her, but her limbs felt heavier now. She did not think someone might not graduate who came to the School. It was supposed to make you better. She thought about the girl crying in her room, the man in black. Davey had paused and was leaning against the carriage, frowning at the floor. Azealia knew she should stay quiet, leave him to his thoughts, but she could not stop the shaking of her hands as the sturdy lamps cast their sick glow through the room.

“If you were six, she must have hidden her issues well for a long time,” said Azealia. “Had her own kind of control over them.”

“No,” said Davey, a dreamy expression softening his features. “She just only used them on me. And I didn’t know anythin’ was weird about it. But after my dad’s family realized he had died, they kicked us out o’ his place. Their place, I guess. And we went to the boardin’ house. Didn’t take too long for the women there to realize she was wrong.”

“What did she do?” asked Azealia.

“She sang to me, soothed me,” said Davey, but then he shook his head, and his face hardened. “I mean, she changed my moods. She could change anyone’s moods to anythin’ that she wanted.”

“But she only wanted to soothe you?” Azealia asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Davey. “What if she got mad some day and wanted to do worse?”

Sydney was glaring at her, a warning, but Azealia could not read it. And she was not sure if she cared to heed it.

“I don’t see how dangerous she could be if she just altered moods,” said Azealia. “I could be much more dangerous than that if I wanted to. Not that I want to.”

Davey looked up, his body swaying towards her and away, caught in a war of fear and confusion.

“What can you do?” he asked.

Sydney was shaking her head, not subtly. Azealia knew she was making the wrong choice. It had been less than a week since she let herself indulge, and she knew it was bad to do it, but she enjoyed it so much. She enjoyed the way Sydney’s mouth dropped open, and Davey’s eyes grew wide, not with terror, but with wonder. Like Azealia was something wonderful.

* * *

The man in black was not looking at Azealia like she was something wonderful.

She did not realize until he sat across from her that he was a minister. And she could not quite say how she knew. His black clothes could have just been stained that way from how often he travelled from the School to the city, in and out the door, trailing the soot with him. But the way he rested his chin on his folded hands as he offered Azealia a smile that did not reach his eyes reminded her of the old man back home who offered wafers by rote. This man was not old. Once, she thought he was handsome. Now, he was terrifying.

“How are you not tired?” she asked, though she knew she was supposed to be the one answering questions, not asking them.

He had entered her room the night after she and Sydney had worked in the stable. She was not sure how long ago that was.

“Practice,” he said. “Discipline. I don’t need any of the extra help you girls meddle with to be strong. Nobody does, not really. But you’ll learn that yourself.”

“How?”

“You’ll keep busy, the right way,” he said. “It will become a habit. Or it won’t. Will you pass me that book?”

She kept her hands in fists at her side. He asked for that book the first time he entered, and when she handed it to him, he shook his head. He wanted her to pass it to him the wrong way. That was what she thought. But when she did, he threw it back at her, and the edge of the book’s hard spine hit her temple. The blood had dried now. She knew that she was not supposed to pass it the way he asked, but he did not leave her room when she refused to pass it the wrong way. She was sure there was no right way to do it, but he would not leave until she figured out the right way to do things. Everything was wrong. Maybe because she was wrong, so wrong she could not hope to know how to be right enough to please this man.

She only drifted into sleep once, fell back onto the bed where she still sat. She had felt something so hot on her wrist and opened her eyes to see the flame of his lighter dancing close to her skin. He still held the lighter loosely in one of his folded hands.

“I won’t do it anymore,” she said.

“How can I trust that you won’t?” asked the man. Azealia looked at her hands, but he snapped his fingers, calling her attention back. “I’m open to suggestions. How can I trust that you won’t engage in the wrong kind of behaviour?”

Azealia struggled to think. It was hard to tell how much time had passed when the rain made it so dark no matter the time of day. She had a feeling it had not been very long, two days at most, and hated herself for how weak she was. She hated that she did not have the ability to change her mood, like Davey’s mother.

She should have listened when Sydney told her not to trust anyone who worked here. Davey had looked so pleased at her trick. But he had been so fearful before. Of course he was going to tell.

“I’m a student at the School,” said Azealia slowly. “We get better. And we graduate. I’ll be better. I’ll get better.”

“Will you?” he asked. The man played with his lighter, clicking the fire in and out of existence. The dance of the small flame was hypnotic. He noticed her distraction, and Azealia braced herself for a punishment, but he seemed amused. “Fire can be a very powerful thing. It can bring warmth and light. It can also hurt us and wreak terrible destruction. But you know what? We don’t need it for either. We have electric heaters and lamps now. Safe. Controlled. Understandable. A fire can be fascinating, but you can never trust the fire. It can always hurt, even if it does not mean to. It cannot be anything that it is not, and it has no place in modern society. It is a remnant from the days of cave people. A less civilized time. Can you be civilized, Azealia? Not every girl can be.”

The man slipped the lighter into his pocket.

Not every girl got better. Davey’s mother did not graduate. Azealia could imagine that woman, was surprised at how clearly she could imagine her. She did not think Davey told her his mother’s name, but she knew the name of the woman she pictured.

“Like Ellen,” said Azealia.

The man crossed to her, grabbed her hands from her sides. She resisted for a moment, tried to pull away and could not. She wondered if she could make him go. She had never tried her wrongness on a person. But she did not try, and she stopped struggling.

“Tell me about Ellen,” said the man.

“Black hair,” said Azealia. “She was in a teashop, and something bad happened, but then it was like it did not happen. Or it did but—”

“She reversed it,” said the man.

Azealia nodded.

He released her hands and stood up.

“Thank you so much Azealia,” he said, smiling, and this time it reached his eyes. He looked handsome again, and Azealia hated herself for thinking it. “See how helpful you can be? If you listen and let us help you?”

Azealia nodded again, hoping he would leave. He did.

* * *

Azealia was woken by hands shaking her, and she instinctively put her arm over her head to protect herself.

“It’s just me,” said Sydney, and Azealia relaxed. The other girl wore a colourful t-shirt featuring the slogan for some sonic station. It was the first time Azealia had seen her out of the uniform dress, and though she had lost track of time, she did not think it was already the weekend. “Come on. We’re going to the river.”

“Why?”

“They’ve arrested one of the graduates,” said Sydney. “She wasn’t as fixed as they thought she was. The Headmistresses takes these failures personally. She won’t get out of bed, no matter what we do. Not for a few hours, anyway, so we need to move fast if we want to join the other girls. Give that failed graduate a proper send off.”

Azealia sat up in bed.

“Who did they arrest?” Sydney shrugged. Azealia was sure it was Ellen. “What are they going to do to her?”

“Her mind is not strong enough to control her body, so she loses the

privilege to use either,” said Sydney. Azealia stared at her, confused. “They’re going to give her a lobotomy. It happens more often than the Headmistress would like to admit, but they usually catch the hopeless cases before they graduate.”

Azealia thought of the crying she had heard from another room, the crying she had not heard since the man in black swept his way up the stairs. She thought of Ellen, who saved all those people in the teashop with a flick of her hand. Azealia bit her lip, tears escaping out of her eyes, cutting through the grime on her cheeks. Sydney sat next to her and gently patted her shoulder, an awkward but appreciated gesture.

“What’s wrong?” asked Sydney.

“I think it’s my fault,” said Azealia. “I told the man in black ... I saw a woman in a teashop, doing something wrong, and I told him. And he left. I wanted him to leave, and that made him, finally, leave.”

She expected Sydney to yell at her, or cry, or strike her.

“I told the Headmistress what you did in the stable,” said Sydney.

Azealia was so shocked she stopped crying.

“Was she hurting you?” she asked.

“No,” said Sydney. “But I slipped a while back, and she wasn’t sure if she could trust me. She trusts me now. Like the man in black trusts you. And for a bit, we won’t have to worry about anyone coming to carve away our minds.”

Azealia brushed her sleeve over her cheek. The tears wiped away most of the soot. It was the cleanest she had felt since she came to the city.

She let Sydney take her hand and guide her out of her room.

* * *

It looked like all the girls from the School were at the river already, but they gathered with other women who were too old to be students. Azealia was surprised to see the woman with curly hair from the teashop among the older faces, as well as the four women with bright red hair who played in her favourite band.

The musicians swept their arms as they turned in slow circles, and when they turned, they disappeared entirely, until another sweep made them visible once more. The curly haired woman’s eyes glowed like fireflies, and another girl seemed to be comprised entirely of black smoke, not gritty like the smoke that still pumped out of the tall buildings in the city over the river, but a smoke as fine and pure as a shadow. Sydney grabbed Azealia’s hand, pulling her to the centre of the group, right before a girl released sparks of coloured fire from her fingertips that swirled around Sydney and Azealia in fantastic patterns and waves. Azealia would have considered them lucky to be in the perfect position to appreciate the display, but from the way Sydney winked, she was sure luck had little to do with it.

Every girl was indulging in her own brand of wrongness, not ashamed in the dark among her sisters, but exalting and glorious. The city looked so far away from them, and with its choking clouds of smoke, it did not look particularly civilized to Azealia. Compared to the wonderful things these students and apparent graduates could do, that city looked like a relic, only impressive to people as uncivilized as cave people who could not imagine anything better. Those people screamed at fire and embraced electric light that they could control.

But even fire could be controlled. The girls were not fire. Sydney squeezed her hand and Azealia squeezed back.

It was easy for Azealia to destroy the bridge that led to the city, to the people who kept their distance from the School. She just had to want to pull it down, like how she once wanted to pull the carriages that

carted her sisters across a countryside so clean and free of gritty coal-burned smoke, like how she wanted to raise the pieces of the engine into the air before demanding all the dirt that stuck to them dropped away and it did. Azealia wanted to pull down the bridge and it fell into the river and the girls cheered around her.

She knew that the bridge would be built again, so much more slowly than if the Headmistress or the man in black asked Azealia to help. They would build it again slowly, inefficiently, with a patient ignorance that they would be proud of. Until Azealia tore it down again, waiting for a storm or a particularly heavy cart to blame, and the man in black would wonder, and the Headmistress would despair, but Azealia would pretend that it was all just a coincidence. She would act like she was better.

Though she could not help but wonder if there was more that she could do than symbolic destruction.

“Why don’t we just tear it all down?” Azealia asked Sydney. “The whole city. We could destroy it all, start over.”

“Do you want to destroy everyone?” Sydney asked.

Azealia thought of the mother with her baby in the pram, somewhere in the city. She would be caught in the rubble if Azealia tore it down. The man in black hurt her, but she did not really want to hurt him, or the Headmistress. They could only imagine fire and electricity. They were so small compared to every girl at the river. And every girl at the river could destroy them, but it did not mean that they should.

Azealia shook her head.

“Then you’re already better,” Sydney said, smiling at Azealia. “We’re already so much better than all of them.”

“But it’s not fair,” said Azealia.

“Not yet,” said Sydney. “But someday, we’ll be the teachers. We’ll be the ministers. We’ll be the mothers. We just have to make it through this. It’s awful but it’s temporary. And once we make it through, we’ll make everything better. Trust me. I have a good feeling about it.”

Azealia had a good feeling about it, too.



Blood River Magician by Elby Rogers

The Thread World

by Maija Haavisto

the last time you left me
a fragile white knife
made of the strangest bones
you said that lizards bigger than houses
had been pressed into it

I don't know whether to believe you

I saved it in a chest
that was supposed to be my trousseau
but the wedding is called off
this is my trousseau
for my faraway fiancé

there I stashed the luscious pictures
you showed me at my bedside
shiny like mirrors
but they reflect things
yet to be invented

and why wouldn't I believe you?

before Lent you brought me summer apples
and another fruit so cloying
it felt like my heart would burst
sweet like honey, it calmed my cough

I saved the apple core, I sowed the seeds
even though you told me
the tree wouldn't bear fruit in winter
only you are free in time
you soar through it like a bird
the tree and I are prisoners of winter

and I won't be here to see appleflowers

mom called you a feverdream, maybe you are
but how would a feverdream bring me all this?
how would a dream bring me a watch
with numbers like fireflies in the dark?
a box that sings into my ear
more beautifully than any seashell?
what kind of a dream is that?

I also have a lock of your hair
as wondrous as your strangest souvenirs

when shall you come back?
you don't need doors or windows
and when you leave
I never know if you'll return

if you do, you might find an empty bed

you said then you can move time
you can come back earlier
and meet me there again

if you can cheat the calendar
forge years like money
can't you just write me more of them?

you told me about a world
where things travel on threads
even the human mind
shiny pictures ride threads
in tiny horsecarts

I am light as a sparrowfeather
I'd fit through the needle eye
thread me and take me with you

you say one cannot escape death
yet you keep running away from it

I don't know if the thread world exists
but I fear it is too far from heaven

Nika

by Irina Tall (Novikova)



A Raven's Request

by M.A. Dosser

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. *Paloop.*

“Darn it,” Sophie said with a sigh. “Nine again.” The ripples extended from each spot the skipping stone had touched. Ridge after ridge of sun-kissed blue collided, until all were consumed by the small waves made by the splash.

Sophie sat down in the soft loam near the lake's edge. She kicked off her shoes and cuffed her mud-caked pants so she could dip her feet in the water. The sunlight bouncing off her already graying hair made the remaining red strands glow like embers in a dying fire. Had more strands turned since yesterday? It looked like it. Her soft blue tunic was loose fitting and undone slightly farther than her father would approve of. But she was on her peninsula. No one would see her here.

To even find her, a person would have to travel miles through the forest that stretched behind her family's farm. Weaving through the fallen oaks, skirting ponds, and bypassing not one, but two lake inlets before coming to her spot. How she found the peninsula was mere luck.

Though, calling it a peninsula might be misleading. It was just a small bit of land—roughly the area of a barn door—that stuck out into the water. The only reason it hadn't washed away over the centuries had to be the old maple. It was as tall a tree as Sophie had ever seen, and wide enough around that it would take three Sophies to hug it properly. And she had tried. The old maple's roots kept the peninsula in place, and the broad, green leaves sprouting from the many branches kept Sophie shaded from the hot sun.

The whole idea of running through the forest and finding a secret spot reminded Sophie of her favorite novels. It didn't seem real. It felt magical. And Sophie reasoned that if she was in a magical place that no one else knew about, she could wear her tunic however she pleased. Also, that she could skip a stone into the double digits. That, however, proved more difficult than the unbuttoning. No matter how hard she tried, she could never make it past nine.

Willing herself to toss again, Sophie reached over and grabbed a stone from a pile she had made. The stones ranged from flat to slightly less flat. She had gathered them from all over, bringing them here with the intention of skipping one across the lake onto Lord Meron's land. Though she would settle for ten skips at this point.

She stared at the stone in her hand, shook her head, and muttered, “Not yet.” Placing it beside the pile, she stood and grabbed another one. It fit almost perfectly between her thumb and middle finger. Keeping her back straight, she angled her body askew to the shore. She inhaled deeply, exhaled, then with a flick of the wrist as quick as a viper strike, threw.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. *Paloop.*

Sophie threw her hands up and let out a frustrated grunt.

“That was impressive,” said a low, croaking voice. Faster than a thrown stone, Sophie snapped around. Standing behind her was a knight. His armor was a deep black, as if crafted from obsidian. Claws extended from the end of his gauntlets. In one hand, he held a helm decorated with metal feathers that protruded out the back. His shining hair, as dark as his armor, hung past his ears and framed his

slender face. His features were sharp and should have seemed terse, but his smile softened them. He had a narrow mouth, and above it hung a long and broad nose. It was so long, Sophie started to glance back at the helm, as it appeared too tight to accommodate such a face, but she was distracted by his eyes. They were a deep brown. So deep it was hard to tell where the irises ended and the pupils began.

“Throwing the stone, I mean,” the knight continued.

“How did you get here?” Sophie asked, more accusatory than she meant. Then she remembered her station as a farmer’s daughter, and added, “Sir.” She curtsied, then feeling the breeze on her exposed chest, pulled her tunic together with both hands.

The knight didn’t appear to notice. Pointing behind him, he said, “Just through there.” Off Sophie’s unsatisfied expression, he continued, “I heard splashing and ladylike grunts and shouts. I thought you might need help, though I seem to be mistaken.”

Sophie didn’t say anything. The knight’s explanation answered part of her question, but only in the way “food” answered the question “What do you want for dinner?” Based on the knight’s smile, he knew it too.

He limped over to the pile and picked up a stone. Examining it, he asked, “Why did you put this one back?”

“What happened to your leg?” Sophie asked without thinking.

“Oh, just a squabble. It will heal in time.” While his voice sounded relaxed, his body tensed. “So, this stone?”

“That one’s special.” It looked like an ordinary stone, but for Sophie, it was perfect. It fit in her palm as if it had been crafted with her hand in mind, it was neither too smooth nor too rough, and she found it the same day she found the peninsula. It was fate. One day, it would be the stone she skipped to the other bank. She just knew it. “I can’t use

it until I know I can make it to ten.”

“To ten?”

Sophie reddened and clutched her shirt tighter. “Ten skips.”

The knight, to Sophie’s surprise, didn’t laugh. He nodded as if it was an admirable goal. Rather than shifting his eyes from the stone to Sophie’s face, his entire head jerked so he could stare directly at her. “I’ve never skipped a stone before. Is it hard?”

Sophie started to answer, then stopped. “Wait. How did you know I put that particular one down? Were you watching me?”

Rather than a flustered response or an attempted cover, he said, “I may have been in the woods longer than I implied, but I just couldn’t look away.”

It felt like she stepped in front of a furnace. New blood rushed to her cheeks with such alacrity, she was afraid there wouldn’t be any left in her legs to keep her upright. Men didn’t look at her like that. No one looked at her like that. She was a farmer’s daughter in her thirties, unmarried, and with hair already gray. The most loving look she received was from her mother’s old hound Jarl when she fed him the wrongly sliced parts of tenderloins. And, besides, no one actually said things like that—only in stories and plays—but his eyes seemed so sincere.

“Oh,” was all Sophie could manage.

After a moment, he said, “My name’s Raan.”

“Nice to meet you, Sir Raan,” Sophie said with another curtsy. “I’m Sophie.”

Raan nodded, maintaining eye contact. The gaze lasted for what felt like hours, though the sound of the geese honking meant it was still

midday. Raan broke the moment when he eyed the stone and asked, “Could you teach me?”

Sheepishly agreeing, Sophie walked over to the stone pile. She picked up two, making sure to tuck her special stone out of sight. Handing one to Raan, she said, “You’ve got to grip it between your thumb and middle finger. Yes, like that. Though it may be easier if you take off your gauntlets.”

Raan removed the claws to reveal strong hands. A smile split his face as he flexed and clenched his fingers, and Sophie wondered when was the last time he had been out of that armor.

She continued, “Okay, now, and this is important, you’ve got to turn your body so you’re not facing straight at the lake.” She got into position, and Raan mirrored her. “Then snap your wrist and release.”

When Sophie did this, the stone hit the water seven times before the angle altered, it arced too high, and *splash*.

For Raan, the splash came instantly.

Sophie laughed then covered her mouth, afraid she would offend him.

With another jerk of the head, he turned to her and said, “I may need more lessons.”

His expression made Sophie want to laugh even more. “No, no. You had great form. It’s just more about speed than strength.” Sophie picked up two more stones. “If you throw it too hard, well.” Rearing back, Sophie hefted the smooth rock and produced a noisy splash. “But if you throw it fast.” Taking the other, Sophie flicked her wrist and the stone flew across the lake, sending out eight ripples before plopping into the water.

“Remarkable,” Raan said. “I’ve never seen a stone fly before.”

“It’s nothing,” Sophie replied, hoping the modesty would tame the redness flooding her face. It didn’t. “I have a lot of time to practice.”

“Would you mind if I practiced with you?”

Sophie, ecstatic, agreed, and the two spent the next few hours skipping stones. The hours were mostly filled with sounds of splashing, the occasional honk or quack, and Sophie’s instruction, but they also found time to talk. Well, Sophie did. Raan mainly responded with looks and nods, but Sophie knew that he was truly listening to what she was saying. It was evidenced by his performance. By sunset, Raan had managed four skips.

Sunset. Sophie, who felt as if she hadn’t laughed so much since her father took her into the town of Piekes to see a performance of *The Prejudice of Boars*, gasped and darted around to find where she had kicked her shoes.

“What’s wrong?” Raan asked, jerking his head from the latest splash to the scurrying Sophie.

“I need to get home. I didn’t realize how late it was.” She stopped and regarded him. She didn’t want to leave quite yet.

“Come back tomorrow. Please.”

A grin broke across her face so wide her cheeks burned. “Of course!”

“Tomorrow morning?”

“I can’t in the morning. I have to help my father, but I’ll come back as soon as I finish.”

“Please do.”

Sophie, as giddy as could be, ran through the forest, only pausing to avoid the holes and thorned branches along the way. By the time she

arrived at the little home she shared with her parents, they had already gone to bed. It wasn't the first time she had been out at her peninsula past dark.

Despite her parents being asleep, Sophie didn't open the front door quietly. Bursting through the green-trimmed entryway, she danced across the wooden floors. She traipsed to the right and scratched Jarl behind his ears, releasing some of the natural aroma all old dogs possess. Then she spun in circles over to the window and let out a longing sigh as she stared at the forest separating her and Raan. Other than the pain from tweaking her back while trying to spin like one of the dancers from Piekas, she felt younger than she had in years.

Crossing the sheepskin rug, she went into her small bedroom. Her father had left a candle burning beside her tiny twin bed. A lopsided stack of books rested on the handmade table to her right—her entire library. Their covers were worn and cracked from being read over and over. Sophie didn't touch them that night though. She wanted to go to sleep as soon as possible, so she could reunite with Raan. But sleep wouldn't come. She laid awake for close to an hour before dreams overtook her. Dreams of skipping a stone to the other side of the lake, where Raan stood. Dreams where he grabbed it and skipped it all the way back to her.

* * *

The next morning, Sophie awoke before the sun was more than a pink bloom on the horizon. She rushed out the front door and over to the barn house. That day, she was responsible for hauling water from the well, mucking the stables, feeding the pigs and chickens, and milking Beattie, the family *imlad*. Sophie still didn't know why her family had an *imlad*, as the yak-like bovines were rarely seen south of Mount Melda, but Beattie was a part of the family. She was also the most cantankerous animal Sophie had ever encountered.

Normally, Sophie would carry one bucket of water at a time, but she wanted to finish as swiftly as possible. She grabbed one of the many

wooden shafts strewn about what she called the lumber shack. Hoisting the shaft over her shoulders, she carried four buckets at a time to and from the well. She knew she would be sore later—she was sore now and her back hadn't completely forgiven her for her frivolity from the night before—but in a fraction of the time it usually took, she hauled enough water to last for days. She proceeded through the next tasks just as efficiently.

Her father was only just pulling on his pants when she finished feeding the chickens. From the front door he asked, "Something on fire or are you just hurrying for the sake of hurrying? I haven't seen you move this quick since ... Hmm. I'm not sure I ever have."

Sophie smiled at her red-faced father, who had decided that that morning was a good one to leave his pants unfastened. He tried to hide the gap with his belt, but it didn't fool her. It never did. Her father was tall and covered in coarse, curly orange hair. Much to Sophie's chagrin, he had far less gray hair than she did. And he was right. Sophie hadn't worked this hard in years. But Raan made her feel like she was a teenager who could work all day then stay up too late writing romance novels in the candlelight. Like she hadn't passed the prime marrying age. Like there was a chance she had finally found someone.

"I've got places to be, Father! Things to do!"

"And stones to skip, I'm sure." Her father barked with a laugh. Sophie shot him a joking scowl, then scurried over to the barn where Beattie was sleeping.

It wasn't until she was midway through milking the shaggy-coated *imlad* that she wondered why she was in a hurry. What if Raan wasn't there when she arrived? Or what if he didn't come at all? Had it been a dream? The thoughts caused her to pull a bit too hard on Beattie's violet udder, and the *imlad* stomped her white hooves and craned her neck to glower at her torturer.

Sophie let out a regretful *oof* and patted Beattie on her black furry

stomach. Apologizing and promising not to let it happen again, she almost immediately drifted into another swirl of thoughts. It had to have been real, because otherwise what had she done all day? Skip stones alone? Okay, that wasn't unrealistic or even uncommon, but he had to be real. He would be there. As soon as she was finished with Beattie she would put on her best bonnet and run to the peninsula. Maybe she should bring a book just in case. She wouldn't need it, but it would be a nice conversation piece. "Have you read this novel, Raan? It's simply marvelous." Then they would laugh about the villainous Count Larkyn failing time and time again to unmask Sera for the commoner she was. Maybe he would have insights to themes she never even thought about, with his knightly sophistication and all.

By this time, the bucket of milk was nearly filled to the brim. Sophie released Beattie's udders, and Beattie let out a groan that mainly signaled relief but carried some undertones Sophie chose to ignore.

Sophie hefted the bucket inside and set it down beside her mother. The thick brown dressing gown her mother wore looked as if it had been sheared off a bear, and she was still rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

Before her mother could ask, "Already done?" Sophie had run into and out of her room, then out of the house.

* * *

Ducking and weaving through the tree branches and spider webs, Sophie made it to her spot in record time. On the way, she had prepared herself to be disappointed. To wait all day and have no one come. She didn't allow herself to hope he would be standing there waiting for her, which made it all the sweeter when he was.

Raan stood beside her pile of stones, smiling widely at her. The morning sunlight gleamed off his armor, and his black hair hung behind his ears. Everything was exactly as she had pictured. "Hello," he said.

"Hi," Sophie said, holding back tears of joy. It was real.

They spent the day much as they had before, skipping stones, listening to the fish leap, smelling the tree's autumn fragrance. Raan was getting better at skipping. He had made it to five skips—though he claimed five and a half—in just two days. It took Sophie weeks to make it that far. His aim, however, still wasn't the best. Sometimes his toss would go completely sideways. Other times he managed to toss it backwards, as if he didn't know how to use his arms. Sophie found it adorable. One time, it slipped and skipped diagonally into some reeds. After a trumpeting of unhappy quacks, the flapping of wings heralded two mallards as they flew from their hiding place.

Sophie watched the majesty of their flight in awe. She asked, "Do you ever wish you could fly?"

Raan didn't respond immediately. His face was contorted into a sorrowful expression. "They fly wherever they want to go, but does anywhere truly want them? When the winter comes where will they sleep? What will they eat? I would trade a warm bed for the consequences of their freedom any day."

The pain in his voice surprised Sophie. When Raan's head jerked towards her, his features brightened. "But that's just the practical side of things. Flying is a true joy. If I could fly like I am, I would never walk again."

Sophie laughed, letting the confusion and tension fade. "I'd be afraid I would get too high and fall. Some birds must make the clouds jealous."

"Most certainly," Raan said with a mischievous grin that made Sophie's knees wobble more obviously than she would have liked. "That's why it rains. Clouds are notoriously pouty." Sophie laughed again as the ducks flew higher and higher. A loose feather floated down towards them. "Though, of course, it takes a lot of work to get that high," Raan continued. "Most birds wait until they can find a warm draft to challenge the clouds."

“You know so much!” Sophie said too excitedly. Here was the perfect segue for the moment she had been waiting for since milking Beattie. “You remind me of a character in this book.” With a flourish, Sophie pulled her worn copy of *A Father’s Folly* from beside the old maple. The faded blue cover was cracked, but the gold embossed title was still visible.

“I’ve never heard of that one,” Raan said before Sophie could ask her question. Her spirit fell. A man like Raan wouldn’t read drivel like this. It was ridiculous to think he would.

“Is it good?” He asked.

“Oh, I mean, it’s just a story about a girl who masquerades as a noblewoman in order to save her father’s shop. It’s silly, really.”

“Do you like it?”

With a blush, “Well, yes. I do.”

“Would you read some of it to me?” Raan asked. Sophie started to protest, but he interrupted, “Your voice is beautiful.” Blushing harder, Sophie agreed and sat by the base of the tree. Raan stood beside her, putting all his weight on his good leg. He was close enough that she could almost feel the heat radiating from inside his armor. At least, she chose to believe that’s what she was feeling and not just the sun rising as the morning turned to afternoon.

Sophie read to him until the sun set. She stopped a few times when the novel seemed to veer into too romantic of territory, but Raan urged her onward.

When Sophie stood up, Raan asked, “Will you come back tomorrow?” With a huge smile, Sophie agreed.

* * *

The next two days were much the same. She would wake each

morning feeling sorer than she could ever remember being, ignore the pain, finish her chores, then rush to see Raan. They skipped stones, she read to him, and they shared more about themselves. She thought about asking if he served in Lord Meron’s army or if he was a knight errant. She didn’t recognize his armor. But she was afraid the mere mention of it would remind him he had to business to attend to and he would leave. She wasn’t ready for that. Things were going too well to end now. Besides, Raan rarely touched on his past other than to say he had many siblings. Twice, Sophie asked about his leg, and each time, he dismissed it. Despite Raan’s reticence, her knowledge of who he was grew each day.

On their fourth night, Sophie capered home humming a melody with no particular meter. Outside, her mother scrubbed wooden pails. Her mother truly was beautiful. When the light hit her eyes, they seemed to shine whatever color her mother fancied. Her blonde hair had begun to turn white instead of gray. In the moonlight, her hair looked as if the sun had started its morning climb, but the stars weren’t ready to fade away just yet. The sight made Sophie painfully aware how much she took after her father.

“What are you doing awake, Mama?” Sophie asked cheerfully.

“Just getting ready for the morning.”

Sophie started to ask what was special about tomorrow when she remembered: it was Slaughter Day. Once every year they gathered the meat from the pigs. The money they made from selling the pork and tenderloins in Piekes, along with the chicken eggs and Beattie’s milk, helped them make it through the winter months.

“Oh. Oh no,” Sophie said without meaning to. “I can’t help this year. I have to-”

“Help your father with the pigs,” her mother finished.

Sophie started to protest but stopped herself. Acting like an adolescent over Raan had gone to her head. The stiffness in her

father's hands had grown worse year after year. It was part of the reason she still lived with her parents. After an incident two years ago where he cut himself so deeply they nearly ran out of thread, she thought she always would. Sophie had promised her father she would be there to help. Her mother couldn't, so she would.

"He needs you."

"I know," Sophie said. Her mother nodded and continued cleaning, angled so she kept her back to the pen. Her mother hated Slaughter Day. She would stay in bed, covering her ears so she couldn't hear anything. Not that it would have been possible over her own sobbing.

Sophie squeezed her mother's shoulder, kissed her on the cheek, and went to bed.

* * *

The slaughter took all morning and part of the afternoon. Her mother mixed poppy in with the feed the night before, as she thought it more humane if the pigs went to sleep and never woke up. Her father said it tainted the meat, but he didn't stop her. He would never admit it, but if they made enough money selling eggs and Beattie's milk to last through the year, he would give up the pigs altogether.

By early afternoon, Sophie was getting anxious. She was ready to leave. She had finished the hard part alone, then she helped her father butcher the meat. All that was left was to transfer half the meat to the smoker. The rest would air dry in long term storage. Normally, moving the meats took a few hours, but not that day. Sophie was determined, and while her new technique for hauling water left her muscles perpetually angry with her, they were also much stronger. Within an hour, she was rushing through the forest.

When she finally made it to her peninsula, Raan was pacing back and forth. His limp more pronounced than ever. Upon her approach, he turned. "I was afraid you weren't going t-." He stopped as his eyes drifted down her front.

Self-conscious, Sophie looked down and realized in her haste, she had forgotten to wash herself off. Dried blood coated her arms in a pale brown. Reflexively, she wrapped her arms around herself, but it only made the blood more prominent.

"But you couldn't ha-. No. What happened?"

"I'm so embarrassed," Sophie rushed past Raan and dipped her arms in the cool, clear water. Her reflection was ghastly. The blood wasn't just on her arms, but on her face and clothes as well. She always brushed her hair in the mornings and before bed, but now it was wild and unkempt, like a burning briar bush coated with ash. No wonder Raan was shocked.

Scrubbing, she glanced back and said, "I'm so sorry."

Raan continued to gape at her. He opened his mouth then closed it again, as if there was something he wanted to ask but couldn't put into words. After a pause that felt like it lasted forever, he said, "I didn't realize the slaughter was today."

"Neither did I until last night." Sophie turned around. "How did you know about Slaughter Day?"

"You must have told me about it."

"I can't imagine I would bring up killing pigs to the man I fan-" Her face flushed a deep shade of red. "To the only man who has ever skipped a stone as well as me. Well, almost." She turned away and scrubbed more vigorously. Maybe she *had* mentioned the pigs. She remembered bringing up the lumber shack, Beattie, Jarl, how no matter how thoroughly the stables were cleaned they were dirty again the next day, and almost falling in a well as a child, but she couldn't remember bringing up the pigs. She didn't feel like pig slaughtering and Count Larkyn's wife attempting to seduce Sera while she was in disguise would have fit in the same conversation, but she must have.

Glancing behind her, Raan's handsome face was taut with worry. She

needed to lighten the mood. Standing up with her arms mostly clean, she said, “If you thought that was bad, you should be glad you don’t have to see me after I milk Beattie.”

Raan let loose a peal of laughter unlike anything Sophie had ever heard. It was deep, gurgling, and came out in distinctive syllables of Ha Ha Ha. It almost sounded fake. Sophie started laughing as well, which only made Raan laugh harder. Raan laughed so much that he tottered and grabbed onto Sophie’s shoulder to steady himself.

Instantly, they both stopped. It was the first time they had touched. The electricity crackled through his strong hand into her shoulder, up her neck, then down her spine. It was almost too much, while simultaneously not nearly enough. Sophie never wanted it to end, but Raan eventually moved. She would have been disappointed, but a faint blush rose in his cheeks, which made her do the same, though much more obviously.

They passed the remainder of the afternoon the usual way: steadily depleting Sophie’s stone pile, reading about Sera’s triumphs in the King’s Court, and chatting. That afternoon, Sophie felt as if Raan stood closer to her. As the sun set, Raan said, “I know it may be improper, but...”

Sophie somehow managed to very coolly say, “But?”

“Well, I would very much like to kiss you, Sophie.”

Sophie wanted to say, *And I would very much like for you, Sir Raan, to do just that*, but all that came out was a little squeak.

Raan waited expectantly, and Sophie realized he needed some kind of confirmation. *A true gentleman*. She nodded her head, and the 32-year-old Sophie received the most magical first kiss just as the stars began to shine.

* * *

The next morning passed by without Sophie noticing. She was still in a stupor from the night before. Her mother and father may have spoken to her and the mud Beattie kicked may have been intentionally aimed, but Sophie didn’t care. She just wanted to get back to Raan. They were almost done reading *A Father’s Folly*, but Sophie hoped she and Raan would be too distracted with other activities to finish it that day.

After breezing through the rest of her work and nearly floating through the woods, Sophie arrived at her peninsula. Raan started toward her, but two steps in, he stumbled. Sophie reached to catch him, but it was too late. Raan hit the ground, face first and hard, then he was still.

Rushing to his side, Sophie asked, “Raan? Raan! Are you all right?”

The reply was muffled, so Sophie gingerly rolled him over. He was lighter than she expected. When she touched his left leg, Raan cringed and reached to grab it.

“Your leg!” Sophie cried. “I should have brought you medicine or fetched a physician. I’m sorry.”

Raan waved her concern away, then stared at her deeply, his nearly black eyes piercing her heart. “Sophie. I have to ask you something.”

“Ask me anything.”

“Do you care for me?”

Sophie sat back in surprise. *What?* She felt she had been fawning over him for the past week. Was she more enigmatic than she thought? “Of course I do!”

“No, I mean do you *truly* care for me?”

“Raan, I love you!” Sophie nearly shouted. Saying it out loud left Sophie lightheaded.

Raan's lips twitched, but his eyes remained intense. "And would you, no matter what?"

"Yes!"

Raan's gaze softened, and he placed his hand on top of Sophie's. "I need to tell you something. I haven't been completely honest."

Sophie tilted her head but said nothing as he unhooked the greave from his left leg. The putrid stench of rotting flesh struck Sophie. His knee was muscled but largely ordinary. As the knee became shin and calf, however, his leg transitioned to a thin, pale black. Rather than skin, it was covered in dark, flaky scales. If there was any meat on it, it wouldn't have satisfied even the smallest of dogs. Across the shin were three bloody streaks, as if from a bear attack. Below the streaks, a splint wrapped with bloodied cloth held together a broken ankle. The wounds were purple on his dark leg.

Too many thoughts ran through Sophie's mind. She needed to clean the wounds, needed to find a physician to resplint his ankle, needed to fashion a crutch, needed to know why his leg looked like that. She needed to do so many things, but most of all, she needed Raan.

Not knowing what to ask first, she remembered his first comment about his leg and asked, "Were you lying about the squabble?"

"No, that was true. This came from a quarrel with my siblings." Raan said, indicating his leg. He took a steadying breath then continued, "You see, I'm what they call a *Valvra*. I was a raven before. I guess I still am. Somewhat, at least. I only changed a week ago.

"You see, some ravens are different. We're smarter than you give us credit for. We watch. We learn. We desire. And my family desired to truly live. Among the humans, because you have everything. You have places to sleep, you always have food to eat, you can go anywhere provided you have a horse or a strong will.

"One night my mother gathered us together, and she told us of a

raven who became a human knight. The knight served as a guard for a Count. When the Count discovered what the knight truly was, he wasn't angry. No, he was pleased. He created an entire army of *Valvra* and always wanted more. My mother told us it was a simple process, really. Provided you were lucky. All one needed to do was eat the heart of a child."

Sophie gasped and started back, but Raan rushed on, "No! It's not what it seems. You see, well, my siblings and I found a child who had been left for dead. She was dead in fact, and recently, so the heart was fresh. Carrion eat corpses, so we assumed it was safe. My brothers and sisters pecked at the body, trying to uncover its heart, but I was the one to take it. That didn't please anyone.

"The legend said one had to consume the entire heart, so we couldn't share. With the heart hanging from my beak, they attacked. Terrified, I screamed, and it fell to the ground, so they turned on each other. Familial love was nothing when humanity was on the line. Eventually, I clawed my way through and tore the heart from my sister's beak and escaped, but not without a few wounds."

Sophie looked at his wounded leg then back at his face. The harder she stared, the more similarities she saw between Raan and a raven, though she was sure they hadn't been so obvious before. His eyes hadn't been so far apart. Nor his skin so dry and flaky.

"But I didn't know where to go. I knew with my injuries, I wouldn't be able to get another heart."

"Another heart?" Sophie cut in. "Why?"

"The transformation only lasts for a week. I need a new heart or I will become a raven once more."

His story raised more questions than it answered, but only one escaped her lips: "So why are you here?"

Raan's head jerked away from her, only for a moment, but Sophie

knew that look. Shame. “We knew about you and your family. We had seen the slaughter. I, well, I hoped you would help me.”

Sophie pulled away. Tears continued to fall from her eyes, and though they looked the same, they couldn’t have felt more different. “You used me.”

“No!” Raan said a little too forcefully. “It may have started that way, but when have I asked for anything?”

Sophie opened her mouth then closed it. Sophie hated him. She was furious. He was a monster! He had wanted to use her from the start, but still she loved him. Despite everything. And he was right. He had never asked for anything before. He still hadn’t. At least, not yet.

“I’m sorry, Sophie,” Raan said, the solemnity returning to his voice. “I wish I hadn’t done this to you. I wish it wasn’t like this, but I need you.” He waited. Sophie didn’t look at him. “You see, if I turn back into a raven, I may never be like ... *this* again. Mother said some ravens could go decades before the hearts work a second time—some never could—and I can’t be away from you that long.”

Sophie could barely last half a day. “You need me to find a dead child?”

Raan shook his head. “A corpse would be preferable, but I only have until tomorrow at sunset. It took my siblings and I months to find one suitable.” He pulled a long, jagged, black dagger from his belt. He extended it to Sophie.

Sophie gasped and shook her head. “No. I, I can’t.”

Raan turned his head from Sophie to the dagger and back. He exhaled. “Please, Sophie. I need you.”

* * *

Sophie ran through the forest, the dagger clutched in her left hand.

The nearest town was Piekas, a half-day’s ride away. If she was lucky, she would make it there by nightfall. It would be mid-morning if she rode there and back without stopping. She needed to hurry.

It was after noon by the time Sophie made it to the stables. Other than Beattie, the only animals there were a pair of horses. The dappled workhorse, Sophie called Greta. Her father had referred to the grey’s color as “flea bitten,” so Sophie named him Jarl II, since the old hound was the only animal she knew who was well acquainted with fleas.

Within minutes, Jarl II was galloping toward Piekas. Her parents poked their heads out of the house as she rode past, but there was no time to explain. They wouldn’t understand.

Sophie had made the trip to town with her father so many times, she barely had to think about directions. The ride gave her time to reflect on her foolishness. She should have known about Raan. Maybe not that he was a raven—that kind of thing didn’t happen in real life—but why had she never asked him who he served or if he was a knight errant? Because she didn’t want to appear foolish, that’s why. Stories were the extent of her knightly knowledge. His comment about the slaughter should have tipped her off, though. If he hadn’t seduced her afterwards, she would have pressed him and he would have had to tell her. Then she could have gotten help. Or at least had time to think. But no. He would leave her unless she got him a heart. Unless she killed a child.

That was crazy, though. It would never happen, *could* never happen. How would she even do it? She barely managed the pigs. It must have appeared different from the skies, because she didn’t enjoy the slaughter. She was just a dutiful daughter, though maybe that was it. She loved her father and would do anything for him, so if Raan could make this lonely woman fall in love with him, she would do anything for him. But was he right? She knew he had manipulated her, and yet she was flying down the road, covered in sticks and mud, tear stained, and in love.

She couldn’t kill a child. Raan said it had taken his family months to

find a body, but they were ravens. As a human, Sophie had more access. There had to be a graveyard. Raan had mentioned the heart being fresh though. How fresh did it need to be? She should have asked him more, but there hadn't been time, and she hadn't wanted to. She just wanted things to be like they had been before. Maybe they could be, but she had to do this first.

A graveyard. That's what she'd search for. A graveyard with recently dug graves. If she couldn't find any of those, well, she didn't know, but she knew she couldn't lose Raan.

She wouldn't.

* * *

A sliver of moon hung high in the sky when she made it to Piekies. Sophie's experience with the town was mainly confined to its hectic market. There, some men and women wore gaudy robes while others wore almost nothing, and the sensible-looking people were always the ones to spend twenty minutes bargaining only to admit they had no money.

Piekies was a town harkening to an older time. The people had yet to give up mysticism and still preached of elves, goblins, and trolls living in the north. The majority of children's fables were written in Piekies. Sophie knew those tales to be false. Or she had. With Raan, what was real and what was fantasy had collided. Now she had no idea what she believed, let alone knew.

Tying Jarl II's reins to a tree outside of town, Sophie made for a side entrance. As she crept closer, the ground changed from dirt to loose gravel to an odd array of cobblestones. Sophie knew from experience the trouble the cobbles gave wheeled carts and heeled shoes, so she was glad she was still in her light leather boots.

Even at this late hour, the people of Piekies roamed the streets. Vendors called out to customers, trying to make a sale or steal them from a competitor. Perfumed vapors and incense poured out of stalls,

assaulting Sophie at every turn. The crowds did as well as they jostled past her, seemingly unaware of her existence. The night was when charlatans began selling their trinkets and spells out of wooden stands. People flocked from merchant to merchant, exchanging coins, recently purchased ornaments, and often what appeared to be self-made charms.

Sophie steeled herself and got up the courage to ask about a graveyard. If they grew suspicious, she could play it off as being from out of town to honor a relative, and if she said it was a nephew or niece, they might provide more specific information. They didn't. No one cared, nor did they provide useful information. The only helpful thing anyone said was that it was near a church. The rest was contradictory or predicated on knowing town landmarks. Most people just wanted to sell her things, and all lost interest when she told them she had no money.

Maybe it was because it was so late, but Sophie was surprised she hadn't seen any children yet. In a town as large as Piekies, there had to be at least a few children pickpockets. They should be rampant in markets like this, or so Sophie assumed based off books like *Sleight of Handsome* and *Raiding the Sun*. They were usually dirty scoundrels but inevitably had kind hearts. Sophie tried to focus solely on the former.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw one. A young boy with blond hair so dirty, it was streaked black. There were more gaps in his mouth than actual teeth. The boy reached into a woman's bag and pulled out two silver coins as she spoke to an abnormally tall salesman. Sophie watched as the child repeated the act on three other shoppers, then, without knowing why, she followed him. Weaving through the crowd, she drew closer and closer as he pilfered more coins.

Sophie was near enough to smell his mildewed clothes when he ducked around a corner. Pressing herself against the wall, Sophie slowly sidled forward. Three loud knocks resounded, a door swung open, and a wrinkled face stuck through the opening.

“Ah, Lendon! What do you have for Mommy today?”

“Six silver, nine copper, and a smushed carrot,” the boy said, holding out his haul.

The woman, who was clearly too old to be Lendon’s mother, sifted through the contents, picked up all but the carrot, and dropped them into a deflated sack tied to her waist. “That’s a good boy! Now bring that carrot in here. We’ll add it to the stew.” With that, she ushered Lendon inside, the door closed, and the alley was empty.

Breathing hard, Sophie slumped onto the ground. What was she thinking? Had she been planning on killing him? No, of course not. She was just following him to see if other children were nearby. Urchins died when food was scarce, and a single carrot seemed scarce. She would never, but then why was Raan’s dagger clutched in her hand? She tossed it away, disgusted, then a thought struck her. Knowing that Lendon filched a smushed carrot made Sophie nervous. Money wasn’t the only thing thieves wanted. She scurried over to the discarded dagger and tucked it into her belt. She would need it when she found the corpse.

Slinking to the door Lendon and the woman had just entered, Sophie peeked through a window. Inside, a motley crew of dirt-coated children bustled around a kitchen. The old woman sat in the corner, hefting her coin purse up and down, ordering her workers around. Unfortunately, despite the filth, the children appeared healthy and happy. *Unfortunately?* Sophie turned away and began her search for the church, feeling guilty and sick to her stomach.

The sounds and smells of the market died away as Sophie wandered further into Piekas. The streets were sparsely lit by hanging lanterns, and the feeling of unease grew in Sophie. She passed three churches without finding any sort of graveyard. She hadn’t even run into another person, which, truth be told, she didn’t mind.

The night sky had begun to lighten by the time Sophie slumped on the steps of the fifth church. There was no graveyard. Burying her

face in her hands, she let out a scream. Afterwards, in the silence that follows a woman’s scream, she heard a small voice.

A little girl in a white dress stood in an empty courtyard down an alley. Between the moonlight and the several lanterns artfully arranged around her, she danced with a troupe of shadows. Her black, curly hair bounced as she leapt from twirl to pirouette humming the theme from the musical *The Melodious Griffin*.

“Hello!” Sophie called out to the girl, who stopped and cocked her head. “Do you know where the graveyard is?”

The girl didn’t respond. Instead, she started humming again.

Sophie hurried down the alley, trying not to seem too eager or too frightening. At the end of the alley, a tall cobblestone nestled in the shadows tripped her. With a loud thump, Sophie fell face first and the dagger skittered out of her belt. The humming girl’s hair bobbed as she looked at the woman sprawled on the ground, then at the dagger, then at Sophie again. She beamed.

The mop of curls ran forward, grabbed the knife, and bolted down an alley on the opposite side of the courtyard. Sophie, in pain from riding Jarl II so hard, struggled to her feet and started after the girl. The alleys wove a labyrinth through the city. It was clear after the third turn that Sophie had lost her. She didn’t know these alleys. She didn’t even know how to get back to the market. Tears welled in Sophie’s eyes, then she heard it.

A giggle. A sweet, melodic giggle. Raising her head, a round face stared back at her. Picking up the chase, Sophie made it five turns before she lost the girl again. She stopped, turned around, and listened. A stifled titter came from around a corner to her left. Sophie ran. After ten minutes of the game, Sophie was soaked with sweat and unsure if she could take another step.

Stumbling forward, supporting herself on a wall, she saw the girl standing in another courtyard. The familiar calls of the vendors were

back, so the two had run all the way back to the market. No graveyard. No dagger. No heart.

A tall woman wrapped in a tight green dress sauntered from the direction of the market. She rubbed the girl's head and said, "Jonna. Where do you keep getting daggers from? Drop that thing and help your mother carry these talismans." The woman swung two sacks from over her shoulder and plopped them on the ground. One sack was filled with wooden carvings. The other with glittering coins.

Jonna tossed the dagger to the ground and lifted one sack high above her head using both arms. Her mother laughed, picked up the coin sack, and the two walked down the alley where the red-faced, sweat-soaked Sophie stood. The mother nodded in Sophie's direction and Jonna grinned. Then Sophie was alone.

Sophie lolloped forward and grabbed the knife. The lanterns wouldn't be necessary to see for much longer. Even if she found a graveyard now, she might not have enough time to dig up the heart and make it back before sunset. She sat in the middle of the courtyard, heaving in air. She had no idea what to do. Closing her eyes, she wished it was over.

Then, the world quieted.

One by one, sounds faded. Without the loud auctioneers, clanging of metal, and rolling carts, Sophie was able to hear something new. A small cough.

Sophie jerked her head in the direction of the sound, but as she opened her eyes, the cacophony of the market returned. Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried to block everything out like she had before. A moment passed. Then another. Then the noise faded, and Sophie waited. After a tense minute of darkness, Sophie heard the cough again. Faint. Somewhere to her left. She kept her eyes shut and held her hands out, feeling for walls to guide her to the noise. The metallic scrape of the dagger against the alley's brick wall nearly made her shout, but once she calmed herself, there was the cough

again. Louder than before.

Every step made her heart beat harder until it was almost unbearable. Just when she thought she couldn't take the darkness, the not knowing, any longer, she kicked something.

Opening her eyes, Sophie saw a child sleeping on a broken crate. The split wooden slats were just long enough that the child could fit on top, provided he curled himself up into a ball. *Not he. It.* She needed to dehumanize the child. It was what her father said about the pigs. It's why she had never named them. It would be too much. But this child appeared half dead already. It would be a kindness. Like putting down a horse who was no longer able to walk, though this wasn't a horse. It was just a kid.

The stench of feces, human and otherwise, was overwhelming. The child was so thin its ribs were as prominent as its little nose. A rattle like a wagon with a loose wheel came from its chest. Each breath caused visible pain. Dirt and white plaster mottled its ember red hair. It may have even looked like Sophie. It could have been her, if she had had a different life. His face was elongated, like he was nearly a teenager, but his body was so small.

Sophie stared at the dagger still gripped in her fist. The black was so deep it was like glass, but the reflection looked nothing like her. Mud and sticks knotted her hair into a nest too tangled even for rats. Tracks of tears smudged the rouge she had applied that morning. Her face was haggard, her eyes were red, and her dress was covered in dust from the road. She was a wreck. She didn't look far from being at home in this alley. With this child. This child who could give her the love of her life. This child she would have to kill.

When she tore herself away from the dagger's reflection, the boy was staring at her. He sat up, glanced to either side of Sophie, but made no move to leave. His eyes were pale brown, glazed but steady. In them, it was clear the boy was almost gone. Death would take this boy within days. Sophie would be moving up their meeting by hours. Not years.

Shifting his glance to the dagger, the boy closed his eyes and grimaced as he inhaled deeply. When his lungs were filled, the rattling in his chest stopped. The only noise in the world was the pounding of Sophie's heart. Sophie raised the dagger. The boy exhaled and opened his eyes.

Sophie's arm thrust downward, and she wrapped the boy in a hug, the dagger clattering on the ground behind her. A cascade of tears fell on the boy's head and shoulders as Sophie repeatedly muttered, "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry." The boy cried too, though Sophie didn't know if they were tears of joy or of sadness, and that only made her cry harder.

When Sophie finally let go, the boy's eyes were dry. Standing, she wished she had something for him. Food, coins, a blanket, some clean clothes, but she didn't have anything. Other than Raan's dagger, which still rested where she had dropped it. She didn't pick it up. She merely walked away.

As she left, the boy curled back into a ball and his breathing resumed its sleeping rattle.

* * *

Finding her way back to Jarl II took Sophie much longer than it should have, but the tears hadn't stopped flowing and she had been awake all night. The market was still open when she wandered through it. The pungent smells of fish indicated the vendors had changed from mystics to seamen and fruit vendors. Worried that her appearance would attract attention, Sophie stuck to the shadows, but it didn't matter. The people of Piekas were used to oddities. Sophie went unnoticed, a fact for which she was beyond thankful.

The sky was a warm shade of orange by the time Sophie climbed on Jarl II and began her long journey back to Raan. To tell him she failed. That she couldn't go through with it. That they wouldn't be together.

Sophie thought she would eventually run out of tears, but the slow ride home proved her wrong. Every time she came close to finishing, Raan's face, the little boy, or the knife's reflection returned to her and she started again. This lasted until she reunited with Raan, as the sun was waning on their seventh day.

"Sophie!" Raan called as he saw her emerge through the clearing. "Are you all right? What happened?"

Sophie regarded Raan, still lying on the ground. His features were even more bird-like than before. His mouth had moved up his face and his nose was longer and broader than she remembered. His voice was a gurgling croak, yet she somehow still found it sweet.

"I'm sorry. I, I just ..."

A look of disappointment darkened his visage. She expected anger, but instead he said, "No, Sophie. Please." His eyes gleamed with concern, for her or himself she wasn't sure. "It's okay."

"It's okay? How is it okay? I've ruined everything."

"No, you haven't. I shouldn't have asked. It's not your burden."

"Why aren't you angry with me?"

"Because I love you, Sophie," Raan said as his lips pulled upward. "I didn't mean to, but it's the best thing I've ever done."

Sophie collapsed to the ground and cried on Raan's chest. He ran his bony fingers tenderly through her hair.

When the sobbing quieted, Raan spoke again, "May I ask you something? Do you still love me? Even after this?"

Sophie wished she needed to think about her answer, but she didn't. She hadn't needed to for longer than she cared to admit. Turning her

head to gaze into his eyes, she said, “Of course. Forever.”

“And I, you,” he said. “I have one request.”

“If it involves a dagger, I’m not sure I’m up to it,” she quipped through a hitching sob.

Raan chuckled and rubbed Sophie’s back. “No, no. No more daggers. Just you and me.” He took a deep breath, then asked, “Will you wait for me?”

Sophie’s reply was the same, “Of course. Forever.”

“It may be as short as a year. But it could be far longer.”

“I don’t care how long.”

Raan smiled. “My leg will heal after I change back, and next time we’ll be able to take care of things together.”

Sophie’s eyebrows lifted. “Take care of things?”

“The hearts.”

The memory of the little boy flashed in Sophie’s mind. The way the moonlight glinted off the knife. His pale, brown eyes. Her crying with arms wrapped around him.

Her entire body went cold.

“And we can start our own family,” Raan continued. “You and I can run the farm with your parents. Or we can move into the city. I’ll take work as a city guard and you can read all the books you desire. It’s more than a raven like me deserves.”

Sophie swallowed hard and stared at the horizon. The waning sun hung inches above the green canopy. Raan had maybe an hour left.

Two at most.

Raan asked, “Do you think we have enough time to find out if Sera saves her father’s shop?”

Sophie gave a sad smile and went to grab the worn book from beside the scant scattering of stones. Over the past week, the pile had shrunk so only three remained. One being her special stone.

There was little light remaining when Lord Charl told Sera that if her station was the only thing keeping them apart, he would gladly give up his title and live a life as a bookkeeper. The novel ended with Sera and Charl’s first kiss as Lord and Lady Charl. For what felt like the thousandth time, Sophie cried over the final scene, but this time was different. And she knew she would never be able to read the book again.

Sophie and Raan lay in silence, Sophie still on Raan’s chest. Raan’s rapidly blackening hand clasping Sophie’s fingers.

Raan broke the silence. “Are you sure?”

Clearing her throat and wiping her eyes, Sophie replied, “About what?”

“Waiting.”

“Of course.”

Raan grinned his same handsome smile. “Come back here. In one year. I may not be back yet, but I will be eventually. I promise. When I am, we can be together. Forever.”

“Okay,” Sophie said, the pain palpable in her voice. Turning to look out over the lake, she asked, “Did I ever tell you about my dream?”

Cocking his head just as a bird would, Raan said, “No, I don’t think

so.”

“I had a dream that I was able to skip a stone all the way to the other side of the lake. You were there. On the other bank. It landed right between your feet. You picked it up and skipped it back to me.”

Raan rubbed the back of her head. “I’d like that.” A moment passed as the two watched the setting sun. “Why don’t we? Skip one over there now. When I come back, I’ll skip it back. That’s how you’ll know.”

“I can’t do that. I can’t even make it to ten.”

“You can. I know it. When the stone lands between your feet, that means we get to start our life together. Go on. Do it now. You won’t want to watch what’s about to happen.”

His human features were nearly gone. The man she knew as Raan was quickly fading. She got to her knees and kissed him deeply, afraid for it to end. After not nearly long enough, it did.

Walking to the edge of the peninsula, Sophie picked up one of the three stones. She got in position and tossed.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. *Paloop.*

Without stopping, she picked up the second stone. Adjusting slightly, she tossed again.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. *Paloop.*

A soft, trilling caw sounded from behind her. Turning, Sophie saw a raven standing where Raan had lain. Its black beak was curved, with a point that could gouge out an eye. Or a heart. The legs were smaller versions of the black, skeletal shin Sophie had seen under Raan’s armor. The only thing that was the same were the eyes. The darkest brown eyes Sophie had ever seen.

The raven nodded, then flapped his wings. He flew into the air and headed in the direction of the other bank.

Sophie looked down at the one remaining stone. Her special stone. And she knew, without a doubt, she could make it. Clutching it to her chest, Sophie got in position. She whispered, “I love you,” and her stone flew.

Splash.

The air where Raan had flown moments ago was a cloud of feathers. Even in the creeping darkness of sunset, Sophie saw the water turn a dark red as the waves dispersed the blood and floating plumage. Luckily, it was too dark to see her reflection.

Sophie turned, tears leaking from each eye. She put a hand on the big tree and said goodbye. Goodbye to Sera. Goodbye to Raan. Goodbye to her peninsula.

Chance Meeting

by David C. Kopaska-Merkel

Your brother in the river,
divers searched for hours,
you'd never met his wife, but here she is,
weeping, pressed up against you,
and now you know;
she's what you smelled on him
the last time you saw him,
the coffee shop by the bridge;
he wasn't hungry.

*He said, she sobs, you were the best
sister he ever could have had,*

*you pour more tea;
You shouldn't be alone, you say,
you take her home, make up the couch,
I'll be right here.*

Your brother settles into the mud,
he joins the bones that have lain there
since prom night, 1962:
the sky so clear,
her date's arms so strong,
she sank in her dress of roses,
brand-new heels,

into the soft soft mud 30 feet below.
her bony arms encircle your brother's neck,
I'm all alone, she says, and I'm so afraid.
I'll protect you, he says;
they dance cheek to cheek
in the cold wet dark.

You start awake, a warm body
trembling against you:

*I had a nightmare, she wails,
and you comfort her.*

In her dream,
your brother had taken a lover,
a young girl with milk-white skin,
he'd abandoned his wife,
was lying with his new girl,
didn't even remember
the woman he'd promised himself to,
only a dream, you say,
feeling her heart pounding in her chest,
her sweet breath on your cheek,
he'd never do you like that,
and scoot over to give her room.

I, the Necromancer, Confess to Loving the Dead

by Alina Măciucă

I banquet with the dead. Deep in the bowels of the City,
We dip unborn dreams in anguish and misfortune.
Our tongues rasp hope off solitary vertebrae;
In our cups, your faith goes stale.

Night after night, five-fingered death-flowers
Drill thousands of holes in the never cooling asphalt.
The dead clutch your ankles and then climb up your legs;
Distal phalanges dig micro-graves
In your thighs, but you don't feel a thing.
You keep walking, and chatting, and daydreaming,
As the dead claw and bite their way to the top of your head.

I don't command the dead. Sometimes, though,
They help me with the meagerest of my tasks.
Each All Hallows Eve, the dead bring me small treasures
they stumble upon in the myriad of tunnels they
Keep digging underneath the City.

I'm not a fool. I'd never even attempt to stop the dead
From doing whatever it is that the dead do.

The dead, they don't always crawl back to their graves
After having gnawed on your mind. Some of them stick to you
Like flies stick to fly ribbons, never to let go willingly,
Whispering their own nightmares and bitter defeats into your ears.
And when you break, because you will—the dead abhor the living
Or are, at best, indifferent to their suffering—they drink
You through the small cracks they punched
Through your skull.

I clean up after the dead,
Scrape the cobblestones when they leave bits of you behind.
I carry chunks of your bones in my purse,
Neatly organized in hundreds of tiny pockets, next to
The thoughts and reveries the dead spat out after having
Consumed you.

Alien Renaissance

Renaissance Portal by Janis Butler Holm





Alien Renaissance

by Janis Butler Holm

Alien Renaissance #1

Alien Renaissance

Alien Renaissance #2 by Janis Butler Holm





Alien Renaissance

by Janis Butler Holm

Alien Renaissance #3

Alien Renaissance

Alien Renaissance #4 by Janis Butler Holm



Contributor's Bios



BARBARA CANDIOTTI is a former High Tech Worker who now focuses on photography, art, and writing.

You can find her website at www.candiotti-art.com

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EMILY CROOK received Honorable Mention in the Writers of the Future contest, 1st quarter of 2021, for "Sea Change." It was also previously published in the *Planetary: Neptune* anthology.

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M. CHRISTINE BENNER DIXON lives, writes, and grows things in Pittsburgh, PA. She is the interim executive director of Write Pittsburgh. Her writing has appeared in *Reckoning*, *Funicular*, *Fusion Fragment*, and elsewhere.

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M.A. DOSSER is the cofounder and editor of *Flash Point SF* and a PhD candidate at the University of Pittsburgh. When he isn't researching speculative fiction fandoms, he's writing about raven knights, long voyages in outer space, or finding love in the apocalypse. You can read more about his creative and scholarly work at maxdosser.com.

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Itinerant writer **M. E. GARBER** currently lives halfway between the Kennedy Space Center and Disney World, the ideal place for writing speculative fiction. Her work has appeared in *Nature: Futures*, *Gal-*



axy's Edge Magazine, and *Podcastle*. When not writing, she's often sipping tea, snapping pics, or tending orchids, sometimes all at once. Visit her online at <http://megarber.net> or on Mastodon [@megarber@wandering.shop](https://mstdn.social/@megarber)

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ALEXANDRA GRUNBERG is a Glasgow based author, screenwriter, and poet. Her fiction has been published in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Cast of Wonders*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and more. She received an MLitt and DFA in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow. You can learn more about her work on her website, alexandragrunberg.weebly.com.

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GEORGE GUTHRIDGE has sold six novels, has twice been a Nebula finalist and once a Hugo finalist. He is co-winner (with coauthor Janet Berliner) of the Bram Stoker Award, novel category. He is now retired and living in Thailand.

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MAIJA HAAVISTO has had two poetry collections published in Finland: *Raskas vesi* (Aviador 2018) and *Hopeatee* (Oppian 2020). In English her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in e.g. *Moist*, *Capsule Stories*, *ShabdAaweg Review*, *The North*, *Streetcake*, *ANMLY*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Shoreline of Infinity* and *Kaleidoscope*. Follow her on Twitter at: <http://www.twitter.com/>

DiamonDie. She has poetry readings available on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/DiamonDie>

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JANIS BUTLER HOLM served as Associate Editor for *Wide Angle*, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

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ANDREW HUGHES has been writing and publishing short stories for the past decade. They have appeared in *Sanitarium Magazine*, Sinister Smile Press anthologies, and on the *No Sleep Podcast*. His fantasy novella, *Children of the Arc*, was published in 2023 by TWB Press. He currently lives in Arizona, working as a middle school English teacher, and mediating heated debates between his roommates, a Maine Coon cat and the world's most rambunctious husky

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R. MAC JONES is a writer and visual artist. His work has appeared in venues such as *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Star*Line*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. He has a website, <https://rmacjoneswrote.com/>, that is always in need of updating.

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JON MICHAEL KELLEY's recent credits include stories in the multiple award-winning anthology *Qualia Nous*, Firbolg Publishing's ambitious literary series *Enter at Your Own Risk: Dark Muses, Spoken Silences, Sensorama*, by Eibonvale Press, and *Triangu-*

lation: Lost Voices by Parsec Ink.

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E.E. KING is an award-winning painter, performer, writer, and naturalist. She'll do anything that won't pay the bills, especially if it involves animals.

Ray Bradbury called her stories, "marvelously inventive, wildly funny, and deeply thought-provoking."

She's been published in over 100 magazines and anthologies, including *Clarkesworld*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *Short Edition*, and *Flametree*. She's published several novels. Her stories are on Tangent's 2019 and 2020 year's best stories. She's been nominated for a Rhysling and several Pushcart awards.

She's shown at paintings at LACMA, painted murals in LA and is currently painting a mural in leap lab (<https://www.leaplab.org/>) in San Paula, CA.

She also co-hosts *The Long Lost Friends Show* on Metastellar YouTube and spends her summers doing bird rescue.

Check out paintings, writing, musings, and books at: www.elizabethveking.com and amazon.com/author/eeeking

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DAVID C. KOPASKA-MERKEL won the 2006 Rhysling award for best long poem (for a collaboration with Kendall Evans), and edits *Dreams & Nightmares* magazine (since 1986). He has edited *Star*line*, an issue of *Eye To The Telescope*, and several Rhysling anthologies, co-

edited the 2023 Dwarf Stars anthology, has served as SFPA president, and is an SFPA Grandmaster. His poems (more than 1200 of them) have been published in *Asimov's*, *Strange Horizons*, and more than

200 other venues. *Some Disassembly Required*, his latest collection of dark poetry, was published by Diminuendo Press in 2022. @David-KMresists on CS. Blog: <https://dreamsandnightmares-magazine.blogspot.com/>

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ALINA MĂCIUCĂ lives in Bucharest, which she loves to capture in highly imperfect photos. Sometimes, she posts those on her social media. She thrives in big cities and eclectic communities, and her needs are often met during her travels. So far, her work has been published in *Space and Time Magazine* and *Vastarien*.

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MIGUEL O. MITCHELL, PhD, is an award-winning, African American visual artist, speculative poet, and science fiction and fantasy author. He is also a retired chemistry professor who often uses his chemistry knowledge in his artistic work, including the mixed medium piece "Drinking from the Mountain Pool." Some of his creative work, both visual art and a selection of published poems, can be found at miguelmitchellsart.com.

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WENDY NIKEL is a speculative fiction author with a degree in elementary education, a fondness for road trips, and a terrible habit of forgetting where she's left her cup of tea. Her short fiction has been published by *Analog*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Nature*, and elsewhere. Her time travel novella series, beginning with *The Continuum*, is available from World Weaver Press. For more info, visit wendynikel.com

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IRINA TALL (NOVIKOVA) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was *The Red Book*, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week.

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STEVE PERRY is the author of 54 novels, including several bestsellers. Besides writing several Star Wars books and Conan novels, he is the author of the well-received *Matador* series. He coauthored several books with Tom Clancy.

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MARISCA PICHETTE is a queer author of monsters. More of her work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *F&SF*, and *Flash Fiction Online*, among others. Her debut collection of speculative poetry, *Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair*, is out now from Android Press.

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ELBY ROGERS is a self-taught artist of the macabre hailing from the, by now, famous state of Delaware in the United States.

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CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 150+ journals selecting his poetry, short stories, interviews, essays, plays, or art photography. (His photography was featured on the cover of six journals.) Two poetry books, *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurricane Press) and *Abandoned* (ScarsTv) have been published. His first photography book was recently published by Praxis. Carl is the art editor for *Minute Magazine*, a competitive runner and 2nd degree

black-belt in Taekwondo.

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CHRISTINA SNG is the three-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares* (2017), *A Collection of Dreamscapes* (2020), and *Tortured Willows* (2021). Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art have appeared in numerous venues worldwide, including *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *Penumbra*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect [@christinasng](https://twitter.com/christinasng).



Tree of Spells

by Barbara Candiotti

(full image)