



TALES OF
THE
**LOST
CITADEL**

KEALAN PATRICK BURKE • BRIAN HODGE • ELIZABETH MASSIE • MERCEDES M. YARDLEY
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— EDITED BY C.A. SULEIMAN —

THE CITY IS CALLED REDOUBT.
AND AS FAR AS ANYONE KNOWS,
IT IS THE LAST.

Seven decades ago, there were cities upon cities; kingdoms and nations, the remains of ancient empire. Cultures at war, cultures at trade. Humans, dwarves, elves, and others. Magic and monsters, rare but real. Regions of desolation, but also regions of plenty. And so it was for millennia, through two dynamic ages the lorekeepers and scribes called Ascensions.

Until the world ended. Most call it the Fall, but whatever term a given people choose to use, it marked the point where everything changed. Nations crumbled. Races died. Magic sputtered. Nature sickened.

The Dead woke.

Welcome to the first anthology set in the death-ravaged world of The Lost Citadel™. In *Tales of the Lost Citadel*, you'll find 14 flights of dark speculation on the nature and people of the last city of Redoubt, courtesy of some of the finest writers working in fantasy and horror today. Come inside these dwarf-built walls and hear their tales. Come, be haunted by a bone-shaker's daughter, a dark dressmaker, and a Forerunner; a Corpseman of the Undertaking, a desolate widow, and a witch of the wood. Introduced by editor and world-builder C.A. Suleiman, these stories combine to paint a portrait of a dark fantasy world unlike any other — one where all that's left of civilization has come together in a struggle to survive...

THE LOST CITADEL

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Cover Illustration by Todd Lockwood. Design by Shawn T. King

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TALES OF THE LOST CITADEL

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For Rick Hautala

*We all long for Eden, and we are constantly glimpsing it:
Our whole nature, at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most
human, is still soaked with the sense of exile.*

— J.R.R. TOLKIEN





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FOREWORD

GREETINGS, YOU WHO remain, you arguably happy few... and welcome to the Citadel.

With a setting this rich, and over three years' worth of world-building and thematics driving it all, you'd think that the foreword to our first narrative foray into all of that would focus largely on the story of that development process. But honestly, between the stories in *Tales of the Lost Citadel* and the art and background in the *Lost Citadel Writer's Bible*, I think the fallen world of Zileska speaks well for itself.

Instead, I'd like to talk a moment about two fine writers who informed all that vision and effort.

The epigraph of this book is from J.R.R. Tolkien, beloved godfather of western fantasy. The anthology itself is dedicated to writer Rick Hautala, who passed away before he could lend his genius to it.

It is, of course, hard to overstate the importance of Tolkien in any discussion of fantasy, be it of the severely dark variety or otherwise (and in this editor's humble opinion, the grandmaster got pretty good and dark there in a few parts of his seminal cycle). Lots of writers have been inspired by Tolkien, or have endeavored to carry on their view of his legacy, or have even actively tried to emulate his authorial voice. Not as many have gone out of their way to build an entire new world, but one that visibly honors Tolkien, with an express intent in using it to engage in critical analysis and thematic deconstruction *of* his legacy.

That idea sits at the core of the Lost Citadel experiment. Think of it like a game of Operation, where the players are contemporary dark fantasy writers and the patient with the Eureka nose is Tolkien. Ideally, the result is a whale of a good time that we editorial types have been referring to as “pitch-dark fantasy.”

For those not fortunate enough to know him, Rick Hautala was an award-winning writer and notoriously generous goosebump donor. (I'm an old hand with the scary stuff, it's safe to say, and his stories are among the few that have ever legitimately kept *me* from sleep.) He was also my friend, and the first writer invited to participate in the experiment that became *Tales of the Lost Citadel*. Rick believed in concept and metaconcept both, and just ate up all the juicy setting material I was excited to share with him. He signed on with the giddy glee of someone far younger than he, and said he looked forward to whatever gruesome conceit may bloom in his mind upon devouring the completed *Writer's Bible*.

Thanks to that all-time party pooper, death, Rick never got a chance to contribute, and the world — let alone my little project in my little corner of it — is that much poorer for it.

But Rick's enthusiasm was contagious as a yawn, and his excitement burned like fuel inside my own, and a couple years'

FOREWORD

worth of hard work later, I had in hand an anthology of original stories from some of the best in the business. Stories of many different literary voices, but in an underlying mode I like to think Rick would have enjoyed a great deal. Although he loved my music, he never got to hear the song my band Toll Carom contributed to the *Tales* video. Although he loved and excelled at short stories, and put out several amazing collections of them, he never got to read his fellow contributors' stories; not even mine. Those things sting a little, but that pain pales in comparison to what Rick Hautala did for the Lost Citadel, for me, for all of us who knew and enjoyed his prodigious talent and indomitable spirit.

Our Citadel is a transmedia setting, and so there are many who have contributed to bringing it to life: not just writers, but visual artists and musicians. They are all gifted, and have all gifted this brave new world their time and talent. But when it comes to this, the anthology that awaits just beyond the turning of your page, perhaps the two most formative contributors are the two who will never see it for themselves.

Both men were masterful storytellers, and each one fundamental to this project in his own way, but one of them was truly a shepherd of lost Redoubt, and this collection of Redoubt tales is dedicated with love to him.

C.A. Suleiman
Washington, D.C.



REQUIEM, IN BELLS

ARI MARMELL

THE BELLS NEVER let up. The stifling heat and the sour stench of people, human and otherwise, crammed together between streets, between walls, never meant to accommodate such numbers... those, Khulechtan was long accustomed to. He felt those things, hated them, splashed the sweat from his brow and the haft of his spear, snorted the rancid air from his nostrils, and dismissed them. The dull buzz of a dozen accents, the creaking of wagon wheels, the sharp panting of dwarven slaves, and the longer, rasping breaths of his more bestial companion; the sun beating down on boiled and sweat-scoured leather, the mistrustful and fearful glances of all whom he passed — directed often his way, even more frequently toward the rotting and fearsome cargo he guarded — all comingled into an oppressive shroud. A shroud he wore day after day, and also, more often than not, managed to ignore.

It was *all* oppressive in the great city of Redoubt. The *last* city of Redoubt. The hunger and the want; the dreary, unsatisfying fare that was all most could afford to assuage that want. The day and the night, the labor and the rest. The living and the Dead. All oppressive, but all capable of being set aside, at times, by the dour men and women who had lived entire lives in their shadow.

But not the bells. Crafted to chime high and painful to the ear, to clash with one another in horrible cacophony, the bells would not be ignored, for that would have defeated their purpose.

Khulechtan barked a sharp order at the dwarves hauling the wagon. Most didn't even look up at the sound of his voice, just kept beards matted with sweat and dust aimed roadward, but obeyed. Creaking and juddering, the great wheeled cage turned a sharp corner, continuing past the ramshackle huts and impoverished tenements — dilapidated, listing, packed well beyond capacity, more hives than dignified abodes — that made up the next street on Khulechtan's appointed rounds.

Through the endless din of Eastside, poorest and most crowded districts of Redoubt's Inner City, through a hundred conversations and the cries of children and the bleating of goats, those bells cut. And even the most oblivious pedestrian stepped aside for Khulechtan's cart.

All save those who had deliveries for him.

Doors drifted open, where the humble tenements *had* doors. Leather curtains swept aside where they did not. From homes, the occasional shop, even sporadic alleyways, men and women — mostly human, of this culture or that, but occasionally a free dwarf — shuffled out bearing their dead.

Not *too* many, of course. Even in the harsh environs of Redoubt, people weren't dropping dead constantly, and Khulechtan's wagon was but one of three or four that would pass through this district

throughout the day and night. The Undertaking never stopped, never slowed.

It wouldn't dare.

So he would stop, and unlatch the wood-barred cage, and watch as the people said a rude farewell to their loved ones before dumping them into the growing heap of corpses. Sometimes, the dwarven slaves would assist. Most of the time, Khulechtan drove the tip of his broad-bladed boar spear through the shoulders of the dead, severing muscle and tendon and bone, before locking back up and continuing on his way.

It was, perhaps, an unnecessary precaution. Many of the dead would never rise, and they almost never rose before processing. It took most people days, on average, and not scant hours to join the ranks of the Dead.

But "on average" was not "always." Khulechtan's precautions wouldn't keep a revnant from rising, but it ensured the creature couldn't tear at the bars — or grab an unsuspecting passerby, or slave, or Khulechtan himself! — if it did.

The extra bloodshed meant a more thorough cleaning of the wagon come end of shift, but that was a price he would pay willingly, especially as it was the dwarves who would be responsible for the bulk of the extra labor.

Lost in thought, to what extent the bells permitted, otherwise struggling to keep one eye on the growing cargo of dead flesh and the other on the citizens responding to the call of his chimes, Khulechtan almost failed to notice when the other member of his entourage fell suddenly behind. Only when Rasuk, eldest of the dwarven slaves, called the others to a halt and addressed him with a questioning, "*erus?*" in a parched tone did their leader recognize something had changed.

"Hudai? What is it?"

The ghûl slave had halted beside the boarded window of an old shack — teetering, stinking of dry rot, but a veritable palace compared to the tenements. Hudai sniffed at the sill, canine snout swaying rhythmically. As he wore only a pair of breeches, awkwardly altered to fit his inhuman frame, the hyena-brown pelt that covered most of his body rippled visibly as he pondered. He turned only slowly at the sound of his name (or the closest a human could come to approximating his name), idly scratching one claw down the rough, leathery skin that armored his chest and belly.

“What is it?” Khulechtan asked again.

When the ghûl replied, it was in the series of growls, snarls, and barks that were the only sounds the race could produce, a primitive language that had taken Khulechtan no small effort to learn.

“Smell death. Sick. Fresh.”

The human tried not to shudder at the hunger those words seemed to evoke in the ghûl even as he spoke them. “Are you sure?” Few in Redoubt would hide a corpse when the bells pealed. The consequences — legal and otherwise — were dire indeed.

“*Sure.*” Hudai paused, head tilting like a curious hound. “*Almost sure,*” he amended, grunting and pointing back toward the wagon. “*Smelly.*”

“Oh, *is* it?” Khulechtan cursed under his breath, but he’d worked with Hudai for a while, now. He found the carrion-eaters vile, had no idea how the Ouazi had stomachached living side-by-side with them in the days before the Fall, before Redoubt, but... Hudai wasn’t too unreliable, too dumb, as ghûl went.

And, Khulechtan reminded himself in a moment of shame, as a near pure-blooded Surinzan himself, it wasn’t as though he had *any* right to criticize another culture’s interaction with their non-human neighbors.

“Keep the bells ringing,” he commanded Rasuk. “I want everyone to know this is official.” Then, as the dwarf relayed his

orders to the slave responsible for shaking the framework of chimes — and who had stopped when the wagon did — Khulechtan moved to join Hudai at the shack.

“All right,” he told the ghúl. “Let’s see.” He raised a fist, pounded on the door so that it nearly shook from its frame, then took a step back so he had room to wield his spear if need be, and called out. “*Taker!*”

In the instant of the door creaking open, he’d taken it all in. The young man in a mantle standing before him, hair ragged and unwashed, face puffy with tears and distended in anger. The older relatives back in the room, hunched on rickety furniture, gawping fearfully; parents of either the bereaved or the deceased, reluctant to say anything but terrified of defying the Undertaking.

And the odor, of course.

“*Sure now,*” Hudai gruffed, but it hardly mattered. Khulechtan’s own merely human nose was more than sufficient.

“There’s nothing for you here, Corpseman,” the younger man snarled. “Not today.”

Between his patrician features and the sharp edge to his consonants, he struck Khulechtan as Angat. Even in Eastside, where poverty and want laid all people low and ostensibly equal, so many of the arrogant bastards still held themselves above the law.

This, despite — or perhaps because of — the fact that the Angat had come up with or codified most of that same law.

Still, the Taker saw this now and again, and held some sympathy for the grieving. On occasion, even knowing the laws and the risks, some people simply weren’t emotionally equipped to let go. Not criminals, not bad folks — and, assuming they could be handled swiftly, not worth the effort of detaining or reporting.

So it was, between his fatigue and his compassion, that Khulechtan — whose legal authority permitted so much more —

delivered the blow with knuckles rather than with blade, and to the young widower's stomach rather than to any spot that might readily break.

"I grieve along with you," he said, his tone flat. "But if that body is not in my wagon before this moaning idiot catches his breath, it won't be the only one I collect from this house today."

Despite their advancing age, the dead woman's relatives had her in the cage with time to spare. Khulechtan spun on his heel, nodding a brusque farewell to them and an equally short "well done" to the ghûl, and resumed his rounds, accompanied once more by the screech of wheels, the tromp of dwarven boots, and those God-forsaken chimes.

It was hours later, the sun having only begun its westward plummet, when those rounds were finally complete. Tired, sticky with perspiration, the Corpseman and his team turned their wagon toward the yard, where the bodies would be processed — dismantled not only so they wouldn't rise anew, but for daily use; bones carved for tools, skin gathered for tanning, fat for rendering into tallow, hair for yarn, every possible piece used in resource-starved Redoubt. From there, the slaves would take to their pens for food and rest, while Khulechtan returned to a home not much more comfortable.

All as it had been for days beyond counting before this, and almost assuredly would be for days beyond counting afterward. Except that, today, Hudai remained restless. His feet fell heavily, his snout working, his voice a constant mumble, rumble, deep in his throat.

"Not enough... Not right... Not enough..."

Ignore it, Khulechtan told himself, time and again. Just a ghûl slave gibbering nonsense. Meaningless. Shift is over. Go home.

"Not enough..."

"God's name, Hudai, what are you *talking* about?"

So much for ignoring it.

Hudai's snout swung, aimed almost accusingly. "*Not enough. Too few dead today.*"

"Oh, for... More people die some days than others. It happens."

"*Not this way. All one neighborhood. Too few. Feels bad. Not right.*"

"What, do you actually count the dead we collect? Do you even know *how* to count?"

The ghûl squinted, showing only slivers of black, predatory orbs. "*Don't need counting. Don't need three, four, six. Only much less, much more. Today, much less. Too much. Not right.*"

"*Erus?*" Rasuk, the dwarf, approached with gaze only just downcast, voice pitched low, a slave's proper diffidence. Here, the worst of the road dust splashed from his face, the piercings that were the mark of his station showed in sharp contrast to the sun-painted hue of his skin and beard. "Will you be needing anything further this evening?"

"No, I don't think... Rasuk, you didn't happen to notice if today's collections were particularly shy of normal, did you?"

Rasuk flicked a peculiar questioning glance at Hudai before answering. Khulechtan realized he had no idea if the dwarf understood any of the ghûl's speech, or how much of the conversation he might have overheard. "I can't say I did, *erus*. Although... Now you mention, the wagon might have felt a measure light on our way back to the yard. But if so, it was nothing I could swear to."

"All right. Fine, you're all dismissed for the day. Good job, everyone. Hudai, that means you, too."

"*Mmm.*"

And that, Khulechtan was determined, was that. He was too tired, and his duties too important, to disrupt what little resting time he had on the vague and ill-defined suspicions of a ghûl slave. He was going home for a meal, might treat himself to a drink or

a few rounds of dice with neighbors, and then to sleep. He was certainly not going to spare another moment's thought to the precise number of corpses he'd collected.

Not one.

"IF THIS PROVES to be nothing more than a figment of your primitive mind," Khulechtan snapped for what was far from the first time, "you'll wish you'd kept your damn muzzle shut."

Hudai, as had been his wont since the irritated Taker had come to collect him from the slave pens at the yard, grunted softly and otherwise said nothing at all.

Nothing about Khulechtan's current garb announced who or what he was. When he'd finally clambered out of bed and gotten dressed, unable to keep his mind from chewing over the ghûl's concerns, he'd known his off-hour efforts might require a certain subtle anonymity. Rather than the leathered armors he wore on his rounds, he had dressed in a mundane tunic and leggings of drab, undyed grayish-browns that appeared almost bright against the ebon tone of his own skin. They were also nothing compared to the more ornate and more colorful garb that was the tradition of the Surinzan people, but Khulechtan lacked the wealth to afford such a wardrobe.

The only nod to his heritage that he carried, indeed one of the few he even owned, was his *sleaghar* — a short-hafted spear of long, leaf-shaped blade, designed for cutting as well as thrusting. The traditional weapon of the Surinzan, it was more versatile and far less conspicuous than the massive boar-spear he carried on his rounds. Currently it hung over his back, strap slung loosely across one shoulder.

Hudai, of course, carried no weapon. As a slave, it was not permitted. As a ghûl, it was hardly required.

The foot traffic at night was only marginally lighter than the daylight hours', but that lessening of the ambient scents — as well as the pair's choice to walk directly beside the buildings, rather than keeping to the streets — made sufficient difference. They had only begun retracing their earlier route through the neighborhood when the ghûl drew up short, snuffling up at a second-story window.

"Hmm. Here. Death. Fresh."

"Body?"

"Not now. But recent."

"And you're sure?"

"Mostly."

"Wonderful."

So Hudai couldn't be positive. And even if he was right, couldn't another Taker have come through on rounds after Khulechtan? Could the ghûl be smelling the traces of a corpse that was properly disposed of? Khulechtan did some quick subtraction on his fingers and decided that, while it wasn't *likely* one of his brethren had come through since his own earlier visit, it was possible.

He sighed, shrugged one shoulder so his *sleaghar* dropped to his fist, and started up the stairs. The roaches and beetles were a noisy carpet beneath his steps, not even bothering to scatter. The rats were fewer, and small on average; the survivors left behind to breed, while their larger compatriots had doubtless already been trapped and eaten.

"Through here?" he asked, stepping into the hall and stopping before a doorway that, like most of its neighbors, boasted only a worn curtain for privacy.

Hudai sniffed. *"Yes."*

Well, if someone inside had indeed kept a deceased relative from the Undertaking, they weren't going to casually admit to it. Khulechtan hefted his spear and lunged inside with a fearsome shout.

He emerged some minutes, many threats, and a few bone-bruising raps with the haft of the *sleaghar* later, lost in thought. Hudai, clearly puzzled despite wearing nothing resembling a human expression, held his questions until the pair had returned to the streets.

“Why pay for dead flesh? Men don’t eat it.”

“You heard the old woman. She doesn’t know. Nobody in the neighborhood knows.”

“Thought you might have a guess.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Hmm.” Then, after a few moments and several dozen passersby, *“What now?”*

What now, indeed? He could, probably *should*, simply report this to the Watch, or even the Magisterium’s Hoodsmen. Either organization had the authority to investigate this sort of crime. As a Taker, Khulechtan’s duties technically only required the collection — and, where necessary, suppression — of the dead.

But then, if this threatened the Undertaking as a process, that *was* his responsibility. That it was happening on his rounds, didn’t that also mean he ought to look into it? That he might be liable — or at least blamed — for anything that went wrong if he did not?

And of course, if those absconding with these bodies failed to take precautions and an outbreak of the Restless resulted, that was *everyone’s* problem.

So be it. Khulechtan studied the homes up and down the street, searching for... There! A pair of candles, placed side by side on the leftmost edge of a windowsill. That, according to the elderly couple he’d interrogated, was the signal by which members of the local street gang would know a body lay, available and not yet collected, for purchase.

“Go back to the yard, Hudai.”

“Mmm?”

“Go back. Get some sleep. If I fail to report for duty tomorrow, tell the others what we’ve learned.” Many of them would, most probably, doubt the word of a ghûl slave, but Hudai’s experience working with several, along with Khulechtan’s own absence, would at least get them moving.

“Back? You continue alone?”

“I’m going to have to follow them to God-knows-where. I can blend in through most of the Inner City, but there are places where a ghûl would be far too conspicuous.” He frowned. “You do know that word? Conspicuous?”

“Yes.”

“Good. And you understand your orders?”

“Yes.”

“So go.”

“Mmm.” But that lone grumble aside, Hudai obeyed, vanishing swiftly into the darkness. Khulechtan wandered around a bit, found a darkened doorway that allowed a good view of the tenement he’d selected, and waited.

They arrived, three of them, with a goat-drawn wagon full of burlap sacks. Far away as he was, Khulechtan still got a brief whiff of near-rotten vegetables. Smart, if they planned to smuggle a body that way. And indeed, they went inside for only moments, returning with a man-sized parcel. This, they carefully placed beneath the sacks they already had before continuing on their way.

Struggling to appear oblivious and casual, the Corpseman followed.

They covered a great distance, stopping once to collect a second cadaver. The tenor of the streets changed, as did those who walked them. Khulechtan realized that they were approaching the edge of Eastside; not remotely a wealthy neighborhood by any measure, but

markedly better off than where they'd started. The passersby wore nicer garb, the homes were ever so slightly larger and definitely in better repair. Even the air smelled fresher, though the place remained crowded enough, the people sweaty enough, the labors of daily life hard enough, that it really oughtn't have.

Had they continued much further, into neighborhoods nicer still, Khulechtan might have begun to stand out. As it was, however, they hauled their bleating goats to a halt before a long structure of multiple storefronts. Several boasted signs, but the moons were insufficiently full, the streetside torches too far apart, for Khulechtan to make out whatever illustrations they bore. In any event, they should all have been closed up for the night, but the door on which the first of the trio knocked opened almost immediately. Several more men emerged to assist them, and they swiftly had both bodies inside and out of sight. The door slammed shut, while one man returned to the wagon and drove it off down the road.

Khulechtan dashed across the way, flattened himself in the doorway, and tried the latch. He was disappointed but not remotely surprised to find it locked.

Break it down? It wouldn't be difficult, but neither would it be quiet. With a sharp sigh, he returned to his prior waiting spot and hoped the wagon-driver would return.

As luck had it, he did, only moments later. Khulechtan waited until he heard the thunk of a heavy key in the lock across the way, then sprinted once more.

The stranger gave a juddering sigh as the *sleaghar* slid into his back, angled upward to catch heart and lungs. He slumped, with only Khulechtan's grip on the spear holding him upright.

The Taker swiftly dragged the body inside, swung the door shut with a heel, and leaned back against it. The room was dark save for a single guttering oil lamp, but the heavy shapes bobbing in the

liquid shadow suggested a potter's shop. Khulechtan dropped to his knees, carefully dragging the edge of his spear across the dead man's every major tendon, and jabbing the tip through a great many joints as well. It would have to do until he figured out what was happening here and got the body — or bodies, as he knew might well be the case before he was done — properly collected.

Now that he'd grown accustomed to the feeble lighting and could see the man up close, his confusion only mounted. The rough features and rougher garb, the scars and the various blades, all confirmed what he'd already known: These were members of a street gang purchasing the corpses of the poor and desperate. Why? How could they afford it, and what use could they possibly have? Whatever answers Khulechtan hoped to find tonight, they wouldn't come so easily, and certainly not from this one.

As a door at the rear of the shop provided the only other obvious egress, it was there — after cleaning his blade on the dead man's tunic — he headed next.

It did not, as one might otherwise expect, lead to a back storeroom or the shopkeeper's quarters.

A brief sloping passage carried Khulechtan downward, through shattered stone and tunneled earth, into a series of underground chambers that might once have been an offshoot of the ancient dwarven catacombs. Once, but no longer. Any religious or funerary symbols had been crushed or scraped from the walls and the floors had been deliberately smoothed, the footsteps of ages ground away. Once well beneath the roadway, the corridor twisted several times, until the intruder had no solid notion which direction he faced. Still, getting lost seemed no real threat; the passage only went the one way, and even had it not, he had begun to hear the rumble of voices — a surprising number, echoing over and around one another — from ahead.

There was also a sentry, another gang thug by the looks of him, waiting in the corridor between Khulechtan and his destination. He was barely watching, however, presumably secure in his belief that nobody but his wagon-driving compatriot would be coming this way. By the time he recognized Khulechtan as a stranger, let alone a potential threat, the Corpseman's *sleaghar* was already between his ribs.

This time, for all his training, Khulechtan was nearly too stunned to take precautions, to mutilate the body enough to slow it down should it rise. For in falling out of his path, the dead sentry had provided him with his first clear view of what awaited.

The chamber was massive, more an artificial cavern than a room. Multiple scores of people were gathered within, laughing and shouting and cheering like spectators in one of the city's great arenas. Their garb, their stature, their skin marked them as members of all five of humanity's great nations, and every possible mixture thereof. For all its variety, however, the group wardrobe was only the finest available. Many of those present, though not all, wore masks of various styles, flaunting their riches but hiding their faces.

Of course. Khulechtan nodded absently. *That was why this — whatever it was — was happening at the very edges of Eastside. Couldn't ask the wealthy to lower themselves to come any further into the realms of the unwashed, could we?*

At numerous points throughout the crowd stood men and women in cheap, piecemeal armor — mostly of boiled leather, like the Taker's own, which he had rather fervently begun to miss. Armed with heavy axes or long-hafted spears, they clearly served as guards, though Khulechtan couldn't immediately guess to what purpose. Surely the crowd itself didn't require that sort of control, and they weren't positioned to watch the various entrances to the great hall.

No, they had to be standing sentry against whatever was within the pit.

REQUIEM. IN BELLS

Located in the center of the chamber, it was this great, gaping hole on which the shouting spectators had fixed their attention. Unfortunately, from his current position Khulechtan couldn't even begin to make out what might be within that hollow that was worth such focus, nor could he possibly hope to hear what might be happening over the roar of the throng.

Nothing for it, then, but to move closer. His own outfit was poorer than theirs, but if he kept his distance from the guards and acted as just another member of the crowd, he might pass unremarked. Fortunately, though few in number, several of the attendees had also come armed, so his spear wouldn't instantly give the game away.

One deep breath to steel himself, and he strode boldly from the corridor.

He needn't have worried. Nobody so much as glanced his way, save for when he elbowed past this onlooker or that in hopes of a better view, and even then he got only a snarl or a sneer before they'd forgotten he existed.

The sour scent of rotting blood assailed him before he neared the pit, until he struggled not to gag, but he felt no shock to accompany his revulsion. That these wealthy and powerful bastards were here for some illegal bloodsport or other was the obvious conclusion, one he'd already reached; this merely confirmed his suspicions. What he failed to understand, still needed to learn, was how the illegal purchase of the deceased could possibly play into—

Khulechtan finally saw the contents of the hole.

At first, he couldn't be certain what it was he witnessed. A trio of figures circled one another, locked in combat, while a fourth held back, lurking on the outskirts, perhaps watching and waiting for an opportune moment. Details and specific features remained difficult to discern, as all four combatants were drenched in thick,

dripping blood. Far, far too much to be their own, or the result of any struggle; it must have been poured freshly upon them, in amounts beyond what any human body could hold, before the contest began.

Grotesque as it was, it wasn't merely the blood itself that bothered him. In staring, trying to determine precisely what was happening, he saw the foul stuff dripping from three of the figures below, splashing and dangling in viscous strings, but from the fourth... It was hard to be sure, at this distance, but it seemed to be clinging, shearing off only in tiny flakes as though... frozen?

Khulechtan's breath caught in his chest as if it had claws; the hair on his neck stood so straight it might well have broken against his armor had he worn it. It couldn't be! It *couldn't*! Nobody would!

The centermost combatant lashed out, fingers splayed like claws, faster than a bolt from an arbalest. Flesh flew, and bone, a length of rib tearing free and embedding itself in the soft earthen wall of the pit.

The victim of that inhuman assault did not fall, did not flinch. Instead it lunged, jaw gaping wide, wider, until skin and muscle tore, so that it might take a bite from the body of its foe.

His scream of horror and disbelief was lost amidst the cheering of the crowd.

Fighting for breath he looked away, forcing himself to swallow his bile, to squelch the urge to flee, to think through the fog of emotion.

And the first question his frantic, panicking thoughts settled on was *How?* During the occasional outbreaks within the city, amidst the ebbing and flowing tides that flooded the world beyond Redoubt's walls, the Dead attacked only the living, never one another.

Was that why they were covered in blood? Fresh enough, and in such quantities, could it trick them into mistaking one of their own for something alive? Some, perhaps. The Dead could be cunning, but many were all but mindless and none were particularly intelligent. Those that were bestial enough, and who relied on senses more mundane

than eldritch, could probably be fooled. Did those responsible for this travesty of a sport simply destroy any who weren't? Did they...?

Over his shoulder, in the corner of his vision, Khulechtan caught a glimpse of movement on high. Situated above and adjacent to the corridor through which he'd entered was another room, one with an open window allowing a full view of whatever went on below. It was, he decided, almost assuredly an office or overseer's post of some sort. No need to wonder and guess at what was going on if there was someone who could simply tell him.

With new determination, the Taker began pushing his way back to and around the edges of the audience, seeking the stairs.

They weren't hard to find, and led to a smaller hallway that ended in a single door, and a single guard standing outside it. "Not allowed up here," the man growled, barely glancing up.

Clearly, these people had grown too comfortable with their secret. They might have been anticipating difficulty from the Dead, but not the living. Khulechtan could only marvel at it, as he once again wiped blood from his spear. He'd killed more men — men who weren't already dead, anyway — this evening than in his past year, and none had had the opportunity to voice a protest, let alone fight back.

Readying himself, he reached out, clicked the latch, and slipped inside.

There wasn't much to see. A few chairs, several of which were pulled right up to the observation window. A few heavy strongboxes with iron locks of a quality rarely seen in this day and age. And a single inhabitant, slowly turning away from that window. "Yes, what is—?" His eyes widened at the realization that Khulechtan was not the guard he'd clearly been expecting.

"Go for a weapon and you die," Khulechtan told him, *sleaghar* raised. The other nodded.

He didn't look especially imposing. The pale features and gaunt

build suggested Menhada blood, but he was remarkably short for any grown human, let alone one of those long-limbed folk.

But it was the large mole or similar growth on his forehead that, combined with his height, ignited an ember of recognition.

“You’re ‘Little Goat,’ aren’t you?”

The street thug blinked. “We met?”

“No,” Khulechtan told him. “But I’ve worked enough with the Watch to have learned a bit about the gang leaders and other criminals in my neighborhoods.”

“Your neighborhoods, huh?” He was quick, was Little Goat. It took only a moment for him to ponder through the possibilities. “You’re not Watch, and wearing no hood, so... Corpseman, yeah?”

“Yes.” There didn’t seem any purpose to denial.

Little Goad nodded and began idly passing a small ceramic bauble back and forth, hand to hand. “We figured it was too risky approaching any of you,” he said, “but since you found us... We could use a Corpseman on our side. Wouldn’t require much of you, and we could make you rich.”

“Are you *mad*? Have you any idea how dangerous, how stupid, this is?”

“I assure you, we’ve taken precautions.” Little Goat’s bauble all but danced between his fingers. “We’ve—”

“Drop that.”

The bauble froze, caught between finger and thumb. “What? Why? It’s just—”

“It’s irritating.” *And I’ve no way of knowing it’s not a charm or talisman*, Khulechtan thought but did not add. “Drop it. Now.”

Little Goat sighed, and obeyed. The ceramic clattered to the floor by his feet.

“You’ve put all of Redoubt in danger!” the Taker snarled at him. “You’ll be fortunate if they execute you instead of exiling you

beyond the city walls! You want to play audience to the Dead? That'll be opportunity enough!"

"We're not endangering anything, Corpseman. We keep careful watch on the bodies we collect. They are caged, and any that haven't risen in a few days are burned. We observe their behavior. Any that won't fight, or seem too potentially clever, are destroyed."

"And did you happen to notice one of them down there, right now, is holding back and letting the others do its work for it? How blind are your 'observers'?"

"We're still judging that one. It may be put down, yes. And we do the same to any that show signs of abilities that might make holding them difficult."

"You have four of them in a pit surrounded by people! Some of the Dead climb walls like spiders. Everyone out of his shit-filled swaddling cloth knows that!"

Little Goat shrugged, waved a hand at the observation window. "The sides of the pit are soft soil. Even one that could climb would be slowed, more than enough for our guards to meet it. We know. We've tested it. And before you ask, no, none of the Dead are strong enough to leap that distance."

"That you *know* of, you idiot! But nobody knows what sorts of powers undiscovered Restless might possess. For all you know, some may fly!"

"In seventy years, there's never been a single instance—"

"But you can't *know*."

"We consider it worth the risk. Have you any idea how much the rich boar-fuckers down there are paying for this opportunity? To witness something they haven't already seen? To take back some power over a shadow that has stretched over their entire lives?"

"People *should* fear the Dead. They're a plague, a curse, not... entertainment."

“They can be both. We’ve *made* them both.”

In the midst of Khulechtan’s disbelief, a sudden understanding struck. “This is too big for a street gang. You haven’t the resources, or the contacts among the city’s wealthy, to pull off something like this. Who’s behind you, Goat? Some bored Angat patron? The Old Wolves? Or... the Iron Moon, I’d wager. This *does* seem the sort of scheme the Nightcoats would have their hands in.”

For the first time, the expression on Little Goat’s face fell. “You want to be careful the names you throw around that way, friend. These are people who don’t care to be spoken of.”

“You play with the Dead! Forgive me if I don’t trust your judgment on who is to be feared.”

“Look, we’ll have plenty of time to argue this... if you join up. You could be of real use to us, and we’ll more than make it worth your while. You’ll be rich, maybe eventually as rich as some of those arseholes down there screaming their fool heads off. What do you say?”

The offer wasn’t without its temptations. They *did* seem to have some notion of what precautions to take. And the wealth... Khulechtan was never going to become rich as a Corpseman. He could barely afford to keep what little he already possessed.

But these people, they didn’t understand what they *toyed* with, not truly. Nor did they understand Khulechtan himself.

He was Surinzan. He carried on his shoulders the great sin of his people, the betrayal that had left the gentle Meliae, as a race, to fall beneath the hands and teeth of the Dead. He would not forget, even if so many of his own brethren chose to; it had driven him to become a Taker, to serve this city that nobody loved, though it kept them all alive.

He would not be party to another betrayal. Not for anything.

“We’re leaving,” he informed Little Goat, the finality of his

answer evident in his frosty tone. “You’re going to tell all of this to the Watch, and in return I’ll make it clear you cooperated. Make any attempt to flee, or allow any of your guard to stop us, you die. And I assure you, I know how to make certain you die slow, in agony.”

“I believe you do.” Little Goat, his hands half-raised, took a single step toward the door and the spear-wielding Corpseman...

A step that landed with a sandy *crunch* as the ceramic bauble disintegrated beneath his sandal.

In the half a heartbeat it took Khulechtan’s gaze to flicker down to the floor and back, Little Goat had produced a long-bladed dagger, now clenched tightly, expertly, in one fist. The *sleaghar* still gave the Taker every advantage — heavier, far longer, yet very nearly as swift — but armed as he now was, Little Goat could at least hold him off several moments. Quite possibly long enough for...

Yes. Already Khulechtan could hear the echo of sprinting steps pounding up the stairs. The bead *had* been enchanted, then. A minor magic, certainly, if all it did was alert the guards to come running, but that was all it *needed* to do.

“Should’ve taken the offer,” the diminutive criminal taunted. “Now you really *are* about to be a corpse man.”

“Oh, I’ve never heard *that* before,” Khulechtan mocked, thoughts racing.

Little Goat scowled. “You won’t hear it again. There’s no way out.”

“Of course there is.” *God, this was going to hurt...*

Even as the door burst open beneath the fists of the first guard, Khulechtan dove through the observation window.

Chamber walls flashed past, and he landed, hard and painfully, before he had time even to register the motion. Had he struck the floor, his injuries might have been far worse, but as he’d hoped and prayed, he landed instead on several onlookers. Caught utterly by surprise — and, in one instance, by the tip of his naked spear —

those unsuspecting souls suffered far worse, crying out in pain at the bruising, gashing, possible breaking beneath his weight.

He staggered to his feet, dazed, whipping his blade about to clear himself some space. All around him were screams, shouts, angered faces. People shoved at him, tore at his sleeves, furious at being “attacked,” at having their fun and games interrupted. Other shouts, from beyond, commanding, the soldiers of Little Goat’s gang — and whoever funded them — closing in, pushing through the crowd.

He tried to move, to run or at least to walk, to force his way through the flood of flesh and bone, only to be pushed back. Blows fell wherever he turned his back, naked fists as of yet but with cudgels and blades sure to come. Again he staggered, stumbled, took a few steps in the only direction the packed throng would allow, stumbled once more...

And fell as the ground beneath his feet simply ended.

This second plummet ended on softer earth, Khulechtan lying flat, the wind knocked out of him. For a bare instant the crowd above went silent, and then erupted into a new chorus of roars and cheers. Through swimming vision he saw them all staring down at him over the edge, audience and guards and Little Goat himself.

The fetor of rot and rancid blood washed over him, and the sudden surge of terror washed away the worst of his bewilderment. For he now knew where he was, and what horrid fate likely awaited.

Khulechtan scrambled to his feet, pressed tight to the wall of soil, and raised his spear to meet the Dead.

The struggle down here in the pit had continued, of course, while he and Little Goat had conversed above. Only two of the four Restless still stood, the other pair having been torn and wrenched and chewed into harmless, quivering chunks.

As before, one of them held back. A gaunt, leathery creature of

near skeletal features beneath the coating of blood, it moved around the edges of the pit in quick, jerking motions near impossible to follow, almost insectile in its way. From there it watched Khulechtan with a burning, predatory intensity that disturbed the Corpseman far more than its grotesque appearance. It passed, as it circled, over a heavy wooden trapdoor built into the pit's floor.

It was the other, however, that demanded his immediate attention. A more foul, bloated thing, like a drowned man, it staggered toward him with alarming speed and arms outstretched. Khulechtan felt an unnatural chill as it approached, shedding flakes and slivers of frozen blood. He felt himself slow, weighted down by a creeping langor.

He barely dodged the thing's first swipe, dropping and rolling to the right. A shower of earth from the wall followed, made icy cold by the dead man's touch. He lashed back with the *sleaghar* as he came to his feet, but his aim was off; the tip passed a full hands'-breadth from decaying flesh.

Khulechtan retreated, trying hard to keep from moving nearer to the other, lurking thing, and the frigid corpse pursued. He heard numbers in the shouting from above as the bastards laid wagers on how long he might last, or which of the Dead would end him.

He wondered if his own lifeless body would rise again to fight in this hellish arena, and nearly vomited where he stood.

And with that, he recognized the error in his tactics. He was already battered, fatigued, not at his best. His enemy? Would never tire, never slow. Fearsome as his opponent was, Khulechtan couldn't afford retreat, couldn't wait for the perfect opening.

The dead thing charged, and the Taker moved to meet it.

Above, the crowd roared its approval.

Again Khulechtan rolled, bobbing beneath the outstretched hand, but this time he drew himself up short, jutting out a leg to

halt his momentum. Still in a crouch directly behind the revnant, which was already turning, he lashed out with the edge of his spear.

Flesh and tendon parted, bone chipped, and the thing staggered as its left leg suddenly threatened to give way.

Khulechtan dove, landing on his side, and lashed out again, making the same strike against the other ankle, then forced himself to rise.

The revnant swayed, nearly toppling, unable to take a step. It wasn't pain — these things, so far as anyone knew, didn't feel pain — but simply the refusal of its feet to obey, to support it.

The *sleagbar* punched through a knee, back to front, slicing muscle, severing tendon, popping the kneecap out of joint, and the creature finally fell.

No cheers, now. The crowd had gone silent.

Khulechtan stabbed downward, over and over — at the other knee, at the spine, the neck, the head, the shoulders, anything and everything to keep the thing down, to render its undead body useless.

More cries from above, now of anger, save for a fortunate few who had bet against the odds.

And still the other corpse waited, watching but never approaching. Khulechtan should have felt relief at this respite, but all he could do was wonder and worry as to why.

A shouted command, Little Goat's voice. "More!" Chains clanked, mechanisms ground together beneath the earth, and the trapdoor slowly rose. Decomposing hands flopped about in the gap as more of the Dead struggled to emerge.

That was it, then. Against two, and only one at a time, Khulechtan might have had a chance. Now?

From across the pit, a repulsive, hissing rasp, the fearsome breath from a thing that *had* no breath. Khulechtan met its gaze, and he swore, though it was impossible on a face already locked in a skull's rictus grin, that it smiled.

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And, before its compatriots had begun to emerge fully from beneath the trapdoor, it lunged.

Fast, *so* fast, its short, sharp movements near impossible for the eye to follow. It slashed left, right, left again, and every time Khulechtan's spear only scarcely managed to parry. He had no opportunity to escape from between the thing's bony claws, to roll aside, and in a matter of seconds he would prove a hair too slow.

Desperately, knowing it would do him little good against a foe who no longer used any of its vital organs, he thrust.

Had he been carrying his boar-spear, it might have proved more effective. The crossbar would, at least, have shoved the revnant back, held it at bay. The *sleaghar*, however, merely punched through the thing's chest without any overt effect.

And yet, the rain of blows stopped.

A dead, emotionless gaze met a live, terrified one for what seemed like an eternity. The trapdoor finally burst open and the Restless scrambled out, another four of them, but Khulechtan could only see the rotted face directly before him.

It spun aside, that dead thing, the strength of its turn yanking the spear from Khulechtan's hand. Skeletal fingers gripped the haft, drawing the weapon free with a terrible squelching sound. Again moving almost too fast to follow, it flipped the *sleaghar* around, aimed, and threw.

Propelled by inhuman strength, the spear sank well past its tip into the soft earth of the pit wall, leaving just a foot of haft remaining.

Even had the guards above understood what was about to happen, they'd have been far too slow to stop it.

The Dead thing ran, leapt up, grasping, used the deeply embedded spear to hurl itself up higher still...

The roars, the cries, the cheers melted into liquid screams of terror as the first of the Dead landed amidst an audience who had dared believe themselves safe from its wrath.

Men and women died, trampled in the panic, asphyxiated as they were crushed between competing waves of the crowd. The guards, who might have been able to contain the thing, found themselves unable to press through the sudden current of panicked flesh. Skin tore and bones shattered beneath the fearsome strikes of the Restless, and bodies both living and dead plunged over the edge of the pit to land in dreadful heaps below.

Two more of the Dead followed the first, leaping from spear to the pit's edge — perhaps clever enough to seek freedom, perhaps merely mimicking what they'd seen. The other pair began tearing into the men and women now trapped in the hole, a collection of victims that only grew larger as those above knocked additional onlookers over the precipice.

Khulechtan crouched — some might have said cowered — against the wall, arms raised to shield himself from the rain of blood, of bodies and parts of bodies. He had no sympathy for the wealthy fools dying before him, but still he turned away from the horror, flinched at every terrible sound. And he knew that every onlooker between him and the Dead bought him only a few more moments of breath, that he would never leave this pit alive.

Except...

The sounds from above had changed yet again. Screaming and dying had been replaced by — no, not quite replaced, but now accompanied — a more martial symphony of angry shouts and battle. The clash not merely of flesh and bone, but metal.

Nor were these the voices of street thugs, however experienced, but disciplined, trained warriors. The Corpseman felt the first faint stirrings of hope — a hope that ignited into a warming fire when

a knotted rope snaked its way down the side of the pit only a few feet from where he crouched.

“Hurry!”

Whoever had shouted needn't have bothered; Khulechtan had a grip on the rope before it even finished its descent. One of the Dead glanced up from its mouthful of flesh and howled at the sight of potential prey escaping, but it didn't bother even to rise, not when there were so many other still-moving bodies in the pit to choose from.

The woman who reached out a hand to haul him up and over the edge bore the noble features and skin to suggest she shared his Surinzan heritage. More important in that moment, she held a heavy hatchet in her other fist and wore the tabard of the Watch. Indeed, the chamber now contained over a dozen similarly garbed soldiers, as well as several in leather armor that Khulechtan recognized as fellow Takers. He felt tears of relief brimming in his eyes and angrily dashed them away.

“The officers are going to want to talk to you,” she warned him. “Nobody knows what the hell's been going on down here.”

“I'll tell them what I can, of course. But they might do better to interrogate the man running this. He's—”

“Little Goat?”

“That's the one.”

“Sure, they'll do that. As soon as we find enough of the rest of him to reassemble.”

“Ah.”

“Listen,” she continued with a sideways glance at a trio of soldiers lowering another rope into the pit, “I need to go. We still have two revnants to—”

“Yes, but how did you know to come here? How—?”

She jerked a thumb over her shoulder, then moved to join her

companions, the first of whom had already started his climb down into the hole.

Khulechtan followed her gesture, stared, and then wandered over, carefully stepping around corpses and clusters of Watchmen questioning the few onlookers who had neither died nor managed to flee.

“You followed me?” he asked.

“*Tracked*,” Hudai growled. “*Know your scent*.”

“After getting help.”

“*Yes*.”

“You disobeyed me.”

“*Yes*.”

“You could be severely punished for that.”

“*Yes*.”

Khulechtan placed a hand on the ghûl’s shoulder, gently squeezing. “Thank you.”

“*Yes*.”

Was that a hint of a smile on Hudai’s snout? Did the ghûl even smile at all, as humans did? As long as he’d worked with them, Khulechtan realized he had no idea, and felt vaguely ashamed.

When all was said and done, the Watch had arrested nearly a dozen members of Little Goat’s gang, almost as many onlookers (though most of those likely had the wealth and power to escape any severe sentencing). Further, they and the Takers had accounted for five of the Dead, in addition to those still held in pens beneath the trapdoor.

Five. Not six. Of a gaunt, skeletal thing with frighteningly abrupt motions and a gaping wound in its chest, there were no reports at all.

And for a very long time, Khulechtan wondered.

It *couldn’t* have planned for this. Its patience, its hesitancy to

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engage the other Dead in battle... it couldn't have been waiting, watching for an opportunity such as the *sleaghar* had provided. Some of the Dead were cunning, yes, but they weren't *intelligent*. They didn't understand, didn't plan. Those that thought at all thought like animals, at most. Everyone knew that. Everyone.

Except...

His own words to Little Goat came back to him, time and again, as he walked the streets or late at night, whenever he tried and failed to sleep.

You can't know.

And on occasion, when the bells rang out their cacophonous song and the people gathered to deliver the corpses of their loved ones, he would turn his gaze toward the outer walls of Redoubt, or down the city's winding streets, and worry over what other secrets the endless Dead kept still.



THE SPORT OF CROWS

BRIAN HODGE

DEATH ALWAYS SEEMED to diminish the things it touched. Even the restless dead that roamed the world beyond the city's outer walls were shades of their living selves, shriveled over the scaffolding of their bones. Death made everything smaller.

But not the ghûl. *These* ghûl. Even in death, they looked bigger than ever to Fáerin.

The pair of them hung from the great oak beam over the entrance to one of the small parks here in the city's Westside, nails hammered through their outstretched arms into the carved wood, to leave their carcasses dangling their full, intimidating height.

Hulking creatures, the ghûl were, not wholly beast but certainly not human. As a boy, Fáerin had learned an old Surinzan song that sought to explain them, and held they were jackals who went to sleep and dreamed so deeply of being human that when they awoke they rose up on two legs before they knew any better, and liked the

view, then soon forgot they'd been any other way.

They stood a head or more taller than your average man, but hid it, or tried to, just not very well. They had a way of hunching when they walked, as if trying to better blend with the people of Redoubt, or at least not tower over them quite so much. It won them few admirers.

Skulking creatures, people often said without bothering to hide the scorn. *What else would you expect from scavengers?*

But these two? Only the most flint-hearted souls could linger in this winding lane and stare at such butchery without feeling that a great and savage wrong had been done them. Kept to themselves as much as they could manage, the ghûl did, slave and free alike. Hard to think of them doing anyone wrong. But even if they had... nobody deserved such an end.

There was more than simple murder in this. There was desecration.

Small as it was, the courtyard at whose entrance they'd been hung on display wasn't just any park. It had been set aside as *theirs*, where ghûl of the Inner City could gather in observance of the role they saw themselves playing in the world. All meat that perished by famine, accident, or disease they saw as theirs by natural right — an ancient pact they'd had with their fellow desert nomads, the Ouazi, and had brought with them inside the city walls from the far-flung wastes of the Eternal Sea. They claimed such meat as their due, then gathered to consume it in ritual and reverence. Even slaves. It was the one true freedom they were allowed. As long as they had that, it seemed to make them compliant slaves.

So there was more than desecration in this. In their mutilation there had to be a message.

Their formidable lower jaws had been hacked away, then hung

around their necks with rough twine. Their tongues lolled from their exposed gullets. The coarse russet fur of their chests was matted with blood that trickled as far as the bare, leathery hide of their bellies.

These two will never eat again. That was how Fáerin interpreted it.

He circled, moving through the crowd gathered in their finery and rags. Where he couldn't slip through with ease, he had shoulders enough to clear a path for himself, until he made his way inside the park so he could survey the bodies from behind.

An old saying, there was, probably Ouazi, as no one else knew the ghûl quite so well: *If you have to kill a ghûl, you'd best stab him in the back.* It was less to do with working up the courage to come at such a fearsome creature head-on than matters of practicality. Those long bellies of theirs were tougher than hide armor.

Nobody had stabbed these two, front *or* back. Their heads, though — it was an easy thing to miss when you had those severed jaws hanging there to appall you and make you turn away.

But he was Surinzan. And a true Surinzan did not look away, neither from those in need nor from those past help.

Fáerin scaled one of the stone pillars flanking the entrance to the park. The ghûls' heads slumped forward in death, and from here he could inspect the wounds he could barely see from the ground. Each ghûl had a hole punched into his long-muzzled skull — one in the back, the other near the temple.

They'd died swiftly, at least. That was about all the mercy anyone could ask for in this world, and often, not even that much.

He straddled the oak beam and scooted farther out until he was on top of them. Took the dagger from beneath the belt tied around his waist and prodded its slim blade into the hole in the back of the closer ghûl's skull. He slipped it in until the wound took the blade's full length with no more resistance than the mush of the thing's brain.

Not so with the other one. Halfway in, the tip hit something

hard, heavier than a fragment of bone. Fáerin probed with the blade and a finger until he'd dug it out: a ball of lead twice as big as the end of his thumb.

Surely there had to be many such lead balls in Redoubt.

But he knew the truth of this one even before he could prove it, because there was still magic in the world, and more often than not, it was cruel. And if it dropped trinkets in your hands again years after they'd been forgotten, that was the way magic toyed with you. Another name for fate.

He was almost sorry he'd bothered to stop and look and then look deeper.

But he was Surinzan. And being a true Surinzan meant not looking away.

He cleaned the lead ball of blood and pulp. When he held it to the sun, the sheen of light revealed the ghost of old letters scored into it while the lead was still soft, and now all but rubbed away by the wear of twenty years.

Still. He knew his own.

It was the sort of thing a boy would do, new to the forge and prideful for no reason, feeling himself entitled to set his initials in the metal because he hadn't yet learned the humility of the craft. He'd yet to learn it was the artifact that mattered, not the artisan's mark. For if you made it well enough, from a place inside that was uniquely your own, then your artistry *was* your mark.

He told the ghúl he was sorry for his role in their end, then tucked the ball into a pocket in his breeches.

And as long as he was up here...

He called down to the crowd for someone to fetch him a pair of good stout pliers.

He'd worked up a heavy sweat wrenching out the nails and getting the first ghúl halfway freed before someone yelled up to

him from the street:

“For a fella called Tree-Foot, you’re a nimble enough climber!”

Maidóc the Bald, this was, with another man he didn’t know. There had never been a time he hadn’t known Maidóc. Like so many true Surinzan before him, who remembered who and where they’d come from, Maidóc had been eager to take up the cloak of the city Watch, as a way of paying for the past.

“What are you doing up there, Fáerin?”

“Hoping for someone like you to come along before I got to these last nails. Help ease these two down, would you? They’ve been through enough.”

The other Watchman, Menhada by the look of him — fair-skinned and light-eyed — seemed content to observe. “I think they’re well past the point of feeling anything.”

Maidóc backhanded his partner’s shoulder to get him moving, and together the three of them got the ghûl down and laid out on the street, and the Menhada started shooing the spectators along.

“It’s not your job, you know,” Maidóc told him. “Are you the one who found them?”

“Not the first. But near enough.”

“You’re nowhere near home, either. What brings you up from Southside?”

“Delivering a pair of pewter armbands to one of the nobles in the Old City. You know how the Angat love to flaunt their baubles. His brother got one, so nothing would do but that he have two made, twice as ornate. And he doesn’t trust slaves to bring them to him.”

“He may have a point.” Maidóc looked at the carcasses at their feet. “More than likely these ghûl were slaves, and look what happened to them.”

“This wasn’t robbery, though. I don’t know what it is, exactly,

but it's not robbery."

"I know. They aren't the first ghûl to die as bad as this. Three of them turned up last week in Eastside. I didn't see them, but two of them were run through from behind, and the other one had a hole in the side of his head like these two. And I don't think even they were the first."

He'd heard nothing of this, but then, Redoubt was a city of imposing size and complexity, descending the mountainside it was built on in great terraces, spilling onto the plains below, and even delving into rock itself.

"Were their jaws cut off too?"

"That, they were." Maidóc squatted beside the bodies, turned one's head for a better look at the wound punched through the skull. "What do you think did this? A hammer? You're a man who knows hammers."

"Could be," Fáerin said, and ignored the lump in his pocket.

Maidóc shook his head in wonder. "Take a brave man to swing it. A hammer wouldn't be my first choice for going up against a ghûl."

No. It wouldn't. Not for anyone.

You'd want something with a bit more range.

THE NEXT MORNING, like every morning, Fáerin and Rowina climbed to the flat roof of their tiny villa and, as the sun hurled shadows and fire over the east side of the mountain, went through the age-old forms with their *sleaghars*. Short and versatile spears, these were, with a broad blade in the shape of a leaf and a flanged knob at the butt of its stout shaft — a weapon whose feel they knew as well as they knew the feel of each other's bodies.

Step, thrust, lunge. Step, slash, thrust.

They went through sequences by the score, always the same, like a dance they knew by heart, attacks and defenses for wars fought by

their great-grandfathers. Armies might never fight this way again... but they were Surinzan, and being Surinzan meant remembering who you once were, to keep that part as alive as who you were now.

Sweep, reverse, step. Spin, leap, chop.

Ritual, routine... nothing else was quite so useful for a lifetime of mornings. It kept you grounded; was its own kind of clock. He was smooth enough at the sequences that comprised the Surinzan art of war, but where he himself was thick and blocky, Rowina was limber and lean, all sharp angles and hair like braided black whips, so that her movements became a kind of living poetry.

Each morning, by the time they'd run through their forms and broken the night's fast, the forge of his smithy would be hot enough to begin the day's work.

But today he left it cold.

When Rowina held him in their doorway, nearly as tall as he was, she could've told him this wasn't his concern. But she knew better, and why, and that if it was his, it was hers, too. She could've told him to be careful, but she already knew he would be. She could've reminded him that diplomacy was often not one of his virtues, but the lash scars on his back were all the reminder he would ever need.

"I'll see you when you're home again," was all she said. "Until then, may you find just the words you need, right when you need them."

With that, he set off for as long as it would take.

In Redoubt, you could find anybody you wanted as long as you kept looking and asking questions. True, it was a vast place, with heights above and layers below, but still, it all ended at the outer walls, and there was no life beyond them. There were only so many places anyone could hide.

And, so far as he knew, Khaigar ool-Nacheen wasn't trying to hide.

It was well into the day before Fáerin worked his way through

the lies and dead ends of the Inner City, and found him. Khaigar ool-Nacheen was back in the plains of the Outer City, a patchwork of farms and festering shantytowns, and, in the southwest, a village the Ouazi called Aurib-Naa. It had begun as a place of self-exile for four tribes who'd lost their taste for the politics of the Inner City. Now it was a place where those Ouazi who still remembered who they were felt most at home, with round tents and open fires and a sky uncluttered by rooflines and towers. Besides, inside a city was no fit place to graze a herd, even the pitiful numbers they had now, and where their herds went, the Ouazi followed.

Khaigar seemed more at home here, in this camp with his fellow tribesmen and their wives, than he ever had in Eastside. For a time, they stood in stillness and took each other in, in that way of men who hadn't seen each other since they were desperate not to be called boys, before the orbits of their worlds had carried them apart.

Khaigar was first to break the silence. "I wonder which of us looks more different to the other."

"Me to you, likely. Swinging a hammer against an anvil, that'll bury any boy deep inside the man. Plus, I didn't have all these little burns on my arms before."

"A valid argument. But I'm the one with the beard."

"You can always shave. Burns are forever."

With a grin, sincere if not wholly relaxed, Khaigar stepped forward to embrace him. He was the leaner of them, still, but felt as dense as if the elements of the plains had carved him like a tree, chipping away all but the hardest heartwood.

Khaigar ushered him to the fire so they could sit together on a pair of camp stools, then poured for him an earthen cup of the same strong tea, as dark as ink, the rest of the Ouazi were drinking. He'd chosen their spot strategically, Khaigar had: not so close to his kinsmen that they could listen, but close enough they could

rally to him in an instant if need be. And they all carried knives.

In the middle distance, a group of younger Ouazi honed their skills with javelins, hurling them at targets progressively farther away. They weren't dressed for the season — the first snows were at most a month off — shunning the layers of robes and furs worn by the older men around the fire for lighter, less constrictive clothes. They were dressed for training.

As was Khaigar.

“What brings you to me?” he asked. “I can only imagine how many stops you must have made along the way. Nostalgia would have given out long before now.”

As Fáerin slid his hand into his pocket, he thought of them twenty and more years ago. A few streets had separated them, and streets only. Boys never cared about such things as different customs, different histories, different eyes, and different skin. Redoubt was all the home, all the world, any of them knew. All they'd cared about was mischief and fun.

What a ridiculous hurry they'd been in to be men. Boys never looked ahead to moments like this.

Fáerin held up the lead ball. “Do you value an old gift so little that you leave it in the head of a dead ghûl?”

Dark of hair and eye, Khaigar seemed practiced at betraying nothing he didn't want known. He might have denied it, and even been convincing. So perhaps he had too much respect for an old friendship to sully it with a lie.

“They say an artisan will always know his work. Even something as simple as this.” Khaigar scooped it into his palm and brought it to his heart. “I esteem it as much as ever. But it went too deep for me to retrieve it in the time we had. I thank you for its return.”

Fáerin sipped his tea and watched the young men with their javelins. Frightfully skilled, most of them, but the javelin was not

the Ouazi people's signature weapon, nor its most demanding. No, that was the *girga*, a simple leather sling that, in a skilled hand, could punch a stone through a plank. Or a lead ball through a skull.

"Why?" Fáerin asked. "Why slaughter these ghûl? Slaves, no less."

"Slaves are property. Compensation for property usually assuages anger over the loss of something so easily replaced."

"Your *Ilbayt*? The wardens? They can't approve of this."

"You might be surprised what leaders will approve of as long as their own hands remain clean of it."

"But *why*? They're not a treacherous race, the ghûl. What have they done to you?"

"Nothing. The same as they have ever done *for* us. Nothing."

"I don't understand," Fáerin said. Khaigar had been a sensitive boy and even now didn't seem like a cruel man. "But how much do I need to understand to ask you to stop slaughtering innocents who've done you no harm."

Khaigar sat back a moment, and looked as if every word caused him pain. "*Ool-Nacheen*... the Eagle." He tapped his eye. "You gave me that. These lead balls you made at your father's forge brought me that name. Their accuracy was better than any stone, no matter how well shaped. They gave me the eye of an eagle. I won my name early. No other name could have brought me more honor than that. You did this for me. For that, I will honor you until the day they light the pyre beneath me and my smoke lifts to meet the sky. But you cannot come here and ask me to stop doing what I must. Our past does not give you that right."

"I have every right to ask on behalf of what's left of our world. It's a worse place every time another piece of it is exterminated. Death isn't rampant enough in it for you already?"

Khaigar nodded. "On that much we can agree. I don't wish the Narghûla exterminated. I only want them gone from here."

Fáerin shook his head with a sigh. “Beyond the outer gates, they’ll be as gone from this world as the Meliae are. If not by your hand, by your will. Do you think the gods will really see the difference?”

“I don’t think the gods see much of anything. If they did, we all would still be out there where they could have a better view of us.” He stood. “Come along. Walk with me. It chafes a man’s ass to sit too long.”

They strolled over the dust and scrub of the plain, northwest, alongside meager herds of cattle and goats that grazed for whatever they could gnaw from the feeble soil. The pastures were patchy and cramped between the clusters of tents and scrappy gardens. Out here, people still lived as if they’d been displaced by a flood.

While Khaigar had eyes only for the sky.

“Let me tell you why this name you helped win for me meant so much,” he said. “We Ouazi hunted with eagles once. When the Eternal Sea was still our home. Did you know that?”

“No.”

“We did. In those days, you might get your first eagle chick when you were not much more a hatchling yourself. You journeyed to a mountain and dared to climb until you found a nest unguarded. You raised the chick yourself. Fed it, trained it. The two of you would grow up together. You would send it to the sky, and it would carry a part of you with it on the hunt. It’s said that, if you grew close enough, you might even come to see the world below through its eyes.”

Khaigar scuffed at the dusty ground, so unlike the deserts and grasses of the Eternal Sea.

“Once we hunted with eagles,” he said. “And now we don’t. Because we’re here. This place. These walls. What eagle worth its wings would lower itself to come here? The only birds that come here are crows. They’re accustomed to picking at the dead. For

crows, nothing has changed.”

They passed another fire where herdsmen were gathered for music. Fáerin had once found an eerie beauty to many of the Ouazi songs, with a sharp voice wailing over the scratchings of a bow drawn across a two-string instrument called an *igytt*, whose headstock was carved into the likeness of a horse’s head. After he’d learned these were longings for a lost homeland, he found their sorrow unbearable.

“Let me tell you what they’re saying,” Khaigar said, and proceeded to translate:

Where is the weight come to rest on my arm?

Where is the grip of talons on leather?

Where is the shadow that blocks out the sun

And the screech of the hunter on high?

Gone, they are gone, he has flown away home,

To those mountains I shall never see again...

“It sounds more poetic in our own tongue,” he added, and they walked on.

“Does it, now?” Fáerin couldn’t help but grin. “I know music, and not just my own. Ouazi lamentations are done as drones. Because sorrow doesn’t have a rhythm. That song’s in three-time. You use it to suggest galloping.”

Khaigar laughed and clapped him on the back. “So we do.”

“So what’s that song really about?”

“A sleepless man whose wife rides him like a horse every night. Forgive my attempt at deception and my assumptions of what you would know. Still... that they were not singing it then does not mean the other song does not exist.” Khaigar turned somber again. “It won’t be long before there is no one living who remembers what it was like to hunt with eagles. When the last of these elders dies, that part of us dies with them. We never will get that back. The eagles forget, we forget. The eagles will be fine, but we will have

lost another part of us forever.”

Now, finally, Fáerin saw the purpose in their path. They stood looking down a wide slope, gentle but rock-strewn, harsh land where nothing would grow, suitable for no one but the ghûl. They gathered in multitudes, hundreds of them squatting on their haunches in orderly rings around the carcasses of two cattle whose sides were reduced to bloody ribs. The first two rings of ghûl swayed and nodded, eyes closed, then lifted slabs of meat to the sky, raw and dripping, presented to each of the four directions, then to their muzzles. When these inner rings finished eating, a sound arose, low and harsh and guttural, a growl given the structure of a chant, then they drifted back to the outer edges of the circle while the next rings closed in to repeat the cycle.

He'd never witnessed this before. Heard of it, yes, but never seen it.

“They are like the crows,” Khaigar said. “For them, nothing has changed. My god is the bright moon. Their goddess is the dim moon, but I say their true god is the earth, and this god tells them their bellies are to be the graves for any meat that dies before we can butcher it for ourselves, and that is the order of the world. But why? I don't hear this god. What entitles them to cling to this pact between ancestors so ancient none of us remember who they were, or why they made it? We Ouazi have left the Eternal Sea. We have lost the open sky. We can no longer follow the wind. The eagles no longer know us. We surrendered it all to make a new life here. This stinking place is all I've known, and still, it does not feel like home. But the Narghûla? They followed us here and gave up nothing. They still feed themselves off our labor, from our losses. What we ourselves do not eat fetches a handsome price up in the Old City. Winter is on its way again, and heed my words, Fáerin, there will be Ouazi children dead before spring who might have lived had

the Narghûla not taken their food and coin for themselves.”

Fáerin watched them sway and feed, and once their portion was consumed, yield their places to the next in line. He listened to their chant, and wondered if it was more than imagination that he heard thanksgiving in it.

“If we Ouazi are really to make our life here,” Khaigar said, “if this place is all the future holds, then we have to free ourselves from old customs and obligations that no longer serve us. So let the Narghûla give up as much as the rest of us have. And if they refuse to do that, then let them take their chances outside these walls. Plenty of dead out there for them to gnaw on.”

“The dead out there gnaw back. Have you tried speaking with them?”

“Myself? No. Others? Many times. You would have better luck asking the wind not to blow. The Narghûla refuse to see another way.”

“So now *your* way is slaughter.”

“At least they see that.” Khaigar clapped him on the back, and nudged him to turn around for the return walk. “I show them as much mercy as I can. They may look gruesome when we’re done with them, but they die instantly. They do not suffer.”

“Your heart is hardened in this,” Fáerin said once they were in the Ouazi camp again. “Nothing I can say can make a difference?”

“Did you really think it would?” Khaigar clasped him by the shoulders. “You have done your part as peacemaker. You are a good and true Surinzan. You spoke of the Meliae earlier? Don’t think I fail to recognize this is what stirs your heart more than any love for the Narghûla. That a Surinzan feels a need to protect, and to create beauty for the world, in payment for what his fathers allowed to die... this is known to me. If I could take that burden from you, I would. But you must throw it off yourself. And not

at my expense.”

Fáerin reached to his own shoulder and laid one hand over Khaigar’s. “A fire is good for thinking things over. I’ll leave you to it. I hope we don’t see each other again too soon.”

“Another twenty years, perhaps. If we’re lucky we’ll be turning old and fat then, and your arms will have new burns you can show me.” Khaigar let him go. “You are as good a friend to the Narghúla as you were to me. The difference is, they do not know it. Now I ask you to go in peace, and to keep it that way.”



THE NEXT MORNING he left his forge unlit again and began recruiting guards. There were Surinzan who welcomed the chance to take up the *sleaghar* once more, with true purpose behind it, while others grew offended he would ask. Not their fight, they told him, and often showed that nothing angered a coward more than a chance to prove he wasn’t one.

Still, their numbers grew. A handful at first — himself and Rowina and Maidóc, in his off-hours from the Watch. A few others. Then ten, then twenty, then thirty and more, enough for teams of three to always be on duty. They escorted ghûl slaves within the Inner City as they did errands for their masters, and, more crucially, when they procured the carcasses of freshly dead beasts and brought them to the Southside park where they chanted and fed upon lost life that was destined for the earth again.

But what of the ghûl in the Outer City, his volunteers wanted to know. After all, that was where the heart of ghûl society was. Were they not at risk?

“I think they’re safe for now,” Fáerin said. “They’re too many to attack, and by now they know what’s going on here in the Inner City. They’re too canny to be caught alone, or in twos and threes.

Slaves don't have that luxury, or the freedom to band together to fight back. Up here, Khaigar and his followers get to pick them off like stragglers. It's no risk to the killers, and every ghûl feels the fear. Down below, they lose that advantage."

Fáerin and his guards grew skilled at spotting the Ouazi spies who tracked them. Were they content to watch for now, or would they eventually attack? He was betting they wouldn't. They were assassins, and assassins would want to do their work in secret rather than waging open battles in the streets.

By now he knew their whispered name. *Tsad ool-Baqyr*, each Ouazi called himself — Servant of the Ripper, some desert demon from their oldest myths. And in time, he thought he understood their true aim as they watched from shadows, windows, and walls.

"They're trying to learn our patterns," he told his guards. "Let's do our best to not give them any to latch onto."

To that end, he varied their numbers. He deployed secondary teams, less obvious, to follow the primary escorts, or precede them. He learned the routes the ghûl favored, and had them vary those too. He fired his forge long enough to take a number of shields made of hardwood and hide, and reinforce them with a mesh made of scavenged iron so they would better withstand stones from a *girga*.

It was here, while alone in his smithy, that the Hoodsmen came to see him. A squad of six, but only one of them spoke. Only one needed to. The rest were there as a show of silent force.

"There is a question being asked in halls you should hope you never visit," the Hoodsmen told him. "Has Fáerin Tree-Foot truly thought out the implications of his actions?"

The Hoodsmen's words were muffled, the sound boxy to the ear. Hoodsmen all sounded remarkably the same, a trait the city's more superstitious rabble attributed to magic. More likely, it was a simple consequence of the fact that they swaggered around with

their heads in a metal box.

“He hasn’t got to the implications yet.” Rowina spoke from behind them, in the rear doorway to their home, then shouldered past the Hoodsmen to stand beside him. “We’re both still stuck on why it’s him and me and mine and ours who need to do this at all.”

Amused or furious, there was never any telling what a Hoodsmen was thinking. Until his actions gave it away. They were the voice and muscle of the Magisterium, and like the masked autocrats whose bidding they carried out, they too were anonymous, each man’s identity concealed behind the rectangular faceplate of a hooded helmet. Their hearts were concealed behind breastplates, and their shoulders were bulky with pauldrons made of the thickest leather armor he’d ever seen, like segments chopped from a dragon’s tail.

“The ghûl,” said the Hoodsmen. “Why should they be of any concern to you at all?”

“Because their slaughter doesn’t appear to be of concern to anyone else.”

“I am led to understand that your back bears the scars of your obstinacy. Should you not regard them as teachers, these scars of yours?”

“Who says I haven’t?” He looked at the hammers on his workbench. Flat heads, rounded heads, spiked heads. He speculated how much damage he could do to one of those helmets before the others stopped him. “Maybe we just have a difference of opinion in what they should teach.”

Intimidating, they were, in those faceless helms. Magister and magistrate and Hoodsmen alike, the notion was that, behind masks, they were beyond the narrow concerns of tribes and races. Behind a mask, there was no such thing as Angat or Surinzan, Menhada or Venmir or Ouazi. When they spoke, it was on behalf of the city as a whole, and not the interests of its tribes.

Only he’d never believed it. Couldn’t believe, men being what

they were, that behind closed doors, they didn't drop the masks to haggle and bargain for the interests of themselves and their own people, with no one at the table to advocate for dwarves and elves and, least of all, the ghûl.

"Compared to the rest of us, the ghûls' numbers are tiny. They are down to but a few thousand. And yet, are thorns not tiny, especially when lodged where they don't belong?" The Hoodsmen spoke, but Fáerin heard the voice of magisters. "The ghûl are prized as slaves because they will never return from death to wreak havoc on a household. Yet this does not entirely release their masters from worry. The ghûl are not made for cities. They are made for the wilds. Like any wild animal brought where it does not belong, there is always the fear of it turning on the hand that is kindest to it."

Fáerin took a few moments to seize one of his hammers and pound at the latest strands of mesh taking shape on his anvil, to see which Hoodsmen jumped. "They're scruffy, I'll grant you that. And there are times you don't want to be downwind of them. But wild beasts, they're not."

Rowina hitched her thumb at him, apparently deciding to try disarming charm for a change. "I could say the very same things about Fáerin." She made a show of sniffing the air. Ah. So much for charm. "And one or two of you lot, as well, though I'm not sure which ones it is."

The Hoodsmen appeared unmoved. "They have had three generations to fit in here. They have not. This is a problem. Sometimes the most prudent course of action is to step back and let problems naturally work themselves out."

It was about all they'd come to say. The rest was but arrogance.

"You shouldn't antagonize them," Fáerin told Rowina once they were gone. "You should leave that to me."

"That so, is it?" She threw an arm around his shoulders. "There

were enough of them for both of us, and you looked like you needed the help.” She leaned her face in closer, brow to brow and nose to nose. “Besides, your implications are my implications. Otherwise, it’s a waste of a perfectly good handfasting, isn’t it?”

AND WERE THEY grateful, these eaters of the dead? He honestly couldn’t tell. He had to imagine that, being slaves, they were accustomed to keeping their feelings to themselves, and they were hard enough to read to begin with.

And, of course, they were not human, but jackals, as the old song told, who’d dreamed they could walk upright. The ghùls’ language was their own, and no one else could speak it. No other throats were made for it. There were those few who could understand it, just as ghùl could come to understand the tongues of men and others, but Fáerin wasn’t one of them. Perhaps the ghùl didn’t even have a sound for “thank you” that applied to whatever men and women might do.

If anything, they seemed disgusted by their own need for protection. They might look at their guards and escorts once, and never acknowledge them again. Aloof, they were, as if they smelled things in the air that were beyond his own senses, and found these more interesting than anything a human might have to say.

He was surprised to observe that they sometimes limped. Their clawed feet, as big as tile spades, were never intended for the slabs and cobbles of city streets. Had Khaigar ever noticed this? Perhaps they’d given up more than he wanted to admit.

It was only when they gathered on the soil of their park that they seemed to uncoil inside and truly become themselves, like the ghùl he’d seen on the plains of the Outer City. Grass grew here, and a few small trees, and flowers in their season. The ghùl seemed to draw as much nourishment from this patch of stone-bound earth

as from the meat they shared.

He saw them tip their heads and sniff toward a cloudless sky, then make sure their gathering had cleared from the park before a torrential rain.

He watched them sit and wait with an inexplicable sense of expectation that only made sense when a vast formation of birds swept in from the north side of the mountain, and passed overhead on their way south for the coming winter. It seemed to bring them a trembling joy that was beyond his ken to fathom.

He found a great peace in watching them.

Still, the Ouazi threats were never far away.

At any moment, whether ghûl and guards were on the move or at rest, a stone might come whistling in to ricochet off the street in front of them or clack against the nearest piece of wood. The projectiles carried too much force to have been fired from anything but a *girga*.

“Are they attacking?” an anxious guard might ask.

“No,” Fáerin would answer. “They’re just letting us know they’re still there.” He would scan in vain for whoever had wielded the sling. “They’re letting us know it’s by their mercy our heads haven’t grown an extra hole.”

“And do you trust their mercy?” the anxious guard might want to know.

He would shake his head no, for he’d seen what they were capable of. “Not as much as I trust their aim.”

HER NAME WAS Gwensori, and if she wasn’t lying about it, she was fifteen, as young as Fáerin would allow in his ranks. She was tall enough, as strapping as any lad her age and more than many, and, like Rowina, wielded her spear with a precise and practiced fury.

She knotted her hair at the crown of her head, except for a thick black strand hanging in front of each ear, and painted a blue slash beneath each almond-shaped eye. He supposed she thought it made her look fierce, and agreed — it helped. She was green, though, so he kept her close, because it was in his nature to worry.

“Why Fáerin Tree-Foot?” she asked late one afternoon as the days grew shorter and the sunlight colder. “How did you earn that name?”

Behind them, some twenty-odd ghûl gathered in the park, and his guards were out in force, a dozen of them encircling its low stone wall.

“How do *you* think I earned it? You must have an idea of your own.”

“It’s because you didn’t run in battle.” Gwenori sounded very confident, as if there couldn’t possibly be any other explanation. “While everyone else took off at the sight of the enemy, you stood and held your ground. Like you’d grown roots.”

He had to grin. “What battle would that be?”

Now she began to waver. “I... don’t know. One before my time, I guess.”

“They were all before my time, too. I still like your idea better.” He peered ahead at roofs and street, watching people go about their business while the ghûl went about theirs. “They called me Tree-Foot because when I was first learning the forms with the *sleaghar*, I wouldn’t really turn myself loose and move with it. I grew roots, all right, just at the wrong time. I didn’t leap, I didn’t spin, I didn’t lunge very well. I didn’t bring the chaos to the fight. I just kind of plodded along.”

If the truth disappointed, Gwenori didn’t show it. “Why? What held you back?”

“What usually holds us back? Fear.”

“What were you afraid of? It was only training.”

“Fear of committing, I suppose. To the move, to the strike.

Fear of leaving myself open. It was hard getting it into me that it's not enough to stand there looking *ready* for anything. You have to show you're *capable* of anything."

She nodded, slowly, in that way of someone recognizing a truth no one had ever bothered telling her. "You should get a new name. You're not like that now."

"I figure I'll hang onto it. Who knows, there could come a day when it might mean what you thought it did. Something to live up to, right?"

At their backs, the ghûl had begun their chant. It was the only thing about their rites he found unnerving, the sound harsh and abrading to the ear, a lower tone than a man could make, resonating from deep inside their bigger bodies. Like the voice of a boulder if it awoke with a need to sing.

And he could feel Gwenori staring at him, working toward another question.

"Who were the Meliae?" she asked.

He blinked at her. "You're telling me you don't know?"

"I've heard of them, but never in much more than whisper. I've asked, but it's something my father won't talk about. He says it's just old stories, not worth wasting time on. That's a first. Get him going about anything else, he'll talk your leg off and then chase you as you're trying to hop away on the other one."

That was what they were coming to as a people, wasn't it? Intent on erasing the memory of what they'd done to get here and call this place home.

"When it comes to the Meliae," he said, "there are two kinds of Surinzan. Those who don't want us to remember, and those who think we can't afford to forget. Those of us who don't want to forget seem to be losing."

He scanned the street, up and down, and found them quickly

clearing out. Typical. Let that ghûl chant get started, and people found a reason to hurry someplace else where they wouldn't have to hear it. The thinning out always tightened his gut. Crowds were safer.

"As to what the Meliae were like," he went on, "I can't tell you firsthand. Never met one, myself. Long dead before I ever came into this world, and my father before me, too. Supposed to be closest to elves... but *more*, if that makes sense. They were like if there'd been trees that stood five hundred years and one day became people. That's how well they fit the land around them, and understood it. There wasn't anything that could happen for miles in any direction they wouldn't know about. If a bird dropped dead off its limb a mile away, they'd know. It's said they were so attuned to the wilds they lived in that they could feel each stone in a stream as the water wore them down."

She gazed at nothing with a dreamy look. "They sound too good for the world."

"Just right for the world that was. Maybe even the best of it. But much too good for what it became. When the dead got restless, it broke them. From the inside. Drove them mad, some of them. And a Melia gone mad was a sad and terrifying thing. Don't make the mistake of thinking they were just some pretty tribe of flower-sniffers. No, fierce fighters, they were. Some of the mad ones laid waste to everything around them, and the rest just dropped and died of it, like they'd been poisoned."

He kept his eyes leveled ahead, and his hands twisted the shaft of his *sleaghar* like he was wringing a neck. He wasn't sure why.

"As the world got worse, the surviving Meliae from other parts fell back to their woodland keep, the Spyre. That was to them what this mountain was to the dwarves once. Just not as secure. The Meliae were our allies, and they thought we were theirs. As the Dead filled the land, we promised to help them make their stand,

and then all make our way here together. Only we didn't. Our great-grandfathers had different ideas. No detours. No honoring a pact. They made straight for the gates here and didn't look back. We left the Meliae to be overrun. Alone. And that was the end of them."

Beside him, Gwenori let out a breath she'd been holding in a long time. Some things, when you learned them, were too terrible for words. You could only let them hit you, knock the air from you, and turn your last meal sour in your belly.

She gave him an imploring look, as if something now made sense. "Maidóc says you wrote a song once, that people didn't like. Years back. That's what it was about, wasn't it? You tried to keep that story alive in a song."

"Aye," he said. "I had a rough night when some people let me know just how much they didn't like it. Takes more than a whip to drive out a song, though. You'd have to cut out every tongue willing to sing it."

He narrowed his eyes, screening them from the lowering slant of the sun. He couldn't say why he didn't like the shadows today. He just... didn't.

Beside him, Gwenori showed why, despite her stature and her poise, she was but fifteen. "Maybe there are still some Meliae out there, somewhere. Hiding. Waiting until it's safe to come out again. You think?"

"No. I think if there were, the world would feel different."

"Different how?"

"Like there's more hope in it."

It was a cruel thing to say. Maybe he should have let her believe.

Or maybe he could've said nothing more fitting, the last thing she heard before the stone whizzed in to take her cheek. One moment she was standing beside him, and the next, her head snapped with a crack and she flopped back against the stone pillar

at the park's entrance, then fell to the ground.

He dropped beside her, lifting his shield to cover them both. "Shields!" he shouted. "Shields up, and rally to me!"

He let go his *sleaghar* and splayed his hand on Gwenori's shoulder. At a glance, he saw that while she should live, she would always bear the marks of this day. Her left cheekbone was caved in, and the wound streamed with blood. A great flap of skin had ripped like parchment, and he saw teeth, and as she blinked up at him, he could tell she was too stunned to realize any of it.

He listened for the sounds of further attack, the thock of stones on shields, and he was either deaf to it, or it did not come. There was only the sound of running feet. He peered over the rim of his shield in the direction the stone had come from, looking high, looking low...

And there. *There*. A face, peeking over the balustrade of a balcony that ran the full width of one of the buildings across from them. A beardless young man or a young woman, he couldn't tell — only that the assailant didn't seem to be gloating. Or waiting for other *Bagyri* to attack. No. What that face showed was surprise.

There, then gone. The attacker sprang from hiding and raced along the balcony behind a cover of drying laundry and beaten rugs, then slid down a drainpipe at the corner of the building and hit the street running.

Fáerin called for three of his swiftest and sent them in pursuit. The rest should stay. For all he knew, this could've been a feint to draw them away and leave the *ghúl* unguarded.

He glanced back over his shoulder into the park, saw them arrayed in their rings, peering at him and red of muzzle. As they locked gazes, he'd never felt a greater gulf between himself and any other living being. He had no idea what they were thinking. No idea if they were even concerned. Maddening creatures, they were. As if deciding the threat merited no more consideration, they

turned their attention back to their meal.

“This is what we risk ourselves for?” one of his men muttered. “Beasts that can’t be bothered to care? And why should they? Animals don’t even have it in them.”

By now, Rowina was on the ground beside Gwenori, cradling the girl’s head in her lap and daubing blood from the wound. Fáerin stood again with shield and spear, and took a stance before the malcontent. “It’s easy to protect others when there’s no cost to it. When nothing’s asked of you but time. Anyone can do that. What matters is when it’s hard. You know the way home. All you have to do is decide which kind of Surinzan you really are.”

He’d really thought the man would stay. Another lapse in judgment.

He ordered his remaining guards to stand ranked across the courtyard entrance, and two of them to walk a patrol around its perimeter.

“She needs more help than we can give her,” Rowina said, then called over to Maidóc: “Where’s the nearest House of Mercy?”

Fáerin’s heart churned at the answer. It wasn’t close, an hour’s walk even if you weren’t encumbered by the wounded.

“We’ll make a litter,” he told Maidóc. “Between here and Meltwater Street, there has to be a shop where you can take a canvas awning and a couple stout poles. You’re Watch, you can get away with it. Now go.”

So their numbers continued to thin.

Is this what you want, Khaigar? He scanned rooflines and balconies, streetcorners and alleyways. *To keep dividing us until we’re no longer a threat to whatever comes next?*

He dropped to one knee beside Rowina, so that only she could hear him.

“I’ve made an enemy of people who prefer to strike from shadows and from behind,” he whispered. “If I’ve made the mistake that gets us killed... forgive me.”

She gave him a smile, the one he never understood how she could make at such times, because she always seemed to fight her fears to a standstill so much sooner than he did. “Then we’ll wake in the Summerfields, far away from here. There are worse mistakes you could’ve made.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “The day’s not over.”

A minute later, one of the runners he’d sent after their attacker came sprinting back to the fold.

“We have him. Caught up with him three blocks from here.” He glanced about to take in the mood of those who remained and decided to lower his voice. “You should maybe come with me, rather than we drag him back here. It’s just a boy.”

Further split up their ranks? Fáerin hated the thought of it. But his runner had a point. The rest of them were rattled now. And angry. The last thing he needed was to trigger a rift between those who knew how to tame their nerves and those who felt just brave enough to beat the truth out of a boy.

Fáerin turned around to leave Rowina in charge of them, and saw the guards at the park entrance parting, backing away with murmurs of confusion, spears at the ready but seeming unsure if they should use them or not.

The ghûl stood a head above the tallest of them. It did not hunch, did not slink or skulk, and above all, did not move with the deference of a slave. Its coarse hide was the color of charcoal, like a creature made from dusk and twilight shadows, and the leathery bare skin of its belly was traced with the pale ghosts of old scars.

It halted only when it towered above Gwenori as she lay on the ground. The girl had regained her senses, and turned away on her side to burrow into Rowina.

“Stay your spear, Éogun!” he ordered when he saw what one of the younger men appeared about to do. He couldn’t let that happen

until he knew. Until they all knew.

Gods be merciful, Fáerin thought. Let this not be what it looks like.

He stepped close enough to smell the pungent animal odor of its hide and the raw blood on its gusting breath.

“She is not meat,” he told the ghûl. “She’s not dead. She’s not dying. She is not yours to claim. She wouldn’t be, even if she were.”

It gazed at the girl at its huge feet, then uttered something in its bestial voice. A promise? A threat? He had no idea. The ghûl understood him better than he understood it. He couldn’t even be certain of its sex.

Standing at its full height, the ghûl was tall enough to be a male. Yet, with every passing moment, the stronger grew his feeling that it wasn’t. There was little else to mark the difference between the sexes of their kind. The parts that did remained hidden behind their fur until needed. Were the matriarchs of their clans as big as the males? There was so much about them he didn’t know.

Intimidating, yes. But aggressive? He began to doubt.

Rowina gave him an imploring look. “Fáerin? Let her. I think...”

He pressed a hand out toward Éogun and the rest, as if he could hold back their spears by will alone. He took a step in retreat, then gave the ghûl a nod and prayed he wasn’t wrong.

She lowered her shaggy bulk and swept Gwenori into her arms, then rose again as if the girl weighed no more than a bundle of dried thatch. She made no move to turn around, to carry Gwenori back to the rest of her kind. Rather, she stayed still and held her like a broken child, until Gwenori began to relax. There seemed a kind of magic in even that much.

Then she lowered her muzzle to the girl’s face.

First, she lapped away the blood until it no longer flowed.

Then she licked at the skin of the flayed cheek, one direction, then another, as if to smooth the flap into place like the petal of

a torn flower.

Then she licked at the wound until its ragged edges began to knit and close.

She tended the wound until all it needed was time to be forgotten.

And through it all, her eyes remained shut.

At last, the ghûl set her down again — Gwenori still unsteady on her feet — and, with a sound like a growl of chastisement, loped back into the courtyard as they stared at her back.

Could the Meliae have done better? He had no idea if the Meliae could have managed such a thing at all. He had no idea if this could even be called magic. There was nothing counter to the ways of nature in it. Only nature hastened. The act of a being who lived so close to the earth it knew how to speed up the nature of another.

He did not want to see that lost.

Rowina pressed against his shoulder, her lips at his ear. “There’ll be time to think on this later. Right now, you’d best make sure that the two of us out there who *didn’t* see this don’t get tired of waiting and kill that foolish boy.”

THE OTHER TWO pursuers he’d sent were detaining the Ouazi boy in an alleyway, inside a low, arched tunnel that burrowed beneath the buildings above. They kept him braced against a wall, standing shoulder-to-shoulder to block him, leaning on him now and again.

“He’s a frisky thing,” one of the men said, but if the youth had been trying to wriggle past them to get away, he’d given it up as futile.

Good. Fáerin wanted him frightened. Wanted him defeated and his spirit broken. He wiped the last minutes from his mind

and pictured Gwenori as this boy had left her.

“We can talk here, you and I,” Fáerin told him. “Or I can drag you back to the rest of my guards and you can try your luck with them. To say they’re angry doesn’t do justice to the mood they’re in. And you don’t look like you’d put up much of a fight.”

He was a skinny thing, dark-eyed and skin like caramel, no more than twelve or thirteen. Hard to feel proud of intimidating a boy half your size, but there were worse ways this could go for him.

“Khaigar ool-Nacheen... he sent you,” Fáerin said. “Here. To do this. You. And only you. Am I right?”

The boy’s eyes were downcast. The loose curls of his hair hung disheveled and dusty. He kept his mouth pressed into a bloodless line.

“If I take you back to that park, what’s going to happen is my men are going to knock you around until you can’t stand up any longer, and once they’ve had their fun, they’ll hang you.” Fáerin snatched the sling from the guard who’d confiscated it and dangled it in front of the boy’s face. “Do you want to be the first Ouazi in the history of your people to get hung from his own *girga*? How could your family bear the disgrace?”

The boy shuffled, and Fáerin knew shame when he saw it. The boy was feeling disgraced already.

“I missed,” he whispered. “I did not mean to hit her.”

“You’re telling me you weren’t even aiming for her?”

“I aimed for the pillar behind her. I missed.”

That explained the surprise on the boy’s face as he peered over the balcony. “So you weren’t supposed to do any more than ping one off wherever, to let us know you were around, same as usual?”

The boy nodded, miserable with the weight of failure.

“Are there any more of you out here? And think hard before you answer. If you lie, one of us is going to smell it. Tell the truth,

and it stays between us.”

“Not with me,” the boy said. “There’s Juffan, but he’s following your people in Eastside.”

“And how old is Juffan?”

The boy’s eyebrows crinkled with fright. He didn’t know, exactly.

“About your age, give or take?”

“Yes.”

Fáerin nodded. He’d heard all he needed — indeed, all the boy was likely to be able to tell. He took the boy by the shoulder and steered him away a dozen paces.

“Go on home,” Fáerin told him. “But take plenty of time. You’ll want to be well clear of your camp in Aurib-Naa for a while yet.” He returned the boy’s *girga*. “You did your duty the best you could, and you did it with no one at your back. That’s all that can be asked of anyone.”

He could tell, though — the boy took it as no consolation.

“When I was about your age, they started calling me Tree-Foot. It wasn’t a good thing. It was a name people would say with a laugh behind it. But times change. People too. You can make a name take on a new meaning.” Fáerin clapped him twice on the shoulder. “This isn’t your whole life, today. You’ll do better tomorrow. But by the gods, don’t let me see you again tonight.”

He sent the boy on his way, then gathered with his guards back at the park.

If not for that errant stone, he would never have guessed what Khaigar ool-Nacheen was really planning. A sly one, Khaigar was. He’d lulled them. Challenged them with just enough threats to keep them on edge, but in refusing to escalate it, he’d made them complacent. *We are here, and we are waiting*, the Baqyri seemed to say with every stone that probed, but didn’t pierce. *We can be patient*.

It really had seemed they were at a standstill.

“If all Khaigar is sending after us today is boys who can’t even be sure of their aim, then he has a reason for keeping his more skilled Baqyri in the Outer City,” he told his guards. “I think he means to attack the free ghûl tonight. Strike at the very heart of them.”

He heard his own arguments thrown back to him, every reason he’d thought the free ghûl would be safe: that there are too many of them, too big and powerful to attack head-on. That free ghûl would not be shackled by the enforced restraint of slaves.

“If Khaigar dares do this,” Fáerin said, “then he’s devised a way to make their size and numbers count for nothing.”

HE HAD HIS core group leave the park behind. He sent one runner to pull the second squad from Eastside; another to round up as many of the off-duty volunteers as could be found, all of them to meet just beyond the Southgate, where the Inner City gave way to the Outer.

It was not a lawless zone, the Outer City, but neither was it a place where the Watch took pains to safeguard it from itself, as long as transgressions didn’t involve the farms. Life really was cheaper on these crowded plains. Terrible things could happen out here, and did, and rarely were they punished, because no one ever saw anything. Fáerin had to assume Khaigar was counting on that.

It was only ghûl under threat, after all. It wasn’t just the Hoodsmen and those they represented who were willing to tolerate slaughter. Maidóc knew how feelings *really* ran in the Watch, as well.

There’s pity for them. The ghûl didn’t bring this on themselves. They don’t deserve it. But they’re not people. That’s the crux of it. They don’t look it, don’t sound it, and don’t much act like it. So maybe they shouldn’t be living so close to what’s left of people, just trying to keep themselves alive. Better all around, maybe, if they weren’t. That’s the feeling, anyway.

As soon as his group crossed over to the Outer City’s stink

and clamor, Fáerin dispatched a scout to go ahead of them, as they waited along the crowded docks of the west bank of the Kolobus for the rest of the guard to catch up. When their numbers were as good as they were likely to get, they set out southwest across the plain.

Night had come on full and deep by now, and the air bit hard with a frosty chill. The plains were lit by the cold glow of both moons and the shantytowns' smoky fires. As foul a place as it could be by day, by night it was worse. On the other side of thin wood and thinner canvas, people quarreled and rutted, wept and coughed. The only thing that made it bearable was that now and again, someone found a reason to laugh.

One scout could slip through unnoticed, but not over thirty of them. Fáerin detoured the group around the sprawling Ouazi camptown of Aurib-Naa and came at the ghûl from their north, here in the far reaches near the outer wall, where the earth turned stony.

He could just make them out in the moonlight: three enormous rings of them that swayed and growled their harsh and endless chant.

Soft of tread and voice, Fáerin had his people fan out in two lines, hunkering low with their cloaks over their heads, blending with the night as he huddled with the scout.

"Brought in three carcasses a bit ago with their carts," the scout said. "Took their places around them, and that's that. Dinner time."

"No Baqyri anywhere?"

"Not a one. I've been up and down between camps twice. Made a wide sweep around the far side. They're not there. They haven't gathered. There's no place for them to hide if they did. Not in any numbers big enough to take on that many ghûl."

Fáerin scowled into the darkness. "Three carcasses, you say."

"Two cattle and a goat."

"Three at once. Does that sound right to you?"

"I don't know what's normal out here and what isn't. Death

everywhere, what's three more?" The scout stirred at the dirt with a fingertip. "Maybe there's a murrain that's got started somewhere and set in. That'd drop three at once, with more to come."

Fáerin shifted from one knee to the other and listened to the ghûl chant. When a breeze shifted, he could smell decay coming from their encampment. Maybe one of those carcasses wasn't so fresh. This was a bad position to be in. He wanted to be wrong, wanted this night to pass just like any other for the ghûl. But if he was wrong, his people might be slower to believe next time.

"Could be that boy who went at us was up there because that's what Khaigar's down to," the scout said. "Maybe the ones with sense are dropping out on him. They weren't counting on the likes of us standing up. It's what we wanted, isn't it?"

"It is. I've just never known the Ouazi to back down so easily. Sometimes they fight you openly. But sometimes they fight you with deception. They show you what *you* want to see while they do something else."

As the moons rose, Fáerin left his shield and spear behind as he merged with the night and drifted back across a narrow no-man's-land, toward the Ouazi camptown. He had to see for himself, and found the Ouazi separatists seemingly tranquil and listless around their fires. He watched as they sat in their groups, listened to the music that lifted into the night, the forlorn scraping of bows on the strings of their *igyyts* and the plaintive wailing of their lamentations.

There were no songs of joy or mirth. There were no songs of riding.

He watched, listened, as the cold weighed heavy in his chest.

And he did not like this. Something was wrong here. In spite of how normal it all looked, something was wrong. *They show me what I want to see, while they do something else.*

He closed his eyes. Never mind what they showed him. *Just*

listen. Pick out one voice, follow it. Pick another. Follow it. He didn't know the words, didn't know if they were singing of lost lands or forsaken eagles. But he sensed the feeling behind them, raw and naked, the screaming caused by a wound that would never heal.

He knew as well as anyone, and bore the scars to prove it: A sad song could be more than mourning. With enough feeling behind it, it could be an incitement to fury.

He opened his eyes to the night again.

The Ouazi came and went around their fires, with more going than coming. He saw that now. They were not moving en masse. They were slipping away one by one, never to return to the fireside.

He sprang from his crouch and sprinted north again, fast as he could, and the nearer he drew to the ghûl, the more apparent it became that a great hue-and-cry was arising within the heart of their camp. Their voices were frightful enough in chant and thanksgiving. They were terrifying in rage. But this — this was worst of all, an eruption of confusion and suffering. This was the sound of betrayal at its worst.

His guards were on their feet already. Fáerin snatched up his shield and spear and ran another dozen paces past them, trying to piece together what was happening.

A moment later, Rowina was at his shoulder. "There's still been no attack. We'd hear it if there was."

"There will be," Fáerin said. "It's coming."

Ahead of them, the ghûls' orderly circles broke apart into chaos and fear. So this was what they sounded like when death came for *them*, and they were not ready. This was they sounded like when they saw their world ending. The terror in it raised the hairs on the back of his neck, and tore the heart from his chest.

Had the Meliae sounded like this, when their end came?

From the south rose a rumble like distant thunder, the sound

of a hundred feet stampeding along the ground. The Ouazi didn't care who heard them, the ghûl least of all. Stealth no longer served them. Noise instilled fear. Now they *wanted* to be heard.

If your enemy is too great, you must first make their size and numbers count for nothing. And Khaigar had. The answer was in the fate of the Meliae, as Fáerin had told Gwenori not four hours earlier:

The rest just dropped and died of it, like they'd been poisoned.

"It was the meat," Fáerin told his guard. "They poisoned the carcasses."

Like an ill wind blowing closer, the Baqyri pounded through the night, preceded by the clack of javelins, shaft beaten against shaft. He fancied he could hear the *girga* stones rattling in the pouches on their belts.

"Shield wall, and keep low until they're on us!" he called, no louder than needed, and led the way.

They streamed ahead to form a living barricade between the sickened ghûl and the oncoming Ouazi. Within moments, a flight of javelins soared overhead, aimed not for them but for the ghûl. Surprise seemed the one advantage they had. As the first rank of Ouazi swept forward out of the darkness, Fáerin gave the command, and they rose up full and locked shields and grew roots with their feet.

He could see in their eyes that the Ouazi had not planned for *this*. The front rank tried skidding to a stop, but were driven forward by the momentum of the next wave crashing into them from behind. Thirty strong, Fáerin and the rest held the shield wall with their left arms, and with their right, thrust their *sleaghbars* over the top. The broad, leaf-shaped blades pierced chests, punched through throats, slashed across shoulders to render arms useless. The Ouazi had never favored armor, regarding elusive movement as their defense... but here, now, this too counted for nothing.

As the front rank of Baqyri fell, the dying and the wounded

and the dead, Fáerin shouted for his guards to slide a step back. Let the next Ouazi be the ones to stumble over the bodies. And when they did, Fáerin had his guards windmill their spears back, then whip them forward again, this time under the shields, to stab and slash at the assassins sprawled at their feet. Shoulders and thighs, wrists and elbows — he wasn't so much intent on killing them as taking away their mobility. An Ouazi who couldn't whirl a *girga*, who couldn't throw a javelin or dagger, was little threat.

In those first moments of the clash, he robbed them of as much as he could, while he could, until he heard Khaigar ool-Nacheen calling for his men to fall back and regroup.

Range. Khaigar wanted range. Now he had to rob them of that, too.

“Break the wall and give chase while you can,” Fáerin ordered. “Groups of four, cover and strike.”

The Ouazi were swifter in retreat than the Surinzan were in pursuit, slowed by the weight of the reinforced shields. They began to take their own casualties then. One of the guards was crippled by a javelin that skewered his knee, another felled by a stone to the head. Still, they were fighting by moonlight and the glow of nearby fires. The Ouazi's aim was more lethal by day. They were assassins, not a disciplined unit forged to come together as one. They couldn't retreat and strike at the same time, and they hadn't come equipped for a melee.

They had come for the wrong fight.

Still, they battled, and when the scrum was too close for using *gargas*, they used the last of their javelins like spears. But javelins were meant for flight, not for thrusting or slashing — their reach fell short and their thinner shafts were easily shattered. When their javelins were gone they fought with daggers. For every Surinzan who fell, the Baqyri lost three, then four, with worse wounds that

steamed in the frosty air.

Fáerin's guards worked in teams as they had trained since they were children — catching their enemies' blades with their shields, then parting long enough to let one of them through, shield left behind, to wield the *sleaghar* in a mad dance of chaos and control.

When it was Fáerin's turn, the forms he rehearsed every morning were there for him. They flowed one into another, the body moving faster than the mind could think...

step thrust lunge step slash thrust

...so that he met his enemies like a razored whirlwind and they fell before him...

sweep reverse step spin leap chop

...until the dance was done and he was behind the shields again, to take back his own and let another take his place. Himself, Rowina, Maidóc and the rest, they were all different in their own ways. The Ouazi couldn't time them, couldn't guess them, and whenever one of the Baqyri thought he might have spotted an opening, they were gone again, another rotating into place to continue the dance anew.

Fáerin bellowed into the night, begging Khaigar, wherever he was, to order the last of his men to stop, throw down what remained of their weapons and surrender. They had lost. They weren't going to rally. He had no more desire for dead Ouazi than he had for dead ghûl.

"Whether we die now or starve in winter, we are just as dead." Khaigar's voice came from somewhere out in the darkness. "I choose now."

As weapons clashed around him, Fáerin flashed on a glimpse of them as boys. Children often dwelt on fighting, but thought only of glory. They never dreamed of the blood and the stink and the futility. There was no glory in this. It took grown men and women to see the folly of it, and too often it was beyond even them.

Khaigar could kill him now if he chose. Of that, Fáerin had little doubt. Even at night, an eagle was still an eagle. His aim would still be true, and from the distance in his voice, he had the range to do it. To find Fáerin's head above his shield with one of those iron balls forged twenty years ago.

It was how a warrior might die in one of the ancient Surinzan plays, the kind no one wrote anymore: slain by a brother with a weapon that he himself had made.

But not on this field, this night.

I will honor you until the day they light the pyre beneath me, Khaigar had promised.

Then let him prove it.

As the wounded and dying moaned around him, Fáerin shoved past his team and dashed his shield to the ground. When the nearest Ouazi lunged at him with the last javelin, he chopped it in half with an arc from his *sleaghar*, then drove the butt of its shaft into the man's jaw to drop him to the ground. He would live.

Fáerin threw down the spear next and spread his arms wide and dared the gods to watch.

"End this now, Khaigar! I'd rather live in a world with you still in it. *End this!*"

The gods only laughed.

From out of the night came the sound of rushing feet, a blur of pale cloth, a flash of clenched teeth through a beard. Fáerin saw the curved daggers last, one held low, the other in an upraised fist. At first, he thought it was Khaigar himself, then was glad it wasn't. He didn't know why it should matter. He would be just as dead.

And the gods reconsidered.

The man, among the last Baqyri standing, pitched forward to land face-first and boneless in the dirt at Fáerin's feet. He did not stir again, and wouldn't. Not with that glistening round hole

punched in the back of his skull.

“Enough,” Khaigar said. “*Enough*. We should leave a few of us to burn our dead.”

One by one, two by two, they all lowered their weapons and set them aside and breathed the cold because they still could, then began the long task of tending to those who needed it and making a row of those who were beyond it.

Behind them, the ghûl watched, then turned away and tended to their own.

When Khaigar ool-Nacheen stepped forward out of the dark, Fáerin knew a beaten man when he saw one, even if nobody else might see past his bearing. Nobody else knew his eyes from so long ago, or the resolve that had left them.

I did this to him. And I am not proud.

“They can heal,” Fáerin told him. “The ghûl can heal. Did you know that?”

For a few moments, Khaigar’s breath seemed to freeze in his chest. Once the words got through, he almost found it in himself to laugh. “Then they have taken great pains to hide it over the centuries, or this is something new.”

“New, I’d think. The priests say the world’s still changing around us, you know.”

Khaigar had eyes only for the dirt and, maybe, for everything that could have been another way. “Even when kind, magic still finds a way to be cruel.”

Fáerin pointed back toward the ghûl camp. “Have you killed them anyway?”

“No. They can be sickened. They can be weakened. But it would take more than an infusion of foul herbs to kill them. They will recover.”

“Then, your more badly wounded... could be they don’t have

to die, either.”

“Narghûla magic?” Khaigar shook his head over the dead and the dying. “They would not want it. And I will not ask.”

In time, sooner than the weariness in them made it seem, a torchlight procession streamed across the plains from the Southgate of the Inner City. Long, it was, like a great worm made of fire, twisting through the fields and shantytowns, marching closer, always closer, until it split to surround them, and he saw the cloaks of the Watch.

Their spears had a long reach, and were leveled, a bristling ring of iron lit by fire.

AS THE SKY spit the winter’s first tiny snowflakes over the land, the River Gate of the Outer City closed at their backs and the whole of the fallen world lay before them.

A few days of confinement in the White Citadel’s central gaol, an hour before a tribunal of the Magisterium, and it was decreed: exile, the only suitable punishment for waging war within the city of Redoubt.

It came as less of a surprise than the magistrates may have thought. Days in a cell will give anyone ample time to think and talk and gauge all possible futures.

It doesn’t matter that you took it on yourself to do what they weren’t willing to do, to protect who they weren’t willing to protect. It doesn’t matter that you stopped a slaughter, Maidóc the Bald told him. What matters is that you have a knack for keeping alive the memory of what some would rather see forgotten. What matters is that we gave them just what they wanted: a reason to be rid of you.

Maybe that’s what fate really was, at the root of it. Favors behind closed doors negotiated between men you’d never met, the latest in an endless cycle of obligations that would always be repaid at

someone else's expense.

He'd been right to never trust them.

And so it was decreed: Fáerin Tree-Foot, exiled. Khaigar ool-Nacheen, exiled. Maidóc the Bald, exiled, along with a few others, Surinzan and Ouazi alike, deemed to have been ringleaders.

They'd offered Rowina a special clemency, as she was a woman. Fáerin knew what that really meant. In exile, he would be declared dead; then before long, some well-connected city father would move to take her as his wife.

Rowina wasn't having it.

If you think I regard this as mercy, you've only proven yourselves as poor a judge of my heart as you are of right and wrong, she told the magistrates to their masks. *If the only kind of women you know are so frail they would betray their vows to cringe behind a few walls when their men are cast beyond them, then I pity you.* She spat on their marble floor. *Or I would, if you deserved better.*

So, as the sky swirled with the first tiny snowflakes of winter, and the winds peppered the plains and forests with ice, the River Gate of the Outer City closed behind them and the whole of the fallen world lay ahead.

In the far distance waited the restless dead, who didn't feel the cold, to whom snow and the sun were as one, and who knew better by now than to roam too close to the city. Even the Dead could learn. The rest of the world was theirs. Let Redoubt have its moat of empty plains. It would always send out a few more of its people eventually.

"But if they can learn that," Rowina said as she scanned the horizon, "then they can learn to fear us, too."

Fáerin held his spear in one hand, as did she, and her free hand in the other. The worst moments since the judgment were the ones when he would rather see her stay behind and live...

until he thought of her warming someone else's bed, and knew she belonged out here. Not for his sake, but hers. To stay would be the long, slow death of her, and so he wondered if the gods would think it too much that the last thing he would ever ask was that they die together, and quickly.

The soft leather of their boots crunched the scrubby dry grass, stiffened by frost. They carried what they could on their backs, and lashed to a pair of sledges *Maidóc* and one of the others dragged behind them. At his other side, *Khaigar ool-Nacheen* stooped to snatch up another stone that caught his eye and added it to the pouch on his belt.

"If we can reach the Eternal Sea," he said, "the mountains will protect us as well as any walls."

In spite of it all, try as he might, *Fáerin* still couldn't find it in his heart to hate this man. If it hadn't been the conflict with *Khaigar*, they would've found another reason soon enough to see him gone. He knew that now.

"There will be eagles there. They will not know me," *Khaigar* said. "But perhaps their memories can be awakened with the right song."

Maybe so. And if they didn't know any such song already, there would be time enough to write it on the way.



THE BONE-SHAKER'S DAUGHTER

MERCEDES M. YARDLEY

BREILIG. CLOSE YOUR eyes and hold out your hands.”
“What kind of silliness is this, Tema? We are not children.
There is not time for such games.”

Tema laughed and it was the sound of freedom, of birds flying free through clear skies; nothing at all like their daily lives in Redoubt.

“You’re always so serious,” she teased. “We have nothing but time. Let’s live out our weak little lives here, shall we? Waiting for something to happen. From one day to the next, we wait and wait. Let’s fill those hours with a little bit of joy, yes? A little bit of shine. Now hold out your hands.”

Breilig did so. His hands were dark with the sun, scarred and calloused from daily work within the city walls. Not the graceful hands of an elf at all.

He scowled at them.

“Close your eyes, I said. You never listen.”

Breilig squeezed his eyes shut, and Tema laughed again.

“There, see? For one second, life isn’t so bad, is it? This feeling? It’s expectation. It’s knowing that something surprising and good waits just around the corner. This, my dear one, is how life is supposed to be.”

Tema took his dark hands in her pale ones, and slipped something inside his palms.

“Tell me what you’re holding. This glorious surprise.”

“I don’t know.”

“Keep your eyes closed and feel, Breilig. Let that brain of yours rest for a second. This isn’t about thinking at all. Keep that part out of it.”

She slipped her hands from his, sat down on a piece of rubble, and watched.

The city of Redoubt was high and walled, built as a sanctuary from the Dead that had obliterated everything around them. Breilig sprawled on the ground, his back to the wall. The sounds of the Dead below them rose and fell like waves from the oceans they had always read about.

Breilig turned his face to the sun like a blind man. He ran his fingers over the treasures in his hands.

“Smooth. Surprisingly cool. Very light.”

“Yes.”

“Are they beads?”

“No, they’re not.”

“Game pieces?”

“No. What do you think they’re made out of?”

Breilig felt the pieces between his thumb and forefinger.

“I’d guess wood.”

“You’d be wrong.”

He sighed.

"Why do you make this so difficult, Tema? Why don't you just tell me?"

"Don't you dare open your eyes! What, and spoil the surprise? What else do you have to do today, except clear rubble out of the city streets and worry about your madness."

He snapped his eyes open and handed the pieces back to Tema. He stood up to go.

She grabbed his hands and pulled them to her.

"I'm so sorry. My friend, please forgive me. I didn't mean to bring something so dear up in such a callous manner. I just... please. I'm trying to help. I only want you to be happy."

The elf took a deep breath.

"I know you do. I know I spend time worrying when I could be spending it doing other things." He closed his eyes again and held out his hand. "Let's try it again, yes?"

Tema grinned and swept the tiny white pieces out of the dust. She dropped them into his palm.

"You know what these are. I want you to feel it. They'll call out to you. You'll feel it deep inside, darling. Let me know when you do."

Breilig held the small pieces of...

"Stone?"

"Not stone."

...*not* stone in one hand and caressed them with the other.

"You're an elf. You're in touch with all of this, deep inside. Just let yourself realize it."

Breilig took another breath and held the pieces. There was something to them.

"A deepness."

"Yes."

He hadn't realized he'd said it aloud, but there it was. A deepness. A sense of vitality. He held the pieces and knew they

were important somehow, in a way that all life was important, certainly, but...

All life. That was it. He had it.

"It's bone," he said, opening his eyes and grinning. "The pieces are made out of bone."

Tema smiled back at him.

"Yes! I knew you'd be able to tell. What do you think of them?"

His eyebrows furrowed immediately, his smile dropping away.

"Is that safe? You know, with the undead? Does it not invite danger to have their bones lying around?"

Tema shook her head and collected the small pieces from him.

"It's safe. Do you think I'd be messing around with something that wouldn't be? That I sometimes dare to leap onto the Corpsemen's cart and take whatever I can find? Of course not. Once the body is reduced to bone, and catches the sun, that soothes the soul. But these pieces are meant for music. Let me show you."

She took a small dried gourd from a pocket hidden somewhere inside her dress, and dropped the bits of bone inside.

"Now shake it," she said, and handed it to the elf.

He shook his head.

"No. I don't want to invite something."

Tema rolled her eyes.

"You won't invite anything except for a little amusement, and heavens knows you don't want *that* around."

She shook the gourd, and the rounded balls of bone rattled gently.

"Softly," she said, and shook the gourd in a light rhythm. "Hear that? It's not conjuring up hordes of the Dead, is it? Are your elders coming after you for some unforgiven slight? No. It's music. Music, Breilig, and it's a wonderful thing! Do you feel your heart fly?"

He wanted to say he did. He wanted to say that her confidence gave him strength, that seeing her creating music out of old bones

was the most meaningful experience of his life. She started to hum and dance, the delicate, elegant ways of her people, bending and weaving before him like a plant moving in the wind and stream.

But Breillig couldn't say these things. He felt the weight of his elven blood, of the grandeur they had experienced once. That greatness was there, deep inside, riding around his circulatory system like his familial madness, and then he was ashamed again, looking at his soft shoes covered in dust and scat and filthy puddles of water that made up the alleyways of Redoubt.

"We are nothing," he whispered, and the sheer starkness of it made him ball up his fists. "We were made for more than this."

Tema stopped dancing, and the sound and beauty of the morning was gone. She studied Breilig carefully before putting the gourd back into the folds of her robe.

"We escaped for a minute, didn't we," she said. It wasn't a question, but a fact. She pushed her fine hair out of her eyes and turned her lips up, but the smile wouldn't come. "For just a second, we were somewhere else, you and I. And then you were somewhere else, all alone."

"I was here," he said. He refused to look at her. "Always here. There's nowhere else for me to be. Nowhere to escape to."

He stood there, tall and broken. Scarred inside and out. Tema reached out and took his hand. She held it in hers, and then brought it to her lips.

"How long have we known each other?" she asked him. Her pale eyes were full of moons and stars and secrets. He had looked at those eyes his whole life, wondering what swam in them.

"Always," he answered. "We've known each other always. Since before time, I sometimes think."

"How many years have I sneaked away from my father to come visit you? To ask about your ways and run my fingers through your

dark hair and escape, however briefly, from the life of a bone-shaker's daughter?"

"Many."

"And you, Breilig. How many years have you crept away from your people, slipping through the alleyways and past the marketplace, in order to meet me? To sit on the walls of the city and watch the Dead howl outside, to talk about despair and beauty and all of the things that makes life worth living? How many?"

"Many."

"Many, and many, and many again. And, if the gods allow, even more years."

"Perhaps the gods will have pity and there will be no more years at all. The Dead will overcome all of us. It will be the end to a civilization that already ended years ago."

Tema's eyes, full of stars and moons earlier, began to fill with storms and lightning and the angry, shaking spears of her people. She slipped her hands from his and put them on her hips, standing upright and proud and strong, although she still only hit his shoulders.

"Breilig, son of Ca'arn, I will not hear you speak in such a manner! Cease feeling sorry for yourself! There is life here. It may not be a very easy life, but it's life and it is worth fighting for. Every morning I arise and see the sun. Yes, I see rats and refuse and children who have starved through the night. I see another loved one thrown on the Corpseman's cart to be taken away before she can rise and harm us all. I see the same things you see, and what's more, I see a wonderful, caring elf wallowing in his own sadness when he could be using his time to create something.

"Make something beautiful. Make life worth living for somebody else, if not for yourself. Make an effort for me. I spent time harvesting and grinding, breaking and polishing this bone to make music for you. For just a brief time, I wanted you to think of

something besides the disgrace and shame of your people. I don't care about that. I defy my father and spend time with you because I see something of value inside of you. Don't you dare disrespect that! Don't tell me my time and my love is wasted because some silly, morose, straw-for-brains elf can't see outside of himself for one moment. Don't you dare!"

She turned and fled, the sounds of chiming bells and rattling bone fleeing with her. She disappeared into the shadows of the city.

Her time and her... love? Breilig thought. Never had she been so bold. Never had she spoken of something so blasphemous to her people. Yet, it was so thrilling to his heart. Words he thought he would never hear, and would certainly never dare speak first.

He turned back to the wall, watching a crowd of risen Dead clamoring and pushing their faces against each other. Such a sea of inhumanity, but he thought of Tema's tearful retreat, of her words, and he smiled.

TEMA STUMBLED THROUGH the crowded alleyway, pushing her way through the nameless, faceless people that blocked her path. That stupid elf. Stupid her for falling in love with him, years ago, when she knew so much better. Maybe finally saying something was the right thing to do, however. It would make him take her seriously for once. It would douse her in enough shame to leave him behind and focus on a future a bit more agreeable.

She turned a corner and ran smack into a tall brick of a man the size of a doorway. The air flew out of her and she fell down into the filth of the street.

"Look where you're going," the man growled, but his face changed when he saw the young woman sprawled on the ground. He reached down and hauled her to her feet.

“Th-thank you,” she managed, still out of breath. She used the sleeve of her robe to wipe her tears away. She flushed and stared at the ground. “I’m sorry.”

“Watch where you’re going, miss. It’s dangerous.”

“I didn’t mean to run into you, erus. I wasn’t—”

“No, look,” he said, and pointed. Tema stood on her tiptoes to see what he meant.

“That old woman?” she asked.

“She refuses to give up her dead. She has hidden his body for two days already.”

“But she can’t do that!”

“No, she can’t.”

The man’s voice sounded heavy, tired and sorrowful like every other person’s in Redoubt. She wanted to shake him, tell him to fight for life, but after what had just happened with Breilig, she felt weary and sorrowful, as well.

An old woman whose face must have been gentle, once, was clinging to the body of a man. The way she curled her fingers into his clothing told her that he must have been her son.

“Don’t take him from me,” she screamed. “I can’t let him go like this!”

A slim man with scars across his face put his hand gently on her shoulder. She shook it off and spat at him.

“You know the ways, Hannah. You know this must be. We can’t allow him to stay. You have put us in grave danger already. He already starts to stink.”

“He’s all I have,” she wailed, and Tema’s heart hurt at the sound of it. “Don’t take away the only thing I have.”

“Hannah, he’s gone. He’s already dead. Now we just need—”

Tema heard the bells of the Undertaking. The Corpsemen as they came near. The sound was loud, jarring, painful, and unholy.

"No," the old woman said, and threw herself atop her son's body again. "They're coming to take him!"

"They must take him. You know there is no other choice."

"He's a good boy. A sweet boy. He would never hurt anybody! That isn't his way."

The man shook his head.

"My wife was good, too. Never hurt a soul when she was alive. But after death, she wasn't herself anymore. None of them are. This thing, this curse, it's stronger than we are. If it was a matter of will, we wouldn't all be walled up in this filthy city, would we?"

Tema hid behind the tall man she had run into.

"Doesn't she know it's better to give the body willingly?"

"Love blinds us when it comes to our dead," he answered. "Common sense doesn't always prevail."

The first of the Takers came by. He was shaped like a barrel and most likely had just as much ale in him most nights. Who wouldn't, seeing what he had seen?

"Bring me your dead," he called, and his voice was hoarse and weary behind the words. He was a man who had said this phrase far too many times. "Bring me your dead."

"Here," the man called, and pulled the old woman away easily. Her scream sounded like death itself. "We have one here."

The rest of the Corpsemen arrived, big men with swords and long boar spears. A team of indentured dwarves dragged an iron cage behind them, with bodies flung inside.

Two of the men wordlessly grabbed the body and tossed it in with the others. It settled heavily, indiscreetly, its leg turning at an odd angle.

"My boy," shrieked the old woman as she was held back. "My son!"

"We all must deal with loss," the barrel-shaped man said, and turned. "Bring me your dead," he called, and the grim parade passed on.

“I feel sorry for her,” Tema whispered to the tall man, but he quickly held out his hand.

“Look,” he said, and something in his tone chilled her, made her shiver all the way down to her thin fabric slippers. A wrongness crept through the air, dug its way to her marrow, and she faintly wondered if she’d be sick.

The son’s body began to move.

Just a little, at first, so slowly that Tema wondered if she hadn’t really seen it at all. A curl of the fingers. A jostle of the leg.

But then the head turned, slowly, much farther than any neck should allow it, and the snap of bone didn’t sound clean, like her father’s work, but instead a dark, loathsome thing.

“Quickly!” shouted one of the Takers, and he roughly pushed the crowd aside while two other men rushed the cart.

The old woman screamed and stepped in front of them. They slowed, but only barely, shoving her out of their path. She was nothing more than sinew and linen. An ancient relic from old times. She stood between them and the thing that was now growing strong, now fighting its way from the cage with the unholy strength only seen in the depths of hell, now climbing the side of the building like a hissing lizard.

That’s the sight that would stay with Tema for all of her days. The man with his head turned around completely backwards, scaling the wall, his tongue hanging from his dislocated jaw.

“Move, girl!” The tall man pushed her back toward the way she had come, when she had fled Breilig. “Run!”

She couldn’t move. She couldn’t do anything more than stand and stare as the now-alive dead thing zipped toward her. How it moved so fast, she didn’t know. What unholy arcana made it stick to the walls like that, she would never be able to say, but right now all that mattered was that she was screaming at her feet to run and they simply couldn’t do so.

She closed her eyes, covered her face so the last thing she saw would be her bone-shaker's fingers instead of some crazy woman's dead son.

There were roars and shouts. Thuds and the sound of steel against stone. The old woman shrieking again until suddenly her voice cut off in a way that made Tema drop a hand to her throat without thinking.

"Look," the tall man said, and grabbed Tema roughly by the shoulders. "They subdued it. Hacked it apart. Next they'll burn what remains before it has a chance to do anything again."

"Move!" shouted the head Corpseman, and the cart jangled and clanged unmusically as it rolled forward. Tema turned her face away from the dismembered limbs on the rusty iron gate and the shine of fresh blood on the Taker's weapons.

Corpses didn't bleed. She knew that. She continued to look away from the carnage, but instead looked at where the old woman had been standing.

"It's a shame," the tall man said, "but she needed to let him go. We have to release the dead."

"And remember the living," Tema said, but the man had already moved on. She heard the sounds of chickens and running feet, vendors hawking their wares and the Corpsemen's bells fading into the distance. Just another day in the city, trying to find a reason to stay alive.

"Tema."

She heard her name and turned. There stood her reason, right in front of her.

"Are you all right?" Breilig asked. He dusted the dirt from her clothes and briefly took her hand before pulling away. "I saw what happened. I couldn't get here fast enough."

"Do you ever feel," she asked him a bit dazedly, "that maybe we spend our time on trivial things when something very important is right in front of us?"

“I do,” he said, and this time when he took her hand, he didn’t let go.

BREILIG SPENT THAT night, and several after, with Tema. They had been together since they were children, but only covertly, and never in such an intimate way.

“A human and an elf?” he mused, tracing ancient elven words on her bare shoulder with his finger. “Father wouldn’t stand for it, of course. How am I to,” he deepened his voice to impersonate his father, “restore the former glory of our race without a proper heir?”

Tema shrugged.

“I would like children, too. I always thought I would have them. But in the end I need to choose what is best for me, Breilig, and that is you. Children would be a joy. But they would also be a concern and a heartache. I want more than anything to be yours and have your child, but that cannot be. So do I choose you, without children, or life without you? It’s no choice, really.”

She kissed him, and her mouth was a wonder. He wondered why he had taken so long to sample it.

Fear. Shame. All of the heavy words he loathed to think of.

“Darling, I’m losing you. Where are you going?”

“I’m here,” he said, and smiled. “I’m right here.”

“Exactly where you’re supposed to be, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Stay with me,” she said, and wrapped her arms around his neck. She laced her fingers in his dark hair. “Promise me that, my brooding elf. Can you?”

“I will,” he said. “There’s nothing I want more.”

When he returned home, he crept into the scant wooden hovel like a child who had done something wrong.

"Where have you been?" his father demanded. "You've been gone for days!"

"I think I have discovered love, father," Breilig said, but his father turned away.

"We have no time for such silly trivialities. You were with that whore, weren't you? The human girl."

"She is no such thing, and you will never speak of her in such a way again."

"My son," his father said, and his eyes shone with an intensity that belied his sanity, "you know what you must do. Bring honor to this once-proud race. We can be great again!"

"Father."

"And not just for me. For all of your brothers and sisters. All of your people who are forced to bear the humiliation of our fall."

"I love Tema. That won't change. She's always understood me."

"A human woman cannot bear an elf child. You would provide no heir. Our line would end."

"I want to marry her."

His father glared at him.

"I won't begrudge you a dalliance with this human girl. But you will marry one of your own, and sire a leader for our people. We are not meant to live scrubbing filth off the streets. We were destined for greatness, and you will make that possible, my son. A bride has already been chosen for you."

Breilig opened his mouth to argue, but his father was already walking away, leaning heavily on his staff for support.

"She'll be presented to you this evening. I suggest you... clean up. Your bride won't want to smell another woman on you, no matter how base this human may be."

Breilig went about his day, scavenging for food while thinking about Tema's soft, white hands. No other fingers could ever compare.

The way she created music this morning in order to move his soul... he washed the stench of Redoubt from his skin and dressed into clean linens with a sigh. His father was old and it would not harm him to please the old man and at least meet the girl.

She smelled of sunlight. She stood tall and slim, her dark hair pulled back and pinned with vines and flowers somehow found within the city walls. She had black eyes full of secrets that he found himself wanting to learn. Her eyes matched his own.

"My name is Pristlin," she said, and dipped her head briefly. He did the same. Stood. Didn't know what to say.

Pristlin licked her lips.

"Your father told me... he said that..." She took a deep breath. "Your father told me that you are to be my groom. If this pleases you, of course."

Still, Breilig stared.

"I know how strange this must be for you," she continued on. "It's certainly strange for me. But I believe in this race, and in our strength. I believe we can band together and achieve our former glory. Be powerful again! I believe we can do this, you and I."

She took his hand in both of hers. Her fingers were long and tan. They intertwined beautifully within his. She held them to her breast and her eyes glowed with a passion that made him catch his breath. Something moved within his soul.

"Will you accept me, Breilig, son of Ca'an? Allow me to be your wife, and together we will raise the new elven King of Redoubt?"

She was slim where Tema was round. Lean where Tema was soft. Elegant where Tema now seemed like a clumsy colt, frolicking through the streets without a care. Pristlin was a woman, concerned about the resurgence of their people. She wouldn't tell him not to worry. She wouldn't think he was being far too serious.

"Do you really believe we can raise our child to greatness?" he asked.

Her beautiful eyes shone, and Breilig swallowed hard.

"Oh, I do! There's no doubt in my mind that we will. I hope this isn't too forward, but when I see you like this, and hold your hands in mine, I feel so much hope. Hope, Breilig. Here. Isn't that exquisite? Isn't it a thing of wonder?"

"It is, indeed," he agreed, and then he smiled at her. A full smile, unchecked.

She smiled back, and he laughed.

"What's so funny?" she asked him, her wonderful eyes searching his, her beautiful smile not faltering in the least.

"I think this must be that feeling you mentioned, my dear. This might be hope."

Her smile grew even wider, but then color touched her cheeks. She charmed him. It was the loveliest thing he had ever seen. He desired to see it a hundred times. A hundred times a hundred.

"Then, do you think that, just perhaps, you might choose to take me as your wife?"

He clasped her hands and brought them to his lips.

"With pleasure," he murmured. He saw their future together. Their children, playing in a clean land with trees and flowers and no city walls ever to be seen. "I will give you anything you desire."

She lowered her eyelids, shyly.

"I hope that in time, sir, you would give me your heart."

Breilig tipped her face back so she would meet his eyes.

"My love," he said truthfully, "I think that you already have it."

Their wedding date came quickly. Tema stole away with several pieces of beautiful cloth her father wouldn't miss. She gave it to the elves, who made it into a dress that suited Pristlin's tall, delicate frame and golden coloring.

"What a dear you are to do this for me!" Pristlin exclaimed, and kissed Tema on the cheek.

“Yes, well, anything for Breilig. He’s my best friend,” Tema said. Her white fingers twisted around in her dress.

“Yes, he told me all about how you two were sweet little childhood friends. I’m so glad he had you while growing up.”

“So was I,” Tema said, and then she excused herself to run to the city wall. Breilig and his new bride wrapped their hands together and said their vows in the old Elven tongue. Tema sat on the filthy stone wall and cried, her tears falling on her short, pasty human hands.

Time is a wicked thing, uncaring and forlorn, and it stops for no one. Years passed and Breilig, his eyes sparking with madness, conceived his first child with pretty Pristlin. He was a boy, a strong, healthy heir, and from the day of his birth he was the crowning glory of the elves.

He was dark and quick, sensitive and strong. He was taught manners, skills, and just enough ruthlessness to ensure his success. His black curls licked around his ears, just like his father’s.

His smile? That was his mother’s, and it tore Tema apart every time she saw it.

Breilig bedded her occasionally, when he was upset or tired or the weight of his responsibility became too much to bear.

“Shhh,” Tema would say, brushing his hair out as they hid away. “You are not Breilig, son of Ca’an, husband of Pristlin, father of an elven heir to me. You are only my dear friend, my only love, and always have been. Peace. Think of us tonight, and nothing more.”

But he couldn’t think of Tema without thinking of her father and his arrogance. Of his finery and the fact that he unknowingly provided scraps to clothe Breilig’s bride on their wedding day. He lost himself in this arrogant man’s daughter, and quietly delighted in the horror he knew it would bring if Tema’s father ever found out.

One afternoon Tema was sitting on the one of the walls protecting Redoubt. She was humming, using a small knife to carve holes in a bleached piece of bone.

“Hello, Tema,” Pristlin said quietly. She gathered the dangling folds of her dress around her and peered over the wall. “Oh, it’s certainly high. Aren’t you ever afraid you’ll fall?”

“Not at all,” Tema answered. She didn’t look up, but continued carving. “And if I did, what of it?.”

Pristlin brought her finger to her lips, chewing her nail. It wasn’t something that Tema had ever seen her do, so she put her carving down.

“Is something bothering you, Pristlin?”

“No. Well, yes. Yes, it is.”

Tema patted the wall beside her.

“Sit and talk with me. Would you like to carve? I have another piece of bone.”

Pristlin cautiously climbed onto the wall, holding Tema’s hand. After she was settled, Tema handed her a second piece of bone and a small knife.

“What shall I do with it?” Pristlin asked.

“Whatever your soul sings to you. Feel the life that used to be there. Draw it out. It’s its own form of arcana.”

Pristlin chipped away at the bone.

“I want to talk to you about my husband.”

“I suppose you do.”

“I want to know what he means to you, Tema.”

Tema looked out at the clear sky over the crowded undead that seethed below.

“He means everything to me, ,” she said. “He was my sun. His light touched my life like the sun touches the trees outside, the frightening allies, even the Dead below. He made things bearable.”

“And now that you no longer feel his light?”

Tema shrugged, smiling bitterly down at the instrument she carved.

“Perhaps life isn’t quite as bearable as it was before. But we survive. Now, listen to this.”

She put the newly created bone flute to her lips and blew. It created a haunting sound that moved the very blood around in her veins.

“Mournful,” Pristlin said.

“Bone flutes usually are. But they’re strong, too.” She turned to Pristlin. “I’m the bone-shaker’s daughter. Do you know what that means?”

“I’m not that familiar with human culture, no. Tell me.”

Tema’s pale eyes, so different from Pristlin’s dark ones, filled with tears.

“It means that we take scraps, pieces of others. We take their bones before they are rendered or burned, and we make something of them. Instruments, mostly, but sometimes knives. Beads. Pieces for our hair. Useful things. Beautiful things. I polish these bones until my fingers bleed, to change them from a thing of horrors to something that brings joy. Even a second of joy is worth all the work.”

“It sounds selfless.”

“It is,” Tema said, and realized her voice was rising. She lowered it. “It is. All of my life has been spent trying to give others a chance at peace. Like Breilig. I don’t know if you’ve seen what you’ve done to him.”

“What I’ve done to him?” Pristlin was taken aback. “What have I *done* to him?”

Tema stood on the wall and began to pace.

“You’ve changed him into something darker than he was before. He seldom smiles, and when he does, it’s an ugly thing. He’s so obsessed with your son and his pure blood—”

“Don’t you mention our son.”

“—that he’s forgotten who he used to be. He’s forgotten about anyone but himself.”

"That's untrue!" Pristlin cried. Her hands shook in her lap, holding far too hard to the bone and knife. "He thinks of our people all of the time. But do you know who he doesn't think about? He doesn't think about you, Tema. I know it hurts, but you must accept it. You only hold him back. Let him go."

"I can't let him go. Don't you see he's all that I have? The only thing I ever wanted for myself."

Pristlin's eyes sparked. "You will let him go or I will make you. Do you understand? You don't know what I'm capable of."

With one quick pull, Tema ran her knife across Pristlin's throat and then pushed her from the wall. The elf didn't make a single sound as she fell. The wandering Dead fell upon her body, tearing and raking and feasting.

Tema turned away and cleaned her knife.

"You don't know what I'm capable of, either," she said aloud. She tossed the bone flute down to Pristlin's ravaged body.

BREILIG MOURNED THE disappearance of his wife. He didn't eat or sleep, but searched Redoubt by foot, walking for days as he searched the Inner City, the orchards, asking clan after clan, race after race, if they had perhaps seen a beautiful elf maiden pass by.

"Must have been killed if she's missing," a dwarf told him, his mustache drooping in sorrow. "Sorry to hear it."

Tema stopped by his ratty room with a bone bowl full of hot broth.

"You need to eat something," she told him. Her voice was soft as she placed the bowl before him. "If not for yourself, then for your son. He needs you."

"He needs his mother."

Tema's pale eyes normally held the moon and stars. Today they held worry.

“He doesn’t have his mother. She left, for whatever reason. He needs you, darling. You have to be strong for him.”

“I can’t.” His eyes nearly pinwheeled in his head as he looked at her. “You do it, Tema. Pretend he’s our child, yours and mine. Remember when we thought we had to choose? Each other or a child?” He laughed and the sound was far too wild, much too loud. Tema drew back from him.

“I don’t like seeing you this way,” she said, and Breilig howled again in response.

“Be strong.’ Be a father.’ Be a leader.’ ‘Calm down.’ Everybody wants something from me,” he growled. “Leave me alone!” He hurled the soup and the bowl crashed against the wall. “Leave me be!”

Tema turned and fled into the night.

BREILIG SLIPPED INTO a fever that wouldn’t loosen its grasp on him. He saw his wife bending over his bed, speaking to him. She told him stories of the old ways, of their former glory.

“It will come again, my husband,” she whispered to him. Her voice was like rain on parched roots. “You and our son will raise our people to glory again.”

After the fever broke, he lay weak and stinking upon the rags he used for a bed. He called feebly for his son, but nobody came to his door.

“Pristlin? Tema?”

He stood and stumbled, catching himself on a rough piece of wood that he used for a table. A too-soft apple was there, and he took a bite. Another. Realized the flesh was delicious and the juice was heaven on his tongue.

Breilig staggered into the alleyway. Life flowed around him, almost as perceptible as death usually was. A woman walked by with

flowers in her hair. A child pranced past with a crudely carved toy.

He followed the woman and child, slowly and for no particular reason. It felt good to be awake, to wander. The air was full of dust and smoke, brick and sewage. The elf tasted traces of honey and freshly baked bread, sweat of the laborers and the galley girls.

He found himself near the wall where he used to meet Tema, and it was no surprise to him that she was there.

"Tema," he breathed, and set down heavily next to her. "It has been days since I saw you last."

"Weeks," she said. She didn't face him, but stared out into the desolate lands beyond the city.

"I'm sorry for how I was to you. You didn't deserve it. You've done nothing but be a friend."

"Friend," she repeated, and the way she said the word, high and tuneless, made Breilig give her a second glance.

"Are you well, my dear one?" He asked her.

She laughed, and it reminded him of the Undertaking's bells, such a cacophony of sound. The wrongness made his stomach tighten, and he reached for her.

"Don't touch me," she hissed, and Breilig drew his hand back in surprise.

"You aren't well," he said, and he wondered briefly what he should do. If his family's madness had managed to touch his lover, or if she had been touched by the unholy and undead. He wondered briefly if he should call for help or perhaps flee, but then he saw the tears on her cheeks and he was immediately ashamed.

"I have wronged you," he said quietly, "and for that I am—"

"Does your every sentence begin with the word *I*, Breilig? Is that all you can think of? Yourself?"

Her words were cutting. The voice didn't even sound like hers, but shrill and dead, choked out of her throat by emotions not of

her own.

“I didn’t mean—”

“And there you go again. It’s always about you. Your honor, your people. Your wife, your child. But what about me? I always loved you, and you never saw. Then, when I told you, you threw me away as soon as an elf maiden came along.”

“It wasn’t right.”

“No, it wasn’t. But I forgave you, because that’s what you do for the ones you love. *Love*, Brielig. Not tolerate or use. Those are different things entirely.”

The wailing of the undead grew louder. They were gathered together at the base of the wall, pushing against the stone. Tema looked down at them with pity.

“They are my children,” she said sadly. “They are the ones we will join. I will, you will. All of us, eventually. Whether the walls fall or the Dead overrun us from the inside out, this is how it will be. You must see it as surely as I do.”

“But what is it that you always say? Every second of hope or joy is worth it? Have you forgotten that?”

“You never believed it,” she said. “Don’t pretend to believe it now.”

She pulled a long bone flute from her billowing sleeve. It shone in the last rays of the sun, so beautiful and intricately carved that he gasped.

“You like it?” She asked and smiled. Her smile was sweet and genuine and reminded him of all the smiles they had shared since Tema was a child. “It’s my greatest treasure. A true thing of beauty. Shall I play for you?”

“Yes,” he breathed.

She yelled down at the frenzied masses outside of the walls.

“I’ll play for you, too, shall I?”

Her song was soft, sweet. The clearness through the flute of

bone filled Breilig with joy and loss. Sorrow and whimsy. He wanted to weep and sing and dance.

"Your wife is down there," Tema said, and put the flute back to her lips.

"What is that?" he asked her. "I must have heard you incorrectly."

"I see her sometimes. A flash of her hair, a bit of fabric from her clothes. Of course it could be my mind playing tricks on me, but I like to think it's her. I play for her, you know."

The song she played was more melancholy. He remembered binding hands with his bride and promising to be by her side forever.

"Is this what forever means?" he wondered aloud.

"Do you know what else I can do?"

She stood on the wall, her back against the blazing sunset as it turned the clouds orange. She was a thing of glory, then. The Bone-Shaker's Daughter. Creator of magic and unifier of souls. Breilig had never seen anything so wondrous, or so terrifying. Her hair turned orange in the fading light. She was aflame.

"What else can you do?" He was almost afraid to ask.

She bared her teeth in what might have passed for a smile, but Breilig realized with a coldness that reached into his belly that she wasn't really there at all. Her eyes took in nothing and everything. Instead of moonbeams, they held shattered pottery and slinking things with sharp teeth. They held the madness he had always feared in himself. Was he mad and she now reflected it back, or was she mad and he drew it into himself?

"How would you like not to be alone, anymore? To be a family again. With me, with your wife, your son, or whoever you choose. Your father, perhaps? The man down the alley who sells trinkets and false gems? Or your mother, long dead. How would that be?"

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"I can make them come."

She put the flute to her lips, a long, straight flute, something so very precious and dear about it, and she played. Her fingers moved quickly, stirring the blood in his body until it moved faster, cleaner. He wanted to get up. He wanted to snap a bone in half with his jaws, wanted to leap off the wall into the melee below, wanted to succumb to love and lust and murder all in one moment.

The Dead below howled and surged, a frenzy of motion. Lightning cracked down among them, zipping from body to body. Some cried out with voices that sounded strangely human. Others had scales as though they were fish.

“They’re attracted to the music,” Breilig realized. He leaned over and saw the masses were starting to hurl themselves more forcefully against the wall.

“No!” he shouted. “You mustn’t stir them up!”

The sun came out of the clouds and silhouetted Tema so sharply that Breilig threw his hand up to shield his face.

“They come. They climb. I call, and they listen,” Tema said between notes. Riled undead began to scale the walls, piling over top each other in order to ascend. Unholy screams and hisses rose from the city around them as corpses reanimated. He heard men calling each other to arms, screaming for their weapons and begging the Corpsemen to aid them.

“The dead call to the dead,” Tema said, and laughed. She laughed and wiped away tears, and Breilig saw madness as he had always feared it.

“It isn’t time for us to all be dead,” he said. “Please, stop this. We can still fight.”

“There’s nothing left to fight for,” she screamed, and she let the flute fall limply at her side. “Nothing, Breilig. You were what I lived for. You were my sunlight.”

“I can still be your sunlight, if that’s what you want,” he pleaded. “Stay with me. Help me raise my son. I know you feel despair now,

but we can change it.”

Tema closed her eyes.

“Your son. Such a beautiful boy.”

“He is. And he’s probably scared. He lost his mother and probably thought he was losing his father, too. But he can have both of us, you and me. We can take care of him. But first I need to find him. Will you help me?”

“I know where he is.”

She held her hand out, and Breilig took it. Instead of helping her off the wall, she pulled him up on to it.

“He’s free,” she said, and pulled him to face the sunset together. “Free and happy, without burden or sorrow. He’s with his mother, and soon with his father and Tema.”

Breilig’s golden skin paled. Tema nodded.

“You... you saw him go?” He asked.

Tema laced her white fingers with his dark ones.

“He went quietly and without pain. Afterward, I did as my father would have me do. I turned his tragedy into a thing of joy. And for a moment, we all felt that joy... didn’t we?”

She smiled brokenly and handed him the flute. The bone was warm and beautiful and heartbreakingly familiar.

“Oh, gods,” he whispered.

She pressed her mouth to his and spoke against his lips:

“They don’t exist.”

She wrapped her arms around him and let both of them fall.



DOWN HERE WITH US

KEALAN PATRICK BURKE

I AM AWAKENED FROM a dream of fire and old blood by a whisper. These days, it does not take much to rouse me, for despite the promised security of the wall, my instincts remain as sharp as ever. Maybe we are safe and those instincts are little more than restless voices desperate to be heard, but they make me feel better whenever the light is gone from the day and the terrible moans of the Dead slip through the cracks in that wall.

“Olta, are you awake?”

I consider feigning sleep, but if anyone knows my instincts better than I do, it’s my brother, as he should. He shares them, both of us cut from the same cloth as our father, even if I’m the only one who lived up to his promise. Thus, with a sigh I roll over to face where he is hunkered down next to my pillow. I wince at the stench of sweat and ale and onions that wreathes my face.

“What is it, Admir? And what hour is it?”

“I have something to show you, brother.”

It seems as if Admir always has something to show me. He is younger than I by ten years, and truth be told, as naïve as a newborn. Every day his discoveries get more redundant and tiresome. Here is the remnant of an old shield half-buried in the mud; there, a well rumored to have no bottom, but from which he swears he can hear the ancestral prayers of the ashen priests. And oh look, a half-mad Menhada woman who seems to be unaware that her shriveled breast is exposed.

“I’ve never had call to question your Great Father’s sense,” my comrade Ilion once remarked, “until I watched your brother for more than a minute. Then I found myself wondering why he didn’t just drown that one in the brook.”

To which I’d responded: “The water would have refused him.”

“What is it?” I ask my brother again, suddenly more tired than I have any cause to be. We were warriors once, the greatest warriors in all the land, bested by no one, merely scarred by upheavals that would have reduced others to ash. We earned our wounds and our reputations, our pride. We earned the kingdom we built. Now we are weakened by immobility, by the lack of a cause to fight, by indignity and humiliation, and every day we struggle to find things to do, to find worth amid the bitterness of being *owned*.

Elldimek, our kingdom, which they have christened the Redoubt, belongs to another now, their only advantage against us being their greater number, an advantage that will do them little good when the world falls again. And it will, for though few dare to say it, the stench of carrion already so prevalent in the air seems to thicken with each passing day. Even the moons seem duller, as if the stink of death has tainted their light.

Something is coming, and in my most beautiful dreams, I imagine opening those doors again as my father once did, this

time not to usurpers, but to devourers, a tactical move which would finally bring us all back down to the same level: that of meat.

“You’ll have to come see. I don’t have the words to describe it.”

“Try.”

His thickly bearded face scrunches up in concentration. I had hoped his education, crude as it is, would have taken root by now, but alas, I fear it’s wasted on him. Not that this is a surprise. He thrives on stories that need no embellishments and yet get convoluted and more preposterous in the retelling with every passing season. And the Redoubt library, once the bastion of our ferocious history, has become tamed by the influence of other races. Now, instead of a shrine to dwarven pride, it has become an argument in which too many voices strain to be heard.

“I went outside,” he says, much too loudly, and in an instant I am sitting up, my hand clamped over his mouth, surprising him. I take in the rest of the room, a one-time stable for our regal mounts that still smells of horse manure; a not unpleasant smell, if not for the implication that this is where we belong in the absence of other animals.

My comrades, two dozen in all, sleep on, enwombed by the amber dance with shadow beneath tallow flames.

“You went... *outside*? Have you gone mad?”

I remove my hand, repulsed by the feel of his spittle-soaked lips against my palm as he smiles.

“I wasn’t alone. Nderin went with me. He’s the one who told me about the garden in the woods. He’d been there before, with the Foresters. Only it was different then. There weren’t so many of them.”

Nderin is my friend Uril’s son. Uril comes from a long line of butchers and you can still see in his eyes how much he wishes the meat were still pleading for mercy and dressed in the colors of our one-time enemies. His son is trouble enough that it is only a matter

of time before the Dead get their hands on him. Never aloud would I admit it, but nobody would grieve if they did. And based on how he treats him, I suspect Uril feels the same. The blood that runs sluggishly through our veins has seldom felt so cold.

“You were warned not to go out there.”

“Nderin knows a path. In the dark the Dead couldn’t see us. And there are not nearly as many as before. You’ve heard the talk. There’s rumors they might be going away.”

“Talk is all that is and you’re a fool to listen to it. Last time our people made benevolent assumptions, we ended up as slaves. Guessing at the patterns of the Restless is a good way to get yourself killed, or worse.”

“The path is safe.”

“Safe is not a word anyone gets to use anymore, Admir.”

He wasn’t listening, his eyes sparkling with excitement. “We only saw a few dozen of them, and the garden, it’s hidden among the dead trees.”

“What kind of garden?”

“You’ll have to come see.”

“You’re a bigger imbecile than I thought if you think I’m going to go wandering out there in the dark to see some flowers.”

“They’re not flowers, though. That’s the thing.”

I lie down and roll away from him, close my eyes though I know he has ruined the notion of rest for me for another night. “Get some sleep. You have horseshit to shovel in the morning.”

He sighs his frustration, puts a hand on my shoulder. “Please.”

“I’ll break your nose for you if you don’t go to bed, Admir.”

A grunt and he moves away, retreating to his cot, where, like the child I know him to be, he pouts and huffs until mercifully his dreams take him back to battlefields he can hardly recall.

In that, we are birds of a feather.

FOR THE SECOND time in as many hours I am dragged from sleep. Incensed, I am instantly ready to make good on my threat to shatter the cartilage in my idiot brother's nose, but upon opening my eyes to the first harsh strains of daylight through the rents in the stable roof, it is not Admir that stands over my cot, but Uril the Butcher. I know by the look on his long haggard face that there's trouble. Silently, I rise and get dressed, sparing a moment to sit on the edge of my cot, his presence like a thrummed violin beside me. My back aches, muscles sore.

"How long?" I ask him, lacing up my boots.

"Since last night."

"We should leave them to whatever fate befell them."

Uril, never a man to waste a word, merely nods in acknowledgment, but it's a redundant gesture. The fact that he's here and I am getting dressed means we've already made the decision to go after our fool kin. And I know why. Loyalty to one another, no matter how misguided, is all we have left, and our numbers are hardly so impressive we can afford to see them reduced, though the fact that Admir and Nderin have been gone since midnight does not augur well for their chances of survival.

To say nothing of our own.

I rise and look at Uril's shabby armor, the boiled leather so inadequate for his bulk it makes it difficult for him to breathe. I have the opposite problem with my own. These past few months, as food has become more scarce, I have lost weight and my armor hangs loose, reducing its efficacy.

"We should speak to Behar."

Uril gives a single shake of his head and pats his belly, which tells me he has already anticipated the request and taken care of it.

Which is wise. The less time we have to waste engaged in noxious verbal jousting with one of the Nightcoats, the better. As we are not permitted blades, we have, on our infrequent excursions beyond the wall, been forced to seek the aid of Karzhaddi and his thugs. Such arrangements are frequently unpleasant, costly, and best avoided, but one might say the same of death, which is, as any fool knows, the likely end result of venturing outside unarmed.

Most of our brethren sleep on around us, as they will continue to do until the house master or his emissary comes and assigns them their tasks for the day. I am still in Dhimiter's service, but since his health has started to fail (at an alarming rate), he has been much less vigilant in keeping us in line. If we are still slaves, it is to our own memories and shame, and not because Dhimiter is in any way a governing force over us anymore. He exits his house less and less these days, and on the rare occasions in which he is visible in daylight, his skin has a papery, translucent look. One wonders how long it will be before Rasuk and his master in the Undertaking come for him. Dhimiter has never been unkind, nor will he be missed. That he has any dominion at all (that *anyone* has) is an affront that will never be forgiven, only avenged when the wheel turns again.

We head outside into the morning sun, the smell of fresh cut grass a sensory illusion of serenity. It is nothing more than the scent of the lamps, which burn only at night for regulated hours, but permeate the day in the Downs.

Uril bows his head and does his best to ignore the curious looks of the helpless. Hollow-eyed wraiths watch us with envy only because we have not fallen *quite* so low. Filth runs in clotted brown rivers down the streets and there is waste everywhere. If it cannot be eaten, it lays discarded alongside those who have been discarded themselves. Once-proud people, thieves, respected politicians, murderers, valiant warriors — all have been made the

same by poverty or punishment, and all of them reek of horror. Human, elf, dwarf, and ghûl, no matter what the race, they seem to gather closer together with each passing day despite having nothing to say, as if wretchedness wishes to stitch them together into one tragic tapestry.

Or as if they are becoming a single sentient entity out of fear of what's coming.

The Outer City stinks of death and decay. The perpetual presence of crows overhead, sometimes almost thick enough to block out the sun, fills me with foreboding. At least today we are spared the horrible sounds of the Dead beyond the wall. All is curiously quiet out there, but I am hardly encouraged by the silence. There was little noise the day my father opened the gates to our oblivion, either. I am reminded of this as Uril and I stand before them and the sentries go about facilitating our egress. There are others here — Foresters, farmers, and fools among them — eager to be the ones who return from their adventures with food and supplies... the currency of respect. They will fail, of course. There is nothing out there for anyone, anymore. I suspect even the Dead know that now, know that they've won, and that all they need to do is wait it out and we will join their ranks from the inside. Maybe that's why they've been so quiet.

A Watchman atop the tower gives the all-clear. I hear one of the human sentinels mutter something about "a few less mouths to feed." Cranks turn, gears grind with a ferocious shriek, rust flakes off the cogs, and the chains rattle to life. The doors open, a wooden mouth yawning wide, bathing us in carrion breath. Out here the crows spot the landscape like black marks indicating the location of the fallen. And they are everywhere, some felled by the sentries, others the bodies of misfortunates exiled as punishment for crimes against the Magisterium.

Inside the wall are farms, houses, homes, as close to an ordinary existence as one can expect in the hell the world has become. There are also dungeons, sewers, tunnels, courts. But out here, there is nothing but dead earth, the grass trampled flat, the clay poisoned by the corrupted remains of the Restless. Fires razed the woods and the trees were twisted and stunted when they returned to life. It is a lifeless landscape, perpetually covered in an omnipresent mist that ebbs and flows like the ghost of a forgotten sea.

“Move along,” barks one of the sentries, an unmistakable note of glee in his voice, and when I close my eyes I imagine slipping the blade Ulric passed me up under his helmet and slicing his throat. It’s a brief thought, but the imagined scent of fresh blood, the heat of it coursing over my fingers, stirs my loins.

And then we are outside, two dozen of us in all, and the gate slams shut with a finality that vibrates through my bones.

As one, wordlessly, we start to walk.

WE HUNTED THESE lands once, brought animals down with unmatched skill and reveled in the kill with our brethren. Carcasses were dragged or carried over the shoulder home to our kingdom for ribald celebrations that would last until the sun rose, sometimes longer. The following day the streets would be populated by women and children who looked upon us adoringly (or with good-humored pity), as the hangover forced us to seek out the cure. All of that is gone now, stolen from us in a moment, and that world is nothing more than a thing of old stories and wistful memory. Our home is a prison, the streets crowded with wretches who no more recognize our worth than they do their own. And out here, our once-fair land reeks, the foul breeze like a diseased giant blowing upon his meal before devouring it.

All the animals are gone, either run to safer territory or wiped out entirely, for when the Dead could not get at us, they took what they could. We have even seen them eating clay, and each other.

We walk for an hour before stopping to rest, midway between home and the sprawling woods in which I spent the greater part of my childhood. Back when fighting the horde seemed like a sound strategy, we lit those woods aflame, watched it burn, the conflagration like the whole world burning as the Restless, who had been using it as a corridor, were cooked. Most considered it a victory, but for months I felt a hard knot of sadness in my throat at the thought of what we had done, of the beauty we had destroyed. Long before I learned to hunt, the woods had been my haven, a magical hiding place, a kingdom unto itself. There I learned to use my imagination to conjure up impossible monsters; I conquered them all like the mighty warrior I promised myself I would someday become. And I did, only to find myself shoulder-to-shoulder with my brothers as we razed that Place of Dreams. Slavery, sickness, grief... nothing has since eclipsed that loss for me. All of us have the day we knew our world was dead. That was mine.

Ever since, I have become a ghost in a land of ash.

As I sit upon a rock gnawing on a piece of stale bread and looking up at the jaundiced clouds, Uril taps a knuckle against my shoulder. I look up at him, a stone-faced monolith in armor, and he nods at something behind me, in the direction of the woods. The bread is like a stone that lodges in my throat as I rise.

Through the phalanx of blackened stems that is all that remains of the woods, one of the Restless comes, cerulean eyes like dull stars trapped in the black hole of its skull. It is horribly emaciated, practically indistinguishable from the spindly arachnid trunks of the trees through which it moves with incongruous grace. And

although nothing but vellum stretched tight over bones, it has somehow found the ability to smile.

I draw my dagger, but Uril stays my hand. There is a light in his eyes that I know all too well, and without speaking, his words are clear: *Allow me this one. There will be more.*

Once the dead thing has been dispatched, the blue light in its eyes remaining lit though its head has been removed, we stand in silence for a moment. At length, spurned by the frustration of inactivity, the quiet is broken as the Foresters take their own path, bound for the hills to the east and to land they hope has been neglected by the attention of the desperate Dead. There are fourteen of them. Only luck will preserve that number when they return. On each of their faces is acknowledgment of this fact. On most, the fear is tempered by apathy. We have lived long enough. We bid them safe passage with unspoken blessings, then watch as another, smaller group heads off to the west and to the plains. I trust no one in this group. They are dwarves, but have managed the admittedly enviable task of forgetting where they came from. If they are slaves, the Nightcoats hold the deed and as such, the nature of their mission outside the walls will go unknown by all but those within the cabal.

Which leaves only four: me, Uril, and the two young dwarves, Tarek and Veli, who seem to have ventured outside the gate simply for the fun of it, or as a break from the misery that exists within. For them, we have little patience. It is the foolishness of youth that has brought us here, after all. As Uril heads straight on through the woods, I turn to look at Veli, the younger of the two, as he tussles with his friend.

“You.”

He stops dead as if I have slapped him. I have always been intimidating in aspect, at least among my own kind, but these days

the black hate that exists in my skull has made oil of my eyes. I have seen them reflected in glass and it frightens even me.

“Yes?”

“You were a fool to come,” I tell him, and then glance at Tarek. “Both of you. And you are not our charges. If you should fall behind or fall prey to another, we will leave you, so you have a choice: stay close or head home. Do you have weapons?”

Veli produces a sharpened stick.

Tarek brandishes a long thin needle, no doubt stolen from his mother’s knitting basket.

I can see by their faces that until this moment, they believed themselves aptly armed, which they are if they also continue in the belief that the Dead have receded, a belief in my soul I know is wrong. The stench of them fills my nose, carried to me on a breeze that has come from darker places.

The boys can see by my face that they have made a mistake.

Tarek stares at his feet.

Veli clears his throat. “We will stay close, Olta. We will watch your back.”

For this, he earns more respect from me than I let show. Weaker men would have run. I turn and join Uril, who has just entered the woods like a knife through the ribcage of some enormous beast.

IT IS NOT the world of my childhood within those blackened bones, but the world as it is now: a graveyard. Death and old smoke cloy my nostrils as I follow Uril’s lead through the charred stalks of the trees. The ground beneath our feet is thick and loamy but crunches here and there as burnt wood and bark are driven further into the earth. A bluish haze hangs in the air, as if the last fog got caught in the maze. A brief glance over my shoulder shows the boys following

silently, the color drained from them by my words and the mist both. Their faces have hardened now, annoyed perhaps that they allowed themselves to forget their nobility, their pride, the instinct that should govern everything in order to keep them alive. But they are young and part of a new generation that no amount of teaching can make whole. Those days are gone. Assuming they live to grow older, they will be pretenders, shadows of what our race once was and can never be again.

A sudden burst of noise and my head snaps back around, my body tensing into a defensive posture, blade extended, breath held. I look up. The sickly clouds are momentarily eclipsed by a multitude of crows as they screech ahead of us, bound for whatever lies beyond. Their numbers seem endless, the cacophony the only sound in the world.

What do you know? I ask them. *What do you see?* Would that we could harness their flight, their sight, their wisdom, then perhaps we might stand a chance in the war to come. As it stands, we are merely waiting for the inevitable end.

It takes minutes, hours, weeks, for the last stragglers to pass over our stilled quartet. The noise recedes. Even still, I listen, for the crows are omens and it will do us well to measure the distance it takes them to reach where they're going, to reach the instruments of our doom. That there is something out there is not in question, only where it is and how long it will take to reach us, to reach lost Elldimek.

I straighten, look back at the boys and note that the mist has thickened into a fog around us. "Come."

They narrow the gap between us in an instant and look up at me breathlessly, awaiting my command. In Tarek's eyes I see the slightest spark of defiance and bitterness. It is a quality I admire. If he can learn to harness it, make a fire from all those unruly sparks, there might be hope for him, yet.

“Stay close, but keep an eye to our backs. I’d rather not have any surprises.”

As one the boys nod, Veli’s gaze lingering a moment longer than necessary before he moves away, as if he was trying to read something in my face. He won’t, of course. The people who might have been able to divine meaning from my eyes are long since buried. At the thought, I touch the spot on my breastplate where my wife’s silver ring used to hang from a cord around my neck. It is, like so many things, gone now, adorning the finger of another who knows nothing of our love or the anguish which stains that ring. I traded it to avoid starving, to keep death away a moment longer, as I couldn’t keep it from her. Maybe if the balance turns again, I’ll have an opportunity to find it.

Such notions exist as fragile comforts in the moments before sleep.

For the first time since embarking on this fool’s errand, I think of my brother. I have avoided it until now because with the summoning of his face comes awareness of his death. He is a warrior, yes, but a poor one, and I can only imagine, based on the excitement that limned his tongue last night, that battle was the furthest thing from his mind. There is a chance, of course, that he ventured out here and encountered nothing, but there’s not a part of me that believes it. Out here is a hell in waiting.

I expect to find him dead, torn to pieces, or to not find him at all. There was a time when the absence of a body to bury would have haunted me. Not so anymore. And should I find him dead, will I mourn his loss? Some part of me will, yes, as any man would lament the taking of kin, but things have changed too much for me to care as I should. He is little more than another body now, and one that has become a burden. The cruelest part of me anticipates the relief I will feel when I confirm he’s gone, for so often it is

akin to having a child in my care. With the world on the verge of change once more, I need to be unencumbered.

Ahead, Uril stops and leans forward. He has spotted something in the murky soup between the dead trees. At my approach, he raises a hand and I cease moving. Behind me, I hear the boys do the same. Then I realize my mistake. Not boys. *Boy*.

I start to turn and a crow explodes toward me from somewhere between the trees to my left. It does not feel like a merry coincidence; it feels intentional, part of a design that will have many parts and leave me in such a state when it ends. I raise an arm over my face as the crow skims close enough for me to feel the displaced air as he caws and swoops upward. *The crows are their familiars*. Then he is gone, his darkness stitched back into the shadows that birthed him and I am turning again, scanning the graveyard of bones for the boys and finding only one.

Veli stands a few feet away, his back to me. I spare a moment to check on Uril. He is still in the same place, as rooted to the ground as the trees, but upon sensing my attention, looks reluctantly away and meets my gaze. Then he looks beyond me, toward Veli, and his face changes, goes slack. It is not an expression I have ever seen before and it fills me with foreign dread.

I follow his gaze back to Veli, who is where I left him, but now the boy's body is quaking so violently it's as if he's being manhandled by a ghost. He is close enough for me to grab him if I'm willing to move, but for the moment I can't, and it is not quite fear that holds me in thrall, but awe. Awe at the thing I have mistaken as the movement of dead branches through the fog. It is nothing so benign, and for all I have seen in my time in this world, I am aware that I am bearing witness now to something that will change me from this moment forth.

It is taller than any of the Restless we have seen thus far. Taller than three men, and no part of it is thicker than my wrist. It looks

for all the world like an effigy made animate, a crude idol of rope and bone. A gathering of sticks. And as it ducks low and pulls itself through the narrow gap between the boles of dead trees, it appears as if the wood itself has given birth to it. The fog whirls away at its approach, allowing me the full view of the horror it represents here in this dreadful place. Nothing about it suggests anything human, but there are features twisted and buried beneath its bark-like skin, a mottled face, as if a man died and was subsumed by a withering tree, granting it some form of perverse life, threading its veins with sap. Its chest heaves as it draws itself back up to full height and now that it has shredded the fog that obscured it from view, I can see that in its right hand hangs the limp body of Veli's friend, Tarek. The head and one arm are missing, the stumps squirting blood down onto the blackened earth, slaking its thirst. The creature's jaw moves languidly as it chews on the boy's remains.

Perhaps to compensate for his embarrassment, to prove his worth and impress, Tarek decided to seek out the source of a noise, and in so doing, sealed his fate.

I look down at my hand, at the blade. It may as well be a feather for all the good it will do. I dare cast another glance at Urik. He is frozen by fear, as he should be. Bravery has found an inhospitable home here. If we fight, we will die. If we run, it will follow, but of these two choices, only the latter makes sense. It is not my time. Not yet. I will know it when it comes, but it does not come today, not at the hands of this godless devil of sticks and bone and rope and blue fire in place of eyes.

"Urik," I hiss, and hear a creaking sound as the creature ceases its masticating and turns in my direction. I watch it cock its triangular head toward my voice. Blind. Despite the twin blue orbs of fire, the thing has no eyes. Urik brings his wide gaze to bear on me.

I tilt my head toward the trees at our back. "We run." He

nods once and some of the life, if not the color, returns to his face. Sometimes the mere thought of action can draw a man out of himself and away from certain death.

“The boy,” he whispers. “Don’t let the Witherer take him.”

He has just christened this creature. Henceforth, this is how it shall be known. Not some nameless thing, as it deserves to remain, but the *Witherer*, a name that will instill fear in all who hear it, for it, like so many of this creature’s ilk, portends a quick yet painful end, an abomination that has no right to be here and now has dominion. Its presence confirms that we do not know what roams the territory beyond our walls, that we have been arrogant in thinking our enemy familiar. The terrible truth is that we know less than we did before.

The world has gone mad.

In two quick steps I have the boy by the scruff of the neck.

“No!” he screams, mistaking me in his fright for another devil of the woods.

And that is all it takes for the Witherer to find us.

The sound of it lunging toward us is the sound of all the kindling in the woods breaking at once, and I do not wait to feel the twigs of its fingers on my body. I am gone, running, dragging the young one flailing along with me through the fog. I have no idea where I am going, only that behind us is death so I have to keep pushing ahead. More than once my progress is halted by trees, the pain of the collision setting stars alight in my eyes, in my bones, but I persevere, Urik a bulky shadow to my left, keeping the pace. The brush crashes down behind us, trunks are pulverized, groan and fall. The Witherer comes, stalking us through the same woods where I became a warrior before burning them down just as this creature would burn me down, and perhaps I deserve it after all. Perhaps this thing is not Restless. Perhaps it has been resting all along and the woods have resurrected it to make me pay for my desecration of this sacred place.

Perhaps it is an end I deserve. And in that moment I think not of my brother, of my brethren, of anything but moving forward and away from that hellish demon that would strip me of my skin. I am not afraid to die.

I am afraid to die and become Restless.

Veli's foot finds a root and he is yanked from my grasp as surely as if the Witherer snatched him away. I slow but do not stop, glance back at the dazed boy struggling to his feet, and I think of going back for him, think of being brave, of trying to save him. But then instinct takes over and I know that if I do not stop, do not go back, the boy will be killed and the killing and the feeding will slow the creature down. The boy will die; we will live. I do not enjoy making this decision. There is no nobility in it, only self-preservation. But the choice is made and I run, and close my eyes as the crashing sounds behind me abruptly cease and the boy's scream shatters the brief silence until it too is made silent.

Urik is still with me, a shadow in the fog, and I wonder what he will say, what he will think, and then realize I don't care. He will thank me for his life, as I thank Veli for mine. Should we live to recount this tale, there were be no mention of the forced sacrifice, of my abandonment of the child. These are not details that will matter to anyone but the parents, and even their grief will be muted by the fear of what we have encountered in the dead woods today.

We run for an hour, until we are certain the only sounds we can hear are those of our own passage, the thunder in our chests and ears and throats, and still we do not stop.

Only when the fog is gone and the light returned to the day do we rest, in what appears at first glance as a clearing. What it resolves to be upon closer inspection is, in some ways, worse than the thing behind us.

Urik looks at me. "We should go home."

I agree, but not yet, partly out of curiosity, mostly because I know he is trying to protect me from what I might see.

We have reached not a clearing, but a garden, ringed so perfectly by the trees it looks as though it was designed by man and not nature. But though this is undoubtedly the garden of which my brother spoke, nothing grows here... though plenty has been planted.

“We should go,” Urik says again, his impatience marked by renewed terror at the new atrocity laid out before us.

It is a garden of hands, of arms buried in soil. Dozens of them, each one reaching into the air like some strange kind of fleshy plant. Each one sprouts from the elbow, and though there is nothing to suggest that these limbs have not been severed from their owners, I know this is not true. I know there are bodies beneath the blackened earth.

“Why?” Urik asks. “Why would someone do this?”

I can only shake my head. It is not a question that is likely to ever be answered, and in truth I care less about the genesis of this terrible display than I care about finding out who populates it. And after a half-hearted attempt to dissuade me Urik turns to guard our backs, his eyes set on the fog as it recedes like a sheet pulled away from a corpse. For now, the woods appear empty back there. If we are fortunate, the Witherer has retreated to feed on the bounty it took from us.

I walk among the hands, out for a stroll in a garden of the Underworld. Whomever interred these poor creatures did not distinguish by race. There are humans here, and dwarves, even an elf. It looks like a mockery of the dead woods around us, all those hands twisted into claws, grabbing at the air in desperation as they died, suffocating, their lungs filled with dirt.

It does not take me long to find what I’m looking for, and as if he has been waiting for it, as if this was the real reason he didn’t want me among the arms, Urik turns to look at me, his face grim.

The arm reaching from the dirt before me has an inked symbol of a wolf on its blanched white wrist, courtesy of the street people who offer such things in trade. Such practices are common, but the street people pride themselves on never repeating a design.

And this one belongs to Nderin, Urik's son.

At the look in my eyes, he nods his acceptance of the news and trudges through the dirt to where I stand. I put a hand on his shoulder and leave him to his mourning, though I suspect it will be quiet and not long. Urik has never had much love for his son. If anything, he has seen him as a disappointment, which I have often suspected is simply us looking at our kin as mirrors, but like me, loyalty has brought us here to retrieve them, alive or dead.

I search the remaining graves, if such a name can be employed for this wickedness, and although my brother is not marked, I will recognize his stubby fingers.

But he is not here.

Urik jolts and takes a step back just as I am sitting down to smoke upon a moss-shrouded rock. Pipe to my mouth, match held aloft, I look and forget the fire until it burns my fingers.

The hand next to Ndemir's has moved. Then his son's hand moves. Then they all do.

"Olta..." Urik shakes his head. "Could they be...?"

I shake my head. We have been here too long, and while my kind are known to be able to survive longer in situations in which others would suffocate, even we dwarves couldn't manage such a prolonged internment. Before the Witherer, we might have fooled ourselves into hoping that there's still a chance for Ndemir. Now it can only be more witchery, another display of the wicked magic that permeates this place. And we should not be here. Every moment brings us closer to our own destruction, a reality that is hardly limited by this place, but seems represented by it.

Urik starts to bend down to grab his son's hand. In a flash I am by his side, my hand clamped on his wrist. "No," I tell him. "Not unless you want to join him."

And as if they have heard, the hands grow still, underwater flowers in the absence of a current.

"Home," I say, and though it takes us an eternity, at last we move, not back the way we have come, but to the west, the long way around. We are willing to endure the protracted journey if it means we are free of this hellish place.

Urik the Butcher, Urik the Quiet, says nothing on the long walk home. He simply surveys the landscape and absently massages his wrist.

SOME UNKNOWN TIME later, the walls of Elldimek hove into view, misted by distance. From here I can see the black specks of the crows. They are not circling, but roosting on the walls. Watchers.

My feet ache, and my heart aches, too. I want to rest, but so close to home and unsure of what further surprises the Outside might have in store for us, I walk on. Urik trails behind. His is not a mask of sorrow, but anger, for though he might have little feeling left for Ndemir in his deadened soul, still he feels the theft of one of our own at the hands of these ungodly creatures. With it comes the awareness that this will never end, that we are the hunted now and one day the sun will rise on a world that is empty of natural life. Our kingdom, already stolen once, will be owned for good by demons, and we will be no more.

And perhaps that is how it should be, for what use are we to this world as slaves? Even those who would own us are themselves owned by the monsters that exist beyond the walls.

"Olta," Urik says, breathless. "Stop."

I do as he asks. He is bent double, bile unspooling from his mouth in a long silvery thread. I wait, watching him carefully as the foul breeze blows around us and the crows watch quietly. I consider this giant of a man, a man that in the old days fought proudly alongside me, a man I would have called a friend. Today, we are strangers. I have no money to buy his meat, and the Foresters don't provide enough to keep him in business, which renders him a butcher in name only. I no longer trust this man.

"Do you wish to share something with me before we reach the gate, Urik?"

He takes his time gathering his breath, clearing his lungs, and then he straightens, allowing me to see the blade in his hand. It is held downward, unthreateningly, but this offers little comfort, not given my suspicion of him, confirmation of which I have awaited since I first awoke to find him in my quarters.

There is nothing to read on his face.

"Why did you really bring me out here? Was it the Nightcoats?"
I ask him.

He says nothing, betrays even less.

"Why?"

Still he is silent, but that is condemnation enough. "What benefit in killing me and my brother?"

He shakes his head, only slightly, but without words I cannot decide if he is denying my words or simply can't explain the motives behind his assignment.

"Are they simply weeding out the weak so their resistance will be stronger when the time comes?"

"Olta..."

"And what of your boy? Was that your test? Did they require a sacrifice before they could trust you? You didn't look upset enough to have found him in that garden."

“I don’t—”

“Is that because you put them there? Was it you who buried all those people in the woods? Is it some kind of ritualistic burial ground? Help me to understand. Did you bring me there to kill me? Did you kill Admir, too? Where is he?”

He shakes his head again and now there is pain on his face. “It’s not like that.”

I step closer to him and his knife hand twitches. The crows rejoice. “Then what *is* it like? Why didn’t you kill me in the woods?”

“Olta.”

I wait, but there are no more words coming. Perhaps that is why he doesn’t speak, because it is impossible for most people to speak without deception. A mute man can never be called a liar. But it also deprives us of the truth if there is a truth to be had.

“Were you planning to cut my throat before we were in full view of the gate? Or did you just intend to cripple me so that the Restless would take me and you would appear innocent of your crimes? Tell me, Urik, why have you turned on us, on your brothers? What have we done to you?”

His brow furrows. “Olta, I didn’t—”

A shuffling sound behind him and he turns, knife raised. I close the distance between us and slip my own blade into his throat and twist, tug it upward and withdraw. Then I step away as Urik’s head comes back around, his eyes like boiled eggs. He reaches for me, his hand clutching like that of his own murdered son in the garden. He chokes, sputters blood, winces, and then drops to his knees.

I watch him wheezing at my feet, blood spurting from the gash in his neck, and then I raise my eyes to the figure standing still and watching a few feet away from where he stood.

In truth, I do not know whether or not Urik betrayed me. It is possible, as all things are these days. The Nightcoats are gaining in

strength. They whisper, build their existence atop a castle of secrets. That they have plans for Elldimek is not one of those secrets, only what the nature of those plans may be. They are cunning, ruthless, dangerous. And despite living within the confines of a stone prison, they yet make people disappear. I may never know if Urik was their emissary, or if I and my brother were truly targets. It is just as likely that I thirst for blood, that my discontent with the shadow my life has become has led me to take blood where I can find it, even if that means my own kind, even if I have to falsely vilify them. In fighting the creature, in breathing this air, in seeing the woods, I recalled more than ever what it felt like to be a warrior. It is all I was ever meant to be, and without it I am a ghost... worthless, purposeless, a waste. As my father once said, "In the absence of other prey, a wolf will eat his own."

It pleases me to think myself a wolf.

Before me is the cub, my brother, weaving before me, exhausted, changed, covered in filth. His face is made of chalk, his mouth hanging slack.

"Olta? Oh, brother, thank God it's you."

As I near him, teeth clenched and blade at the ready, I see the blue fire in his eyes.

I am mad. I am whole.

I am a warrior.



THE DRESSMAKER

ELIZABETH MASSIE

*T*HIS DOES NOT *feel safe. I should not have come here.*

Drita stood on the threshold and stared into the room. It was much bigger than any she'd ever seen, more a grand hall than a bedchamber. There were flower-themed tapestries on the walls, and massive portraits featuring stone-faced humans holding their equally stone-faced pets — cats, dogs, birds, reptiles. At the far end of the room was a fireplace in which red flames leapt and crackled. Chairs bore thick cushions and the bed, which held the center of the room, was made of dark wood carved with dragons. A single, small window was set in a wall near the ceiling. The room was heavy with sharp perfumes that made Drita's eyes water.

I should never have trusted a human.

Auris spun about on her toes to face Drita. She smiled, teeth flashing white. “Do you like this? Do you like my room? How much nicer than any place you have lived, I'm sure!”

Drita nodded slightly. A dwarf herself, it was true she'd never seen such opulence. She lived with her father in a thatched hut in an eastern district of the Outer City. Her mother long dead, Drita helped her father collect, wash, and sell rags.

She also earned a bit more by giving her stout little body to those who cared to pay for sex. Her father did not know this. To know it would kill his soul. He had his dignity, had pride in himself and his daughter, descendants of the noble dwarves who built Elldimek so long ago.

Auris, however, was human, tall and slender, with braided hair the color of lanner-tree bark and lips full and pink. She was perhaps Drita's age of nineteen, perhaps a few years older. Nearly everything she said came with a laugh, as if the world amused her.

"Put your satchel on the floor," Auris ordered. "Open it. Show me all your beautiful dresses."

Drita put her satchel down. She only had one other dress in the bag, for she owned just two. The one she wore was her favorite, a rainbow array of colorful scraps stitched together and decorated with shells, dried seeds, twigs and reeds and polished bones; all tidbits she'd found in the gutters and roadsides.

"Open the satchel!" snapped Auris.

Drita pushed a curl of hair from her eyes and did as commanded.

Auris pawed through Drita's few possessions — a hairbrush, a cup, a plate, a pair of stockings, her sewing kit. Then she pulled out the second dress. It was gray and well worn. "You've only one other? This piece of trash?"

"Yes."

The human's eyes narrowed. "You told me you are a dressmaker."

"I am."

"Fancy dresses, you said you make."

"Yes." *I make dresses for other dwarves. I give them away to help*

them feel proud and noble, as they should. It is not much, but it is what I can do for my kind.

“Then where are these dresses, dwarf?”

“Others have them.”

“Hmm.” Auris walked around Drita as if the dwarf was still a slave on the block. “The one you are wearing now, that pretty one. You wear it to attract customers, yes? You hike it up, wink, and wait, don’t you?”

Drita’s jaw tightened. “I..”

“Of course you do!” Auris clapped her hands, a spoiled child delighted with herself. “In fact, there was a human with his fingers down your bodice when I first saw you in the alley this morning, yes? Ready to do what it is men like to do with your body?”

He paid me enough for a week’s bread. I do it for my father.

“Does it feel good?”

There was no good answer.

“Answer me!”

“You asked me to come to your home,” said Drita, lifting her chin slowly. “You said you would pay me to make you a dress. I told you it would take seven days. I said when I was done, I would leave. You never said I was to answer your questions, and I am not here to answer them. Let us be clear on that.”

The human’s lip curled and her ice cold eyes flashed. “We’re clear on nothing but what I want. I want you to stay and make dresses for me. Not one dress, but rather dresses. As many as I want. Like the one you have. Better than that, even.”

“I agreed to stay until one dress was done and then I would return home.”

“And you believed me?” Auris laughed at the ceiling, her braids swinging. “Ignorant dwarf! You’re all the same. Gullible, stupid, worth only what you can produce for us, best suited as servants or slaves.”

“I am a free dwarf. I am neither servant nor slave.”

“But now you are. Now you belong to me.” Auris moved to her bedside table and pulled a long leather strap from a drawer. “And you will do as I order or face the lash. And I am quite talented with the lash, dwarf. I never miss.”

Drita grabbed up her satchel and turned for the door. Confidence and defiance were her only hopes at getting away. This human might be thrown off balance by a dwarf’s boldness, so unaccustomed to it was humanity, anymore. “I belong to no one. I am leaving.”

But Auris reached the door before Drita. She slammed it shut, locked it, then grinned her white-toothed grin. She curled the strap around her arm as if it were a serpent and leaned down until her nose nearly touched Drita’s. “You’re mine, dwarf,” she said. Her breath was foul. “And there is nothing you can do about it.”

I am doomed! What a fool I am!

There was a knock on the door. A deep voice spoke, “Daughter?”

“Get under the bed, hurry!” whispered Auris. “Should my father find you he will skin you alive!”

Drita stared at the door.

“Now!”

Drita hid beneath the bed, the clots of dust tickling her nose. She heard the door open. Peering from beneath the hem of the low-hanging blanket, she saw leather boots clomping into the room.

“Father,” said Auris. “Good evening.”

“I was passing your room,” said the man, “and heard you speaking to someone.”

Laughter. “I was play-acting.”

“You were?”

“Yes, of course. I haven’t anyone to talk to but you and Mother. I must make up my friends. Don’t you think that is quite creative, yet also quite sad?”

There was a huffing breath and a shuffling of boots. “We’ve discussed this time and time again, Daughter. Outside our house there is danger. Here in the Inner City there are people who might take advantage of you. Not to imagine the horrors in the Outer City. You are safe here, you are protected.”

Piercing laughter. “Oh, yes! Of course. I want to be safe. It is not so sad as I made it sound.”

“There is nothing you want beyond our home, trust me.”

“I trust you, Father.”

“We shall dine in an hour. Listen for the bell.”

“I will, Father.”

The booted feet left the room and the door was locked again.

“Get out here, dwarf,” Auris ordered.

Drita climbed from beneath the bed. She brushed herself off, stared at her captor, and lifted her head boldly. “I will make you one dress,” she said. “It will be the most beautiful dress you’ve ever seen. Then you will pay me and let me go. It is what you promised me when I agreed to come here.”

Auris laughed then slapped Drita so hard she fell back, struck the edge of the bedside table, and lost consciousness.

SHE AWOKE IN a tightly sealed wooden chest. There was barely enough room for her to lie on her side with her knees drawn up and her arms folded across her chest. Her forehead throbbed from the knock against the table, her mouth tasted of iron and blood. One of her front teeth was now loose. It was dark and stiflingly hot in the chest, and there was no good air, for she had breathed it all in while unconscious, leaving only useless, exhaled gases. As a dwarf, Drita’s lungs could store good air and make use of it for many hours, if need be. Yet, when those hours were up she would

need to take another breath, and not of befouled air.

How long have I been in here? Even my lungs are straining.

She closed her eyes, clenched her fists. Was she still in Auris' room, in Auris' house? Or had Auris put her in a box and hauled the box elsewhere? If elsewhere, then where? Somewhere in the Inner City? Or back to the Outer City's Dockside, where Auris had found her in the first place?

Please let me out...

Or, fate forbid, outside Redoubt all together, beyond all hope, where the Dead roamed freely, and, smelling her, would tear open the box and rip her apart?

No, oh, please let me out...!

Tucking her head, she tried to listen. Her heart picked up its beat and the throbbing in her head muffled any sound that might come from outside the box.

PLEASE LET ME OUT!

Then there was a shuffling sound. A thumping, scraping. Someone was there, nearby.

"Let me out!" Drita screamed, using the last of the air in her lungs. "Please, please let me out!"

The wood creaked and the lid was pulled open. Drita blinked in the light and Auris laughed in her face. "Silly! I didn't forget you. Are you ready to sew?"

DRITA SAT AT the table on a stool that required three thick pillows to lift her up high enough. Her satchel was open and her sewing tools were laid out and ready. And folded on the table were large scraps of fabrics of various colors and textures, from the finest and softest to the coarsest, scratchiest.

"Cloth is rare, as you well know, dwarf," Auris confided, standing

over Drita's shoulder with her hands on her hips. "I managed to steal a skirt and shawl from my mother, an apron from our cook, and a shirt from one of our laborers. I tore them apart for you so you can sew them into something beautiful for me. Now, tell me what else you need and I will make sure you have it."

Drita touched the fabrics, her mind racing as to how she might fashion a lovely gown for a human she detested. But as evenly as she could, she said, "I need shells and reeds, small hollow bones, seed pods, anything you might find that can be sewn into decorative designs."

"Hmm," said Auris. She fingered Drita's dress, the shells along the neckline, the bird bones that covered the sleeves in geometric patterns. She moved around the chair to trace the bits of reeds that had created flower designs on the bodice. They were snapped and broken from Drita's time in the wooden chest, and they hung sadly from their threads. "Oh," Auris pouted. "How sad. Your dress has some damage here. I would think you'd be more careful with your one nice gown."

Drita cringed as Auris' hand moved along her breasts where the broken reeds dangled. She recalled the hands of the human men who paid to have their way with her, and how she would want to bite their fingers off and spit them away. Yet she never resisted. What they gave her was worth her temporary debasement.

Auris stepped back and twirled a braid. "Well, then, I shall sneak out and go hunting for those things this very evening. And you shall begin sewing."

Using a length of yarn, Drita took Auris' measurements carefully. The human was tall, and her arms were long. It would be pure luck should the provided fabrics be enough to create the dress. But Drita did not dare ask for more. If need be, she would trim some off the bottom of her own to add to the new dress.

I must make this dress and plan an escape, she thought as she laid out the fabrics. I cannot live here, for it will surely kill me!

She cut and pinned the pieces together, then began the painstaking job of stitching the bits together. Auris watched for a while, mildly curious, and then went to her bed to brush her hair and play off-key music on a small flute. When the light faded from the single window high in the wall, Auris ordered Drita to climb into the chest for the night.

Drita shook her head. "There is no need for that. I can sleep on these pillows on the floor."

Auris snatched up her lash and waved it back and forth. "Oh, but there is. I don't trust you, dwarf. Should you be free when I sleep, who knows what foul tricks you might come up with?"

"I would not try such a thing. I know my place now."

"I can't trust you."

"You can."

"In the chest, dwarf!"

No! I cannot!

Auris flicked her wrist and the lash caught Drita's neck, wrapping itself tightly and cutting into the skin. Drita clawed at the leather. "That's a small taste, dwarf. A reminder of who I am and who you are. In the chest, now, or it will be a whipping you'll never forget!"

Drita climbed into the chest, folding herself up and tucking her head. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as the lid was shut and latched. How long would it be before she was let out? Just a few hours? Or perhaps several days this time? What if Auris' attention turned from wanting a dress to wanting something else, and she forgot Drita all together?

There were sounds outside the chest, footsteps, humming, laughing. A door opening and closing.

Drita counted her heartbeats. She clenched and unclenched her hands. She tapped her teeth and flexed her toes, trying to keep her mind off her circumstance.

Be brave! You are alive still.

Her thoughts scrambled from her father who was surely desperate now, wondering where she was. She thought of the dwarves and how her simple gifts of lovely dresses brought the females joy in spite of their daily struggles. There would be no more dresses for them if she could not get away. Had her efforts to help her kind come to an end, here in a chest in the bedchamber of a human? Here is a tiny wooden chest?

She lay, trembling, as fat tears coursed down her cheeks.

As sleep rose up at last to soften her dread, she thought back on the stories of her great grandmother Mariad, who had been a priestess before the Fall. A beautiful dwarf, quiet and strong. A leader, a fighter. One who cared for her people with secret knowledge and great skills.

If only her knowledge had been passed down to me.

If only her skills had not been lost to time.

If only...

BY THE FOURTH day of her captivity, Drita had sewn the human's dress and completed all adjustments. Auris stood before her mirror and admired herself, spinning this way and that, tipping her head, undoing her braids and shaking her head so her hair swirled about her shoulders.

"I like the way you put the colors together, dwarf," she said without looking away from herself.

Drita sat on the pillows at the table and said nothing.

"Did you hear me? I gave you a compliment."

“Thank you.”

“Now it’s time for you to decorate the dress.” Auris strolled to her bed, on which lay a cloth sack. “While you’ve been in the chest, I’ve gone out secretly and found some things.” She up-ended the sack and out tumbled a gritty collection — twigs, tiny shiny shells, dried reeds and grasses, and several mismatched buttons. “Nice, yes?”

Drita nodded.

Auris frowned and snapped her fingers. “Come get them, then. I’m not about to do your work for you, dwarf.”

Drita carried tidbits to the table as Auris changed from the new dress to her old gown. Then she stood close and watched as Drita stitched the first design with the buttons and twigs. Auris slapped Drita’s hand and caused Drita to stick herself with the needle.

“No, no,” said Auris. “That flower design is too small. Try again.” It took several attempts before Auris was satisfied.

Though not completely.

“Something’s missing,” the human said. “It’s not as pretty as it should be.”

“You brought no bird or mouse bones. Bones glisten when polished, and they catch the light nicely.”

Auris wrinkled her nose. “Birds. Mice. I can’t stand the thought of such vermin. My mother was bitten by a mouse once and her finger swelled. And Father taught me that birds bring plague.”

“Any small bones, then. Search in rubbish hills.”

“I’d never touch a rubbish hill.”

“Then nothing shall glisten on your new dress.”

Auris slapped Drita, knocking her off the pillows to the floor. “Get up! And get into your chest.”

“It is just early afternoon. It is not yet evening.”

“I don’t care what time it is. Get in there!” She kicked Drita in the stomach, then dragged her to the chest by her hair. Drita

struggled but the blow left her weak. Auris threw her inside and slammed the lid shut before she could take a deep breath. Drita lay in the dark, folded up, her stomach heaving, her heart thundering, weeping with rage and helplessness.

Great grandmother Mariad! See me! Hear me! Help me!

But the woman did not see, did not hear, did not help. For she was long dead.

BY THE TIME the chest was opened again, Drita's lungs were spent. She sat up, gulping in the fresh air and blinking in the red light from the fireplace. It was still night, and shadows were wide and deep.

"Get out, dwarf!" laughed Auris. "I've found the little bones we need for my dress!"

Drita pushed herself to her feet wavering, panting. She rubbed her eyes to clear them.

Kneeling on the floor was a young dwarf. His hands were lashed behind his back. His dark eyes were huge with fear. Auris stood behind him, smiling, holding a large knife.

"What...", managed Drita. "What are you doing?"

"Whatever I please. This is my home. My room. My dress. And my dwarves." Auris placed the blade to the young dwarf's throat. "This one is particularly small. His bones shall be just right."

"Please, no!" said Drita. She stumbled from the chest. "There are plenty of bones scattered about. Take me into your kitchen. I would think there are bones left over from your meals. I can clean them, shorten them, hollow and buff them until they shine. Any other kind of bone, I can make work!"

"Let you into our kitchen? My mother would spy you, or our cooks, who would tell on you and then discover what I've been up to. But not to worry, silly. I want you to kill him. I don't take on messy tasks."

Drita stopped and stared.

Human! Oh, if I were strong enough to kill you!

“Will you do the deed? I would think a dwarf knows all about killing, quartering, and cleaning animals. Here, take the knife. Do it quickly and let’s get back to the business of my dress.”

“No!” Drita wailed and rushed forward. Auris knocked her aside with a solid blow. Drita fell and slid across the floor, splinters from the wood floor digging into her face, raking her face with pain.

“Since you won’t do it, dressmaker, I’ll have to,” said Auris. She slashed the blade across the side of the young dwarf’s neck, releasing a torrent of blood, severing the flesh and tendons as he twisted and screamed. “Oh, my, that didn’t work.” Auris stabbed the dwarf in the stomach three times then and shoved him onto his back, straddled him, and sawed at one stubby arm until she hit the bone. He continued to writhe and gurgle, spewing, drooling red. “Hold still, you fool! You’ll only make it worse for yourself!”

The dwarf twisted and kicked on the blood-soaked floor. “His arm bones are too large,” said Auris. “But toes are tiny!” She tugged off a shoe and chopped at the dwarf’s foot.

Stop it stop it STOP IT!

Drita righted herself and crawled toward Auris. “Please, no!” she cried, though she could see it was too late. She watched as the young dwarf twitched beneath the human, his tongue lolling, and then went still.

Auris stood and looked at the knife and then at the body. She was drenched in blood from her hair to her slippers. Her eyes shone mad through the red and she waved the knife at Drita. “Dwarf, look at me! This is your fault. Had you done this there would not be such a dreadful mess. Clean it up, now. And then procure some bones for my dress.”

Drita said nothing. On hands and knees she stared at the dead dwarf and then at the human. Bones for a dress. A murder for vanity.

Auris snapped her fingers and walked to her bedside table and the basin of water that rested upon it. “Get a rag! Clean it!”

Auris waited, sneering in her gore-covered gown, while her captive went for a rag to clean the floor. Drita knelt and wiped wet, scarlet circles into the wood. Then suddenly the dead dwarf spasmed grunted, and growled. Auris screamed. “He’s one of the Dead! What do we do, dwarf?”

The revnant’s eyes flashed, white to black to white to black. It rolled over and tottered to its feet. Its head hung at an angle from the severed neck and its mangled arm flapped like a raw and scarlet wing. Its blood-slicked teeth clacked. It immediately turned on Drita and shuffled toward her.

“What do we do, dwarf?” demanded Auria.

Drita backed across the room. “Burn it.”

Auris climbed onto the bed. “I’m afraid!”

“This one seems slow. We can do it.”

“Kill it, dwarf! Burn it!”

The thing’s head jerked around and it locked gazes with Auris on the bed.

Yes, please! Go for her! Kill her and let me be free!

But as Drita took another step backward she tripped over a footstool. The thud was enough to get the attention of the Dead back on her, and it snarled. Drita clambered up and raced for the fireplace, where she grabbed up a flaming branch and held it out. As the revnant fell upon her she shoved it against its bloody clothing, which smoked and then caught fire. The undead dwarf slapped clumsily at itself, grunted, snorted, and crumpled into a flaming heap.

I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry, my brother.

Auris bounced on the bed, her hair flying. "Hooray! Hooray, I am saved!"

And I am doomed.

THE YOUNG DWARF'S toe bones were charred black, but Auris thought the dark tint had a certain charm. She said that should Drita refuse to polish and add the bones to the dress, she would beat her and lock her in the chest for as long as she felt compelled.

Drita wept silently as she hollowed the bones and stitched them into a cheerful pattern on the bodice.

AURIS LOVED HER new dress. She first wore it in her bedchamber alone, prancing back and forth before the mirror as the reeds, twigs, and toe bones clattered. Then she decided to show her family, and tell them a story about learning to sew herself.

"They will believe me," she said with a laugh before she left the room. "If they come to see how I've done it, you will hide and I will show them your sewing tools. I will admit to borrowing fabrics, but I think they will be so pleased at my new skill they will overlook that minor issue."

Drita nodded. *Your new skill? Oh, if I had but a taste of Mariad's old skills.*

Auris' mother and father were indeed pleased, and did come into her room to see her new tools as Drita hid beneath the bed.

When they were gone, Auris ordered Drita out and said, "Now that I am known as a dressmaker, I shall need more. I will have one dress a week. I will provide what you need, and you will make

them. Each must be more beautiful than the one before it.”

Then she ordered Drita into the chest, and Drita heard the door open and shut.

Alone in the dark, keeping as calm as she could with no certainty how long she would be locked away, Drita thought of her great grandmother. She thought of how her father had told her that from stories told and sketches made, he could see that Drita had inherited Mariad’s curly hair, the wide forehead, the index fingers that were a bit longer than the middle finger. “Mariad was quiet yet strong,” her father had told her. “You are quiet and I know you are strong. Her blood is in your veins, and for that you should carry yourself with pride.”

Great grandmother, if only you were here. You could save me from this torment! I am not strong! I am lost! I am damned! There is no hope for me!

She slept fitfully until the chest was opened once more.

When she stepped out of the box and into the late night candlelight, she saw two young dwarves in the room, on their knees, with their hands bound at their backs. One female. One male. Auris stood over them, grinning and holding her knife.

Not again oh no no no NO!

“I smuggled them in this evening. Put them in hoods and no one in the house was the wiser, thinking them to be some of our own servants. Aren’t they charming?”

“Why did you bring them here? We don’t need them.”

“Of course we do, silly. We need bones for my new dresses!”

“We still have bones,” said Drita carefully. “Just look in the kit. There are rib bones, finger bones, bones from the spine...”

“I don’t like those bones. They are clumsy. I like toe bones, and we have no more of those.”

The two young dwarves began to cry, and they looked to Drita as if she could save them.

“Toe bones... they are too difficult to work with. Please, let

these two go, and I will make you a fine dress with the finger bones.”

Auris spit. “No! I want what I want! Now, will you kill them as dwarves kill their animals? Or must I do it again?”

Drita’s thoughts flashed on the young dwarf, his slashed neck, his wounded stomach, his butchered arm and foot. His dreadful, agonized death.

She nodded and took the knife from Auris, who stood back, picked the lash up from the bedside table, and smiled. “Do it, then. Quickly. And you can start the new dress tonight!”

The trembling dwarves looked up at Drita.

“Do it!”

Drita wondered how sharp the knife was, and how quickly she could free herself from this prison with one deep, quick slice of the blade. She put her finger to the tip, felt the cold, bright, pricking of her skin.

Yet if I kill myself, Auris will rid herself of these precious little ones in whatever way entertains her and assuages her rage at me.

“I said do it!”

Mariad’s blood is in me. In some way I will find her magic in my blood, too. And then I will escape this place and seek revenge on Auris and those who treat my kind as trinkets, as garbage. I will become a fighter. I will become a leader.

Auris snapped the lash and it cut open the side of Drita’s face. The pain was excruciating, the blood hot. “DO IT!”

As Auris stood watching with the lash swinging back and forth from her hands, as the fire in the fireplace popped and hissed across the room, Drita knew she had but two choices: to kill the dwarves kindly, herself, or to let the butcher do the deed. Tears burned and welled up in her eyes, but she did not let them fall.

“Look there,” said Drita to the dwarves on the floor. “Look to the fireplace... see how the flames are dancing.”



HE IN MEMORY

MALCOLM SHEPPARD

A SHIELD." MY UNCLE said it with the twilight face of war. True Surinzan know the face. Neither clouds of fear nor threat of anger's storm appear in your eyes. Darkness embraces your intentions; your pain dissolves into evening shadows. No sun, no bright, arrogant joy. It's a clear, darkening sky, hard to read.

Yet as I lifted my shield, spinning it left and right to warm my wrist, I sensed anger beyond his twilight face, a fleeting gray cloud. He dropped his arm so his *sleaghar* fell from attention to point so slightly at me. It was disrespectful to do that outside of practice, and no accident — this man could carve a circle the size of an iris with his spear's point. His weapon only moved by desire.

"The guards have them," I said. "There's an art to it, you know."

"Yes, Morrika." His voice was a desert echo, even between the thick dwarf-built walls. "We knew shields before Redoubt. Do you know our word for them? It's as old as the rest of the real language. *Koath*. Say it."

“*Kowath.*”

“Your tone is off. That’s the word for coward. A related word. You must forget the city accent. Your own name means ‘fiery queen,’ niece, but if you lose the pronunciation it could acquire all sorts of stupid connotations. Our language is subtle. We are precise.”

“I’ve seen the Foresters walk out in formation against the Dead. That’s when they fight shield to shield.” I tapped my forearms together to suggest the technique of overlapping steel-shod wood and pressing muscle. “They’re not cowards, uncle.”

He let his *sleaghar*’s point drop a bit more. He could thrust up at me, perhaps. He was a man carved from knotted oak, immovable but made of the slow stone-shattering motion of old growth. But he could move fast. I’d seen it.

“You know, some of us use it now. Surinzan train with the Watch or at the Red Door School.” (*More popular fighting schools than ours*, I thought.) “We’re the only ones who don’t.”

“Why?” Now his weapon pointed straight at my neck.

I was never one for the twilight face. The words hissed out. “It’s one of Redoubt’s weapons. We live here now. Without it? No students. The Coilhand School closes. Twenty-three generations of the art end.”

“Twenty-four, maybe. Depends on how much you’ve learned. Show me this way of the shield. If it impresses me, I’ll let it into Coilhand. You can teach it to warriors after I’ve been burned or fed to the jackal-folk.”

“You know I can’t beat you.”

He opened his hand; his *sleaghar* clattered on the stones. “How about now? You’ve got two weapons to my none. Try to hit full force, but keep the sheath on your spearhead. I know you’d be afraid of hurting me otherwise.”

“I might still hurt you.” I dropped to war stance, knees bent deep.
“Come.”

My *sleaghar* slid in my right hand out of nervousness, but I still flipped it off my shoulder fast and caught it firmly. *Never drop your spear.* It was the first lesson, the law of all fighting schools. Drop the *sleaghar* and leave in shame, until you make an offering to your teacher and the spear’s god.

Yet my uncle’s weapon lay on the paving stones between us. Disrespect.

I thrust for the midsection. He tapped it aside with an open hand and ground his forearm on my *sleaghar*’s haft to guide it down. I knew the trick; it would rise up again behind a fist aimed at my throat or face, but my shield was ready, pushing out. At Red Door they’d taught me that in single combat, you angle shield and spear together into a wedge.

But he stepped close enough to pin my weapon with his body. He swung with the other hand: a short hook. It hit my shield dead center instead of sliding away. The metal boss groaned and crumpled, and my shield splintered. It cut my arm, but that was a little thing. I tightened my grip for a close range strike, but he slipped to my shield’s side, shoved his arm under its wreckage and lifted, sharply. Its top edge struck me between nose and lip. Red pain and worse, my hand lightened, because I’d dropped my *sleaghar*.

I sunk, sightless with agony. I spat blood and snot out of my mouth. He’d broken my nose.

I heard him: “I didn’t drop my spear. I am the spear. I do not carry a shield against my weakness. I am the shield of the People.”

He treated my face. “Your nose was too sharp before, your skin too smooth,” he said, and led me to his hammock to rest, not the dwarven slab beds students usually use. He gave me ground shadowseed for tea. It came from a *Meliae* plant, holy and rare.

Every Surinzan fighting school had a recipe, but most of them substituted other ingredients, like poppy and cistern orchid. I knew it was real by the smell: burnt roses and cinnamon. It was the giver of visions. I dreamed my aches away.

“LOVER.” A POINTED smirk shaped his broad mouth, its symmetry inhuman. Sussura was Meliae; his face would always be thus. He darted away. How did I know his name?

“No!” I laughed and chased him up the stairs. The long spiral ended in a great carved flower: five petals, his house’s sign. A pillar rose from each point, and they gathered and twisted into a roo. The chamber’s sides were open to the sunset sky save for wind-tossed curtains embroidered with the same flower. I felt a drop of sweat fall on my lip from the point of my nose. It wasn’t broken. I was embarrassed, not winded. I was dreaming.

“Of course not. You promised me warrior’s service, not love, but that’s the paradox, isn’t it? The best guardians love their charges. The worst only follow their oaths by rote.” He sat on a gilt bench in the middle of the room, but no sign of exertion touched him. One eye was black and the other green, and his pale arms were laced with violet veins. He was a shapechanger, and this lanky form pleased him today. I studied his body too closely and it seemed to wear his smile away.

“Even Surinzan who serve out of love know the words of their oaths, and the limits they impose,” I said.

Sussura’s green eye blackened, and as he stood, his bones cracked and he stretched half a foot taller. “You’re sincere, but your mother wasn’t, was she? She too loved one of my house, until the world vomited up the Dead and she voted with the betrayers. I remember the red tassels on her spear dancing with the stride of her horse, away and away.”

Her *sleaghar* rested across my back. I'd inherited it. I swung the baldric around and drew it. "Now you see it again, returned. Even in a dream, I will not be accused of her crimes."

"Not a dream," he said. He pulled the curtain aside. They stood as high as a water tower in deep Redoubt, and among a cluster of other, slender towers: wood embracing white stone, just as the Meliae built.

"It is. I'm dreaming of Spyre, the Meliae capital."

"No. This is a Skrye, a lesser fortress. Spyre is over there, to the right of the sun. Look."

I put my hand over the sun, and blotting out its glare, saw it: hybrids of tower and tree surrounding a greater, pointed tower the size of a mountain, just as my uncle described it.

"It's a tomb." Sussura took hold of my shoulders, so I faced him; he wept. "It contains nothing but mad echoes and the Dead. But Skrye is unspoiled. I'm all that survives, but my soul knows yours, Morrika, through the vows made by your blood. By your love."

He pulled me closer — no, I tightened my hold, only then aware of my hands around his waist. "I trained to protect you, even though we thought there were none of you left. I'll come to you."

"Then I will show you the lights of Redoubt and the river between us, and you'll know the way."

"YOU WERE DRUGGED out of your mind." Mother folded her hands in her lap and shot an angry look at me. Kuellan nodded in agreement. It was a clan feast. Talking out of turn was rude but I tossed the bones from my meal into the fire in an act of deliberate, angry waste. They were pigeon scraps: expensive, and good for stock.

We were the ChaKavan Clan, twenty squeezed into an old dwarf apartment. Our tapestry hung from an old-form spear across

from the hearth. Redoubt's masters resented wasted space, but Surinzan meet by clan twice a month, and tradition demanded a dedicated space. They gave us this hovel. Higher clans enjoyed better accommodations.

Mother waited for the other elders to agree. They nodded and poured her a cup of watered wine, signalling the end of the matter, and she said, "There. A troubling dream. That's what you get for training with Coilhand. We sponsor Red Door. Coilhand's teacher isn't even a relative. You call him 'uncle' because that's the old tradition."

"I thought tradition brought us to Redoubt. That's why we're squatting in here, sweating, isn't it? You sided with the Running King. According to him, we didn't flee because we were scared, but because the Surinzan Way needed to be preserved even at the expense of the Meliae. I would have thought protecting the Breathers of Magic was part of our sacred identity, but what do I know?" I stood and shook off the numbness in my legs.

"Do not call him the 'Running King,' Morrika. That's treason. He was duly elected then, and remains so."

"You're right. The only thing about the old man that runs these days is his shit. I'm sure it swiftly slips down the open sewer a stone's toss from here. It's probably the only part of him that leaves sight of the White Citadel to walk – well, slide among his people."

Of course Kuellan jumped up. Tradition burdens siblings with each other's honor. He wasn't going to kill me. The only spear in the room was hanging on the wall, sacrosanct outside of war. His *sleaghar* was racked outside along with his shield – *koath*. Red Door taught unarmed techniques, usually a strike to the face followed by a grab and throw. The rest of the clan skittered to the walls.

He launched a palm. I slipped, grabbed his clavicle and twisted, bringing him to his knees as he screamed once, sharply, and then trembled. My technique wasn't for everyone. It takes a particular

type of grip strength to reach far enough behind a collarbone to feel you could almost close your hand. You get it by catching sandbags in your fingertips, and driving your hands into jars of pebbles until your fingernails fall out. If I'd liked, I could have turned my wrist, snapped the bone in half and driven it into his lung, but I only wanted to shame him, and them.

"That's why I call the old man at Coilhand my uncle. You? I don't know who the fuck you people are." I threw my brother down and made for the door. They got out of the way.

I was picking up my *sleaghar* when I heard her: "Daughter. Listen to me call you that. I'm never going to do it again, unless you kneel and apologize to your clan." Mother was just outside the door, near her own weapon.

"I thought I made myself clear. You're not my clan anymore."

"So much self-righteousness, so little experience. Ever since we gave your spear a blade you've been like this. You've always been able to beat your brother, Morrika. That doesn't make you better in other ways. And unlike you, he was born outside the walls. He saw Spyre. You didn't."

"I've been out there. I train with the Foresters. My *sleaghar's* been profaned with Dead flesh. You think my vision's just a drug dream, but that's what visions used to be! Besides, I know exactly where Skrye is. I could point it out for you on a map. What kind of dreams tell you where to find places you've never been?"

"You picked wild fruit on clear days. You fought lesser Dead... shamblers and crawlhands. If that was all there was, we would have stayed. You've never seen them swarm, or gather about the greater ones, the speakers. You never saw what happened to the Meliae."

"The Dead took them. We ran away, and the Dead came." I pointed the tip of my spear straight at her. She ignored the insult or didn't even recognize it.

“No. This isn’t just a disease, Morrika. They were Breathers of Magic. It was air and meat and drink to them. The Dead poisoned its flow. The youngest Meliae suffered first. They turned gaunt and ordered us to build burial mounds for them. The older ones cracked open our tombs and made armor out of our bones. They demanded blood to drink. Some of them took the shapes of deformed predators. They went mad from magic’s pollution long before the greater Dead came to Spyre. What could we do?”

“Fight. Die well. That’s the Way.”

“No, the Way sets your spirit to do your duty. When oaths are impossible to fulfill, your duty is to *live*. Perhaps you could reach Skrye...”

“It exists?”

“Yes.” She frowned. “I never told you about the five-petal mark of our lieges, either. It was a real vision, Morrika, but you mustn’t go. Think. Even if you could reach it, and even if one of the Meliae still lives, ask yourself: How do you know he hasn’t become one of the mad ones? If he survived, why does he need your protection? Tell the story to your sons and daughters and perhaps they can reclaim it, after the Dead rest again. But going now would serve no purpose. Let him remain in memory to inspire the clan.”

“Why did you lie?”

“So you would do your duty to me. So you would live.”

My *sleaghar* had once been hers. I offered it to her again, but she shook her head. So I put on my twilight face and walked away.

“I SHOULDN’T HAVE allowed that indiscretion before. You’re not permitted to touch me.” His eyes were impossibly violet in the dark. The moon should have been too weak to bring the color forth. They

glowed, or I didn't dream of the night properly.

"I can do it to protect you," I said. I saw five-petaled flowers and the horizon from Skrye beyond Sussura's face and the wild, black branches of his hair in the night. The wind drew chill fingers across my shoulders. I wasn't wearing pauldrons, and hated the lack of weight and armor. In the city, I wore a heavy cloak just for the feeling.

I dreamed of court clothes instead, loose silk trousers bloused into boots, and a sleeveless leather tunic with my clan's sign. I wore last it at age eighteen, to demonstrate spearplay for the Running King. It was the first and last time I ever saw him. The tunic rattled, the trouser fabric was a constant, irritating whisper and the spear drills were too simple for me. I wanted pressure against my body, but I wasn't allowed to touch Sussura.

"*Lover-protector. Perhaps the contradiction distracts you?*" He lit a bale-candle from across the room by twisting his fingers in some mystic sign. New colors invaded the room on the back of its white light. His robe was flame orange, covered in silver flowers.

"No. The body sages say a snake coils at the base of every spine. Lust, fear, anger, and the other ancient urges rouse it, but as long as we don't satisfy these drives it slithers upon itself, faster and faster, and we can direct that energy into strength and speed. I am well-coiled for you." Yet I felt a bit of strength escape to even admit it to him.

"The closer you get, the stronger you'll become then? Good. You'll need it. The Dead cannot enter here and it enrages them. Their nightly howling disturbs me. The wind you feel might issue from their massed, dry throats."

"I'm not the sort to hurl myself to death for a caress. I'm not a maid waiting for you."

"In that case," he said, "I rely on your sense of duty."

I CUT SLIVERS of warbark into one of Vakim's cups and took his kettle from the fire. He kicked his blanket down and propped himself up on an elbow to watch. "I thought you hired a spell for your womb," he said.

"I don't rely on it. You have to choose between the academics who spend half the time complaining that their Art is failing them, and street witches who are either cheating you or might butcher one of the old chants and poison you. I control this, so I trust it."

"Let me see." He dragged himself over and I handed him the little ragged square of warbark. He regarded it in firelight. "I think I recognize it. It's a thorny plant, short but thick in the trunk. Grows in the Plague Fools' Wood. We should be able to get you more when we travel."

I grabbed his shoulder to catch his gaze. "Vakim. No sex on the road." I pinched, hoping it added the proper mix of affection and seriousness.

"Ow. It happens. That's all I mean. This looks like it was cut up by some herbalist eager to gouge discriminating women like yourself. We can swing around on the way back at least, and save you any added cost." He tossed the blanket around me like a big wing, but I shrugged it off.

"No, we'll get it on the way if we can." I took a sip of the tea. "Warbark thins menstruation, keeps you awake, and widens your pupils so you can see better at night. My uncle taught me about it. It's part of the Surinzan Way."

"Morr, after ten moons with you I can't think of anything you do that isn't part of it." Vakim chuckled. "Well, except me, but even then, I don't think you'd even be with me if I wasn't a Forester. Correct?"

I held my tongue. We enjoyed each other's bodies, but it flowed from training together, one exertion sliding to the next.

"I'm not offended," he said. "My father told me there was nothing purer than unrequited love, but I think he just wanted me to marry his pick without raising a fuss. What you and I have is even better, because we've already tasted each other. I can be confident that everything I feel about you is honest, instead of frustrated lust. I know I love you."

"Vakim." I held up my hand. He babbled on.

"You'll never let me through the iron-banded door over your heart, so I can love you for any virtue I imagine you possess. I don't have to be disappointed by reality." He grabbed soap and a washing bowl and started cleaning himself. Dawn touched his skin, making it the color of a rose.

"That's not my burden. It's your choice." I dressed as I said it.

"That's right. Don't worry. I'll never speak of it again. But you should know why I'm joining you on this ridiculous journey. It's not because we might find a safe place beyond Redoubt, not because you've dreamed of some Meliae lord in his fortress. I don't know if I believe in your dreams. It's just for you."

"I understand. Again, it's your choice. Come freely or stay. I'll feel the same."

Vakim tied off his tunic and tapped open the door. Dawn light and autumn wind banished the dark humidity. He swiveled on his heels, smirked and said, "Of course, I told the others they'd be able to loot the place."

WE MET AMONG the tables by an Eastgate tea stand. Backlit by the morning sun, the gate was the silhouette of a seated giant, its towers upraised arms with battlements for stubby fingers. The dwarf running

the stand scowled at us as he shoved wood under his cauldrons.

The others looked like looters. Foresters were all sorts. My uncle said they didn't have a Way, and that before the Fall and Redoubt, they would have been members of free companies; the mercenaries petty kings and lords hired to pillage their neighbors. When Red Door had more students we used to practice war-forms designed to fight them — three against three and maze ambush techniques.

Vakim introduced them. The first was an elf, called the Dammalori after his people's lost city. Like a creature crawling out of dead leaves, his sharp features took a moment to emerge from dun rags and tangled locks.

"You Surinzan?" His eyes were dirty amber, a narrowed accusation. The elves had always been jealous of my people. We stood closer to the Meliae than they did. Old stories said that elves and Meliae had once been a single fey people, but where the elves had made magic an Art of runes and chants and mystic conjunctions, the Meliae sought communion with it. They drew sorcery into their veins. Elves had been half as potent in the ways of magic, so the madness of the Fall affected them less. Their survivors put on airs, but were barely better regarded than the dwarves.

"Yes. I'll introduce you to the lord, if you wish it."

"If he exists. I can make do with a Meliae bauble or two."

"How will you earn it?"

"Magic." He straightened himself proudly. "I have adapted certain works from the last Ascension so that they won't suffer the Dead-taint."

I caught a familiar, lopsided smile behind him; Lalia, Vakim's cousin. They used to be engaged to preserve the bloodline of some Venmir holy man. But Vakim made no secret of the fact that we'd shared a bed. His father declared him ruined for the task and disowned him. That pleased both of them immensely, and she joined

the Foresters soon after. She was good enough with a shield to impress me, which is why I tried to convince my uncle of its merits.

“I passed the full Foresters’ trials on the last new moon, Morr,” she said. “Your timing’s excellent. I don’t know how much cousin told you about our upbringing in the faith, but I was taught where the old shrines and pilgrims’ paths are, on the assumption that when the Dead go away I’ll lead my people back to the Lands of the Righteous.” She smiled. “I believe the elders were a little premature with their plans. In any event, I know how to keep us from getting too lost, considering our map is, if I’m not mistaken, a drug-inspired vision.”

For the last, Vakim tossed a teacup at the dwarf running the tea stand. He batted it down, where it broke. “Rashuk,” said Vakim. “He’s a very useful man, especially since I beat his master at dice and won his indenture contract. I freed him, naturally. But he still has to make us tea.” Rashuk said nothing.

We spent a long time in the square after, saying little as Vakim shuttled between Eastgate’s towers, bargaining for passage. After the sun crowned the giant’s head he jogged out of its shadow, grinning. “This way,” he said, and gestured into the deepest black, where the great doors were. We passed through them, then two more, after which I heard an animal whine. Vakim whistled and snapped his fingers. Two horses trotted forth; one black, one chestnut.

I’d only seen horses twice before. In the Inner City, on the day I performed for the Running King, and when I started training with the Foresters. The elite outriders used them for long patrols, though I had never seen them ridden. They were rare creatures. You had to be rich or demonstrate extreme necessity to use them.

“You never played dominoes or fate disks,” said Vakim. “Foresters pride themselves on gambling skill. Want to make captain? You need to beat one at a game.”

“Trouble with that is they assume the low ranks are easy prey,” said Lalia. “They certainly don’t believe some fallen temple maiden and her unfaithful betrothed could beat them. Vak and I worked as a team. We were going to buy officer’s commissions, but we canceled some debts — some big debts — to get these. We know how to ride and care for them.”

I touched the black horse mane. She snorted, and I snatched my hand away. “I don’t know what to say,” I said. “You set yourselves back for me.”

“Morrika, without you I’d be married to Vak. He’s my best friend, but they’d want him to make me a wife.” Lalia shuddered. “He wouldn’t, of course, but we’d say the words and never be free.

“That’s worth every note to us... mostly to him.” She pointed a shoulder at Vakim.

He frowned, looked away and took a slow breath. Then: “We’ve got a fortnight from tomorrow. After that the gate masters list us as deceased. Our homes and possessions pass through the kinship systems of our respective nations, or go to the factors of Redoubt for redistribution.”

“It’s not an issue for me,” I said. “I’m not leaving anything important behind.”

“Our inhuman friends are similarly ascetic, though not by choice, like you,” said Vakim. The dwarf and elf glanced at each other with wary camaraderie. The shared poverty and resentment of fallen peoples. “But I’d like to come back to my room. Good memories. View of the rice terraces. The smell is tolerably fecal.”

We spent the rest of the day preparing, because it would be better to leave at the next dawn. The Dead still moved by day, but the Foresters said they were less and in any event, easier to see.

"LESSER REVNANTS," LALIA said, when the first of them tore free from the banks of a stagnant stream. They were skeletons with strips of dry gray muscle, packed with riverside clay and clothed in dead grass. "Not fast or especially ardent. They'll fall apart in a matter of hours."

And so they did, after we easily fled them. But over two more days, more earth-clad Dead shook off their roots and mire to pursue us. Eventually their femurs crumbled and pelvises cracked, and they collapsed into twitching heaps. The black energy in them couldn't sustain them for the full chase. Sometimes we rode two to a horse to outpace them, but never for long, lest the beasts tire. They were more useful as pack animals, following as we walked.

We moved at night, using lanterns sparingly. Light attracted the Dead. The Dammalori could see through starlight well as if the sun was out, and he only spoke to guide us, whispering, "This way. Stop. Silence now."

By the third sunset the horses whined at our touch. They were exhausted. The Dammalori said, "Silence now" again, and we saw withered forms crawling in the moonlight. We pulled the horses into the shadow of a fieldstone wall, where it met a thicket of trees, an abandoned orchard. The house beyond tempted us, but Vakim said the Dead might lie where their living selves once breathed. Anywhere with a bed or hearth was dangerous now. We made a battle line in front of the horses and wall, waiting for the enemy to come forth.

There might have been twenty or more: revnants of bone, rotten flesh, and caked earth. Vakim and Lalia met them with axes and spiked shields. Articulated steel protected their shoulders and necks; they smirked at each other before shutting the visors of their Forester sallet-helms. The dwarf Rashuk readied a spike-backed warhammer with both hands. Despite his poverty he was well armored in a solid breastplate, helm with a crow-faced visor,

and ironclad boots. (“From family,” he’d said.) I wore twenty-fold waxed linen armor — a Coilhand relic, from the days we protected the Meliae. My uncle had recut it for me. With a little guilt, I’d bolted steel pauldrons on. The Foresters warned me that sometimes the mere touch of the Dead could sicken and kill, and the linen armor didn’t come with sleeves.

The elf hid behind us and chanted hoarse, desperate sounding foreign words.

I’d marched with Foresters before. It wasn’t the first time I’d cut down the Dead, but I’d never seen so many, so close. The spear-work was simple but you had to discard techniques that dispatched the living. Swift thrusts to the chest and throat did nothing. Cuts to what Coilhand called the Five Red Wells — places that ensured the enemy would bleed out — were similarly useless.

Against revnants, we used what my uncle called “contempt techniques.” Cuts to sever limbs and rip flesh off bones. Unless you attacked their bodies’ supporting structures, the Dead fought on, with no pain to halt them, no blood to lose or organs to fail them. In Coilhand, we never mutilated opponents unless we despised them. Thus, contempt techniques. We cracked bone and butchered corrupt meat. They shuffled forward in waves until it wasn’t a battle, but industry. In another time, when humans kept cattle, we might have used the same rhythms on a killing floor.

After a minute of true combat, the rest was a matter of chopping large pieces into smaller. We left nothing larger than skulls clacking their voiceless jaws. We cut the hands in half where we found them, so they wouldn’t crawl and gouge. We spread the pile of body parts out; Vakim reminded us that the Dead sometimes knit themselves together again.

We carried our packs and dragged the horses on until dawn, toward a temple Lalia said lay on the second of three rocky hills. We crested

the first and she told us to sit, eat, and drink. But still I paced, *sleagbar* shifting from hand to hand. “I still have the strength to continue,” I said. “I’m not the only one.” I pointed my chin at the others, who fidgeted while they sat on a circle of rocks. These must have been put here by farmers long ago, to clear them from the valley beyond.

“You don’t,” she said. “You think you’re fresh because you’ve got the fear of the Dead in you.”

“I’m not a coward.”

“The fear’s in the body, not the mind!” she hissed. “It doesn’t matter that we cut them to pieces, or even that we could do it all over again. It doesn’t matter how strong you feel. The body-fear’s the same as when you snap your hand from an open flame. The body moves; the mind makes excuses. You can suppress it, transform it into battle rage or senses sharp enough to hear a leaf float in the wind. You can laugh and fuck while it possesses you, but it’s there all the same. It wants you to do anything but stop, even though that’s precisely what you need to do. Otherwise, you’ll tire without knowing it. A dirty veil will fall over your mind’s eye. You’ll forget to eat. We could run for days, Morrika, until the horses fled or died, and then we’d sleep with eyes open, dream we’re still strong, and then the Dead would claim us. So sit.”

I did. There must have been a vineyard in the valley. Rows of posts stood like rotten teeth, thrusting out of dense, gray brush.

“It’s a Forester teaching,” said Vakim. “Rest, or the fear will wear you out. Did you know that you’re bleeding?”

I lifted my right arm. Three new stripes decorated the linen on that side, and three ragged claw wounds matched it. I remembered the revnant’s grasp sneaking under my pauldron, but it hadn’t seemed important at the time. Vakim soaked a fresh rag in rice-draught and wiped the wound clean. It stung, but I put on the twilight face. It had its uses after all. And at that, everyone checked themselves

for wounds. We counted eight more shallow slashes and gouges between us, but nothing broken or bleeding as badly as my wound. We broke out more rags and rice-draught. Rashuk brought some sort of black herb and mixed it with ash and water. “Keeps wounds clean,” he said. He packed it into my cuts first.

I winced, meeting the Dammalori’s gaze. “I kept the horses from bolting” he said, answering the question I hadn’t asked about his contribution to the battle.

We waited an extra hour to see if anyone had been poisoned by the Dead. None of us spasmed or raved. Black streaks didn’t crawl from our injuries. We fed the horses sun-dried vines then walked together, silently. There were no Dead in the valley. Lalia prayed her thanks up to the noonday sun.



THE SECOND VALLEY was the same, so we abandoned caution, pushed the horses hard and sprinted to the temple, breathless by late afternoon. I shouldered open its heavy door and staggered in. It was an old-style Venmir church, built before the Fall demanded less opulent expressions of faith. Its altar sat high on the north wall, atop staggered steps built to resemble the cliffs of Venmah. Basalt and quartz saints pointed the way. Back in Redoubt, the dour Angat would have called it idolatrous. During her religious schooling, the priests had told Lalia to smash any graven images she might find. “Our error-riddled past,” she said, with the air of quoting a pompous man. She smiled and led us down to the basement rectory. We tied the horses in the great hall above. If the Dead came, they’d scream.

We waited for night and day again, sleeping in shifts.

“Tell me about the Surinzan Way,” said Lalia, waking me. In lamplight I could only see her face, a mask dominated by that

unbreakable smile. Vakim groaned in the dark, from exhaustion or frustration at the question.

“It’s not our religion,” I said. I pulled myself up and felt marble’s chill touch slip off my back. “We honor the gods. We just don’t expect them to do anything for us. They gave us speech, strength, earth, and water; their work is done. But before the Fall we gave Joril missionaries alms and they took care of funerals. They can still handle our funerals. Outside of battle, we don’t like to touch the dead.”

“Is that part of the Way?” She put the lantern on the floor and pulled herself forward. So did Rashuk and the Dammalori, until we were all fire-lit faces, like orange masks. Vakim sulked in the dark. He thought of the Way as a competing suitor. He wasn’t wrong, though of course there was no competition.

“Corpses are impure. They cause disease. It’s practical. The Way is the sum of practical things, the spirit of being human. It’s whatever you say, how you sit or stand, and even how you breathe. These simple things are our true powers, for they rest within us. It doesn’t matter how much we pray; the gods must have storms and drought, and we can’t control that. Magic flows outside us, and no matter the spell, it might fail, or turn blessings to curses, as it did with the Fall and the Dead. We can only rely on ourselves, our breathing, our movement, the promises we keep. The Way of humanity is to master our basic powers, to make promises more ambitious than our abilities, and in striving, keep them. Mere survival and comfort are forms of death.”

In the dark, Vakim said, “If that’s true, why aren’t we escorting a host of Surinzan? I suppose you’re the only one who’s really alive?”

“No. My uncle teaches fighting arts. That’s his promise. There will never be a perfect warrior, so his Way never ends. Some Surinzan join the Watch or the Foresters.”

“You joined the Foresters, but I suppose that wasn’t good enough.” A red line of dawn had crawled into the chamber and shot across his wide, angry eyes.

“I didn’t choose my Way. None do. If I was a poor student of the spear, I’d find another way. Maybe I would have farmed. There’s a Way to that, too. I thought I’d teach war-skills like my uncle, but I don’t have the Way of it. My clan protected the Meliae, but lost our Way when we fled to Redoubt. But my dream was real. My clan’s Way lives.”

“Pity your clan doesn’t believe you.”

“They can’t. If they did, they’d be admitting cowardice.”

I heard his heavy feet stomp up the stairs. He threw open the door, flooding the room with day. Vakim was a silhouette against in the sun’s gold. “Right,” he said. “Then go.”

“We should.” I stood. “Lalia, which way?”

“No,” said Vakim. “We’re going home, Lal and me. The inhumans can do as they wish.” My eyes adapted, and Vakim’s face appeared as if out of a fog. His features looked loose, lined and tired, but his mouth trembled. He’d always kept anger clenched in his jaw. Lalia opened her mouth but he interrupted: “I’ll say it another way. I’m turning back and taking a horse with me. I can do it alone and probably die, or my dear cousin, who is of course free to do as she wishes, can join me, and we’ll probably live. I don’t expect sympathy from the rest of you,” he said, looking me in the eye.

We packed quietly and marched upstairs. When Lalia handed me a horse’s reins, I shook my head but she said, “I’ll feel better if something carries your burdens.” Rashuk tapped my elbow, pointed at himself and pantomimed riding. The Dammalori stood beside our horse. So I had them.

We left in two groups. From the hilltop I saw the river’s curve and the wood beyond, and my mind’s eye turned them around until

I knew them from my dream, seeing them from the tower in Skrye.

“Vakim,” I said, “I know my path. It’ll be swift and straight, except for the river crossing.”

He wouldn’t meet my gaze. “They called it the Shywere,” he said. “There used to be good fishing there. Should be plenty of boats or if they’ve fallen apart, wood for rafts.”

“Why are you leaving?”

“Ha! Because you don’t love me!” He laughed and put his foot on a stirrup.

“You already knew that.”

“Because if I tried to force you to go back, you’d beat me to death?”

“You knew that, too.”

He swung into the saddle. “All right. I thought that once you’d seen the Dead in number, the silent houses and fallow fields, you’d come back... to live. You don’t want to live. You want your Way, which is death. You think virtue’s about having a purpose beyond survival. The Dead? They don’t care about survival, don’t need to. The Dead have a purpose: to press us into their ranks. They’re the definition of Surinzan will, aren’t they? None are so dedicated. So go to death, like them. I can’t stop you, but I don’t have to watch.”

He dug his heels in and the horse trotted away, Lalia walking beside. She glanced back many times as they went back down into the fallen vineyard, but if she said anything to Vakim, I couldn’t hear it. She’d never raise her voice where the Dead might hear.

WE FOUND A sturdy boat at the second hut we tried. It sat upside down under a long awning, four yards from bow to stern. Its oars were secured with iron rings. The Dammalori said, “Mast. It would

have a mast at this size. And a sail.” But I didn’t see it, and it didn’t matter. We just had to cross.

I crouched and pushed, testing its weight. The boat creaked and the hut, made of the same wood, answered. There were footsteps, but no voices.

The boat’s Dead owners shuffled out to defend it. They’d been woman and child walking hand in hand, but the flesh of their hands had rotted and dried into one mass. The connected arms must have broken in many places because they hung together in a loose loop of dirty musculature. The child’s face had worn away around the jaw, giving it the appearance of a three-legged dog with a white snout of bone, straining its leash. The mother was slow as the child was swift. One took elephantine steps on thick legs; the other ducked and shuffled from attempts to impale it.

The Dammalori cagily snuck up from behind and stabbed the mother with a thin dagger. It was useless, except to distract her. As she lumbered around to grab the elf, Rashuk struck the rope of arms with the spike of his warhammer. He pinned it to the ground and tugged until it split in two. Black fluid spurted forth, corrupting the earth.

The child dropped and trembled. I beheaded it. The mother grew even slower, as if the black ichor was blood to her. I cut through fat and viscera, to black worm intestines that uncoiled at my feet. Finally, I felt my *sleaghar* hum at contact with her spine. I thrust through. She fell.

Vakim had left a spare fighting ax and hatchet. We used them to butcher the remains for scattering. Once it was done we flipped the boat over, saw the center thwart with the expected socket for the mast, and chopped it out to make room for the horse. We had barely enough rope to tie the boat to the saddle, and the horse was willing to drag it to the water’s edge.

The dwarf and elf held the boat steady and I stepped in, tugging on the horse's reins. I might as well have been urging a tree or stone to board. The mare didn't protest, but gently pulled against me.

"Take my place," said the Dammalori. I gave him the reins and grabbed the stern. The boat bucked between my shoulder and the current, a trapped wooden beast. The elf wound the reins about his forearm and drew a polished blue stone from his dun rags. He waved two fingers above it and pointed them skyward before singing in soft, rapid syllables. The mare snorted and her ears twitched. She trembled, but stepped softly aboard and sat on folded legs.

We pushed the boat until the water carried it, then scrambled aboard, unhooking the oars. Rashuk and I claimed one apiece and pulled hard, managing a diagonal drift downstream. I glanced at the shivering horse. The Dammalori patted its nose and whispered to it some more.

The elf looked up. "A little spell like before," he said. "She's terrified, but I keep that part of her spirit from communicating with her body."

The boat struck something and lurched. I didn't see rocks in the silt-choked water. It happened again. Wood groaned.

I wasn't surprised by the first hand I saw, blue and bloated, reaching out of the water. I traded the oar for my spear. The river weakened its owner's flesh. I cut it off mid-forearm when it reached for the gunwale, and scarcely felt resistance from the bones. Another one of the Dead reached from astern with both hands, but when it pulled its head into view Rashuk smashed it apart like rotten fruit.

The strikes against the hull increased to a drumming; oars unattended, the boat spun in the slow current. At least it was still heading to the far shore.

They crawled aboard, Dead men and women and things rendered sexless by bloat and rot, loose-boned with flesh weak as sodden paper. They were easy to cut and smash, and by the tenth I was slashing to and fro to the rhythm of their hands drumming the hull. I missed a beat here and there, slipping on the torn slimy flesh that fell with every cut. Rashuk's hammer obliterated their soft skulls and spines. The Dammalori defended our horse with an oar. But eventually they'd flip the boat from beneath, smash a hole, or weigh it down with their remains.

But we could offer them other prey.

"Withdraw the spell!" I shouted.

The Dammalori closed his eyes and placed two fingers on the mare's shoulders. She scrambled to a stand and shrieked. After one stumble, she jumped overboard.

One of her hooves struck Rashuk. He fell with her.

They disappeared underwater, but after a long breath her neck broke the surface. Rashuk's hand clutched her mane, but his head didn't break the surface. Her fore-hooves started treading water and she thrashed against the dwarf's grip.

The drumming on our hull ceased. I cut down two of the Dead on the way to my oar. It was still hooked to the side. I pulled hard. The Dammalori knocked the last of them overboard with his oar. He'd detached it, and after the fray, paddled from a standing position.

The horse screamed again, but I kept my eyes on the opposite shore. The elf wept.

WE BURNED THE tainted boat and ran, sparing no glance for the Dead who'd run to its light and noise. We didn't stop running until we hit the secret road.

“The Meliae didn’t pave anything,” said the Dammalori. “They willed roots and vines away. They sang up clay from beneath the soil and commanded trees to step aside. The clay hardens in the summer, and fallen leaves protect it through harsher seasons.” He knelt and brushed dead leaves away to show me the smooth, red surface beneath. “We’re already on the road to Skrye.”

We wandered here because it was the easiest route after three days of pushing through the brush. The Foresters had warned me not to follow trails. (“Nothing living makes them,” said Vakim.) The Meliae road was too wide to have been blazed by the Dead, though they might walk it too, searching for an easy path through some animal instinct. We marched fast and camped every day and a half, lighting fires by day when the wind felt strong enough to scatter smoke. We didn’t see the Dead. Either Skrye’s magic repelled them, or our precautions worked.

The elf had been shy before but he spoke quickly, even eagerly now, whenever we stopped to rest. “I’ve revised the arts of the Second Ascension,” he said, “but so much is mere theory. I dare not adjust the great spells until I find active works of comparable sorcery. The Meliae were capable of such. If a colony survives, they could help me in my studies. Their bones and ruins must tremble with power still.”

“Careful,” I said. “I’m their defender by blood. You can have whatever they’ve likely abandoned, but not tombs, temples, or sealed homes. I didn’t offer you plunder.”

“Yes, yes. I understand your duty. Like the Meliae, we selected guardians from you short-lived peoples. Did you know this?”

“The Menhada. Yes.” They were warriors, masters of the sword and bow, and like us, refugees in Redoubt, too.

“We suffered the same madness as the Meliae, but survived, so it must not have been as intense. You *peyani* practice the Art like painters. You take its brushes and colors from the outside. Elves

dance and sing magic. We need only know the steps, gestures, and notes. But for the Eldest, your liege-folk, magic is as breath. It's a terrible thing to be forced to abandon dance, but lethal to abandon breath. When the Dead rose, magic became a hungry thing. Spells devoured the sorcerers that cast them, or called the Fallen to climb from their graves. Some of my people couldn't stop dancing even when magic turned. They stole children and drank blood. But the Menhada did their duty! They killed the mad ones, though servants carry long, silent grudges against their masters, and some of us died not because magic corrupted us, but because a vassal wished to free himself of an elf-oath."

"If my visions are true, the Meliae lord of Skrye isn't afflicted. And with respect, I plan to be a better guardian than your Menhada."

He brushed his tangled hair aside to give me a quick grin. On his thin face, it was like a skull splitting in two. "No, they were wise. The best servants teach their masters and if the lesson is, 'You've lost the right to live,' so be it. Thus, I hope to give magic a new birth, and be reborn myself, and let the elf I was die. What will you teach this master, who lives in your dreams?"

I noticed the point of my *sleaghar* dropping, pointing at him. I shouldered it again. "No lesson. I'm doing my duty." Yet I thought of nothing else as the sun crawled over our heads and fell into night, and we walked toward the rising moon. From the first time he appeared in my dream's eye, I knew Sussura was my master. My untouchable lover. I didn't feel like a maid from the foreigners' stories, faint, restless and eager. I felt alive.

Redoubt, my family, my lover were gray-cast compared to the color of my dreams. They were faded chalk drawings on a dirty wall. My training possessed substance, but what would I have done with it? Killing in Redoubt would be a matter of wiping away chalk with a rag — a quick, artless act committed upon some meaningless

sketch of life, confined by stone. Human killing human, elf, others for the sake of mere survival, a space in Redoubt, grand mausoleum of the living.

But what would I say to Sussura? What was my lesson?

Neither of us slept through the night. The sun rose, and I saw the trees grew ever taller until they were towers.

The forest flowed into Skrye. The trees were fortified and connected by seamless stone. There were no doors at the road's end. The Dammalori warned me that it might be defended by a warding rune or curse, but I was impatient and passed the threshold before he finished chanting some charm of sensing. He frowned and followed.

Skrye's tree-walls formed a circle around the great central tower I recognized from my dreams. This was Spyre's layout, rendered on a lesser scale. Five smaller towers were built into the walls, and the interior possessed a few buildings made of trees that had been grown, woven together and petrified. I walked around the great tower once, eyes always skyward. Was he there now, watching me? I saw the entrance and twitched with the desire to run in and up, but no. I needed to speak to the elf. Yet I'd fixated on my goal and lost my wide awareness. I stepped back and couldn't see him.

"Dammalori!" There was no echo; my voice sounded low and dull, as if the walls swallowed part of it. I called again.

He strode out of the dark doorway of a small, round building, grinning, but his eyes were fear-wide, as they'd been on the boat.

"What do you really know about the Meliae, Surinzan?" His snapped his head to one side, then the next. Purple veins ringed his eyes like thorny vines. "Fey don't think like *peyani*, you children-people. We don't live like you. We don't die like you."

I bent my knees and dropped my *sleaghar* into low ward. "What happened?"

“Sensing magic,” he said. “A little spell. I went into the tunnels. Power. Power there. They’re mound-builders, the Eldest Ones. Did you know? They dug deep. That’s where they put all the little Surinzan fools who stayed.” His body trembled in a cough. Blood splashed on his chin and ragged cloak. “They buried you with weapons, enchanted with the high Art but corrupted now, magic as mad as they became.” He took a shaky step forward, then another. “They surprised me. Just a little prick from a dead man. Enough.”

“Stay back!”

The Dammalori twitched again. His eyes burst. He staggered forward, groaning and crying gouts of crimson. “I’m Dead,” he said. “Now my magic serves the Dead. Run.”

His blood rose into the air, a dozen thorny liquid branches. I took a one-handed grip at the very end of my *sleaghar* to keep my distance, lunged and impaled him. His blood lashed at me, a dripping scimitar across my chest. I heard linen rip, but no pain; my armor held. I twisted my spear to throw him down, but the blood kept flowing out and up, lashing, wrapping tentacles around blade and haft. I couldn’t extract it. The elf’s blood cut my arm like a scourge. Agony, then wet numbness as it opened the wound from days past. I let go and shuffled back.

Behind him, at the mouth of the building the Dammalori must have entered, six of the Dead in rotten linen armor. Each bore a *sleaghar* decorated with a green gem. Surinzan. The gem’s green fire glinted in the eye sockets of their fleshless skulls. Their bodies displayed exposed bones and muscles made of red, wet clay.

They charged together. One of them broke the back of the elf under his heel. At each end of the line, two strode ahead, to surround me. I knew the tactic. Each group of two would thrust in staggered time to seal any opening in the attack, with weapons enchanted to corrupt my body at the slightest cut. And I was unarmed.

No. I was never unarmed. *I am the spear.* My uncle's gift, the secret of the Coilhand School.

There's a snake of power inside all of us. I let it uncoil but bound it to the tight spiral of my will, so no energy was wasted. I pushed with my heel and let the snake spiral from gut to fist. My hand drove through exposed neck vertebrae. The Dead warrior's head dropped behind its shoulders, dangling by clay and gristle. I spun its torso into another of the Fallen. I crushed a third's exposed femur with my heel and when it reared back, I seized its spear. It shot a chill through my hands; I almost dropped it.

I ran to the great tower, up the familiar spiral stairs.

I RECOGNIZED SUSSURA'S robes, faded but intact. He sat on his gilt bench, taller than any mortal. His skull was horned, his skeleton fleshless yet intact. I couldn't see what held the bones together. A crown of five silver petals lay in his lap, caressed by the seven-fingered hands of his final shape. A green gem glowed and flickered in the center of each petal. They filled the room with crawling, verdant light. It reflected off ragged curtains that rippled in the breeze. The sickly glow was that of a stagnant river bottom at noon. The dwarf had probably seen this light after we left him behind.

I touched Sussura's cheekbone. He didn't stir. This was a corpse. My fingers felt like stone, too cold from the spear my right hand still clutched, numbly. It was unnatural.

What is life? What is death? His voice entered my thoughts.

"Are you there?"

That depends on the answer to my question, beloved protector. Is life breath? Blood? There are creatures without lungs and blood. Movement? Trees do not move except to grow. Am I alive?

"I don't know. I don't think you're what I came to protect, liege."

How do you know what I was?

“I dreamed it.” My feet tingled. I was so cold that my tears burned my face, lines of fire on frost-touched skin. My knees weakened. I sat beside Sussura on the bench.

And you remembered that dream. I felt the Great Death, beloved. The opening of forbidden gates. The unbidden Night Ascension. And I, who took many shapes, felt the shadow in my blood, the corruption of the one unchanging part of myself, which thinks and feels. What remains when death takes everything?

“In my Way, duty.”

How do you know it?

“I remembered, even when my clan didn’t.”

Yes. Memory. I am remembered. I am the memory of Sussura, the dream that remains immortal. Yet this is not true life, unless one is remembered. Beloved. Obeyed as if alive. I live when others serve. When you serve.

“You made the spears. You made the Dead serve your memory.”

You must be very cold, but soon the cold will end, and you will serve perfectly. Honor me, beloved.

My spear-holding right hand refused to open by my will, but the cold spared me pain when I reached with my left hand and broke my fingers: One, two, three, and the cursed *sleagbar* clattered free.

Didn't you dream of serving me? Why do you reject my gift?

I pawed at the crown twice before I was able to defeat numb clumsiness, and hook it with both hands.

“How did you make me dream of you when you’re dead? Where are you, in memory?”

THERE ARE FIVE demons in this crown: lovers, lords, and secret-keepers. Their voices drift in the flow of sorcery, calling to dreamers,

offering their qualities to anyone who will come to Skrye, join the Dead, and serve his memory. He was Meliae, a shapeshifter of the eldest race, a being whose memories possessed many masks.

I'm the new, sixth demon who placed the crown on her head to warn them off. I flit from jewel to jewel, battling the masks of Sussura. In Redoubt, the Dammalori's sister dreams of finding her brother and the secrets he must have found. Sussura appears as her guide. But then I show her my memory of her dead brother. Now she won't come.

My uncle dreams of saving me, but I appear and show him my frozen, crowned corpse and whisper, "stay away."

I am not a soul, unless the soul is nothing but the record of one's deeds, retold and imagined by dreamers. Everything I show them, and everything I use to battle Sussura, is a memory — the arts of war I practiced for so long, my journeys with the Foresters, every kiss from Vakim, and every story I imagined as it was told to me. My memory is a kingdom of dragons and unconquerable warriors.

Sussura is only a memory as well, but ancient and inhuman. He often defeats me, and sends his lure. Yet sometimes I prevail, and Surinzan dream of a terrible crown and a cursed city, so that someone will crush the jewels, melt the silver, and burn the towers of Skrye down.

We're only memories, of great deeds, traditions, and tragedies. Sometimes it's better to forget us, and choose the Way of life.



EATER OF THE DEAD

JESS HARTLEY

SCREAMS. MY EARS twitch, searching for the source.
Whimpers. The words are lost, but not the meaning. Begging.
Supplication. Pain.

I track, muzzle lifted into the stale air. Sweat. Piss. Blood. I follow that one.

Four on one. The prey is down, mewling like a cub. I stay in the shadows.

Blows with fists, with feet. The prey stops moving. They take everything. I stay hidden.

A flash of steel and a flow of red. They leave.

I move close. The prey's eyes are open but it sees nothing. I wait, crouched by the carcass. I sing the old songs, but the old howls are too loud for the city, too loud for the present. I sing them in my head where no one can hear.

Ours are the fallen. Ours are the broken.

Ours are what's left after life's blood has fled.

We do not kill. We send all to the cycle.

Redeemer. Reclaimer. We eaters of the dead.

The body is cold, and I eat. This is what I do.

They call me Narghûla. They call me ghûl. They call me monster,
but I am none of these.

I am Eater of the Dead.

DEATH WEARS MANY faces. Disbelief, when the attack comes as a surprise. Defiance, as the killer's blade falls. Resignation, when the belly is swollen with hunger and the limbs have long-since given their last. But the face death wears for those who succumb to disease is like no other. There is more than peace in the faces of the plague-ridden. There is gratitude.

The flavor of the sick-dead is bad. Their meat stinks of their ailment, worse than the panic-tang of slain-dead. It is often as lean as the starved-dead. But my duty does not care about flavor. The sick-dead kill, even if they do not rise. Their illness spreads, even after they breathe no more. I seek signs — rheumy eyes, cough deep in the chest, smell of watery bowels. I will not take them before the end; that is not my place. But when they fall, I drag them away, hiding the meat where I can gorge without their sick spreading.

I listen for days. Her cough worsens. The cries of her cub whine beneath the barking, getting stronger as the mother's grows weak. When the cub leaves, as she always does during the dark hours, I creep closer, waiting for the end. Just before dawn, she gives one last rattle and then there is silence. I slip into the hovel, little more than a lean-to of trash propped up against a wall of the city. It looks to be held together more by desperation than design.

I sniff in the darkness, and listen for breathing. There is nothing. The mother is gone. Only meat remains.

Before the streets fill, I wrap my burden in the tattered rags that served as a bed, and haul it back to my den. It is not heavy. None who live in this part of the city have enough; what is left when they are gone is never much. I eat better than most.

The Takers would have it different. They snatch up those who fall, rendering them down, giving the scraps to those of my kind who bow to their masters for the privilege. But I am not their pet, their tool, their slave. The Takers are not the keepers of my duty. Times may have changed, but I am still what those who came before me were.

My den is two rooms, tunneled under a pile of rubble. One is large and lined with every scrap of cloth, dried grass, fur, and hair I find. I nest there, warm beneath the stone, even in the foulest weather.

The other room is small and dark and cold. I put the meat there, amid the bones and bits of former meals.

I do not bring home meat, save for the sick-dead. The starved have so little, there is no need. Their bones are too thin, too brittle to even bother worrying out the marrow. I eat what is left, the bellies, the brains, but it is quick work.

The slain are more meaty, but their killers make it easy. They choose places in the darkness and the shadows. I gorge there, in the alleys and beneath the bridges, eating at my leisure.

But the sick-dead are different. Their coughs, their moans, their spewings are listened to, tended to, monitored like a fire by those who fear its spread. They often have kin near, hoping against hope for recovery. It is best that they do not return to find me, muzzle deep in their fallen family member's remains. They do not understand.

Long ago, the tribes knew the way. But not here. Not now. The city folk, even those who were once tribes, they do not remember. They put us in chains, and give our duty to those who are even blinder than they. With their carts and their spears and their loud metal noises. Even their own kind mewl and whimper when the Takers come. It is not right. It is not good. From their wagons, the Dead rise, they fight, they kill. And those they kill, rise again.

It is not the way. It is not their duty. It is not their place.

It is mine.

THE MEAT IS gone. I hunger. It has been a full cycle of the moons since I have eaten. The streets I hunt are quiet, the weather mild. Few fall from plague or starvation or exposure, and even the violent deaths seem few and far between lately. Hunger drives me. I range further, but the sun begins to rise and my belly is still empty. I turn back towards my den.

My path takes me past the hovel where I found my last meal, and desperation goads me to sniff there. Perhaps the cub took on its mother's ailment. Perhaps it was too young to feed itself and starved. In hungry times, one can only hope.

The hut is dark, but empty. New rags in a far corner smell of the meat-cub, but the scent of illness is long gone. The tiny fire circle is cold, but still smells of fire, maybe a day or two old. But no smell of death, no smell of food.

Sun breaks through holes in the roof, and I can rely on my eyes along with my other senses. Inside the hovel, every inch of wall and ceiling has been marked. Designs — lines and curves and circles — have been carved into the wood, uniting the makeshift heap of refuse into one united whole. The far wall, near the sleeping nest, is an expanse of stone, the wall between the city and what lies beyond. It is covered in pictures; birds, animals, people. At the

center is a depiction of a woman and child, their arms around each other. Both look out at me, eyes dark from the soot they are drawn with. The mother looks sad, the child lonely. I do not like their stare.

I nose through the rags, through the rubble. I find a root, a chunk of bread-turned-stone, a pot half-filled with brackish water. I drink, but leave the rest.

There is nothing for me here.

I WAKE, NESTED deep, warm but wary. My ears prick to a scrambling sound. Something is outside my den, sniffing. The entrance is hidden, designed to be ignored by human eyes, but whatever is outside is not relying on sight.

I draw back, to the far wall, barely breathing. I tense, prepared to launch myself tooth and claw at the intruder. I am not a warrior. But I will not die easily.

The scent betrays the intruder before they enter. The human cub, the sick-meat's child.

I growl a warning. It stops.

"*Hoo err yoo?*" The cub's growling lifts and drops in the way I have learned is a question. But what it seeks, I have no idea. I snarl in response, a low warning growl that should leave no doubt as to my meaning.

The child ignores it. It comes no further, but does not retreat. Foolish cub.

"*Agool!*" She recognizes that, at least. But there is no anger in the word, no disgust. I growl again, louder this time, words I know she will not understand slipping out.

"*This is my home, man cub. Do not make me forget that I am not a killer.*" The sounds are different than human words, but the meaning translates. After a moment, the cub retreats.

I wait, expecting a trap, but the cub's scent fades quickly, leaving behind the faintest wisp of something else. I ignore it, but it creeps through my nostrils, swirling at the back of my tongue. My mouth fills with moisture, and my belly growls, echoing in the den.

Warily, I slip out toward the entrance of my den, expecting a trap to be sprung at any moment. Instead, I find only the source of my growing hunger. A rat, or rather half of one. The meaty haunches have been removed, but the head and upper body, the juicy innards, all remain.

It does not smell of poison, nor of rot. I do not understand why the man-cub left it, but a full belly is better than an empty one.

I am not one to let confusion stand in the way of a meal.

NIGHT FALLS, AND I wake. I have slept longer than normal, the pains in my belly soothed by the meat-cub's gift. I listen and sniff before emerging from my den; its secrecy is as much a matter of survival as comfort. There is no sound from outside, nothing near, at least. The smells are the same as always; piss and rot. Only tonight, there is something else.

The sick-meat's child has returned. I wait, ears twitching to catch sign of her location. Leather on stone from an unthinking step. An impatient sigh as she waits. The shuffle of rags as she shifts her position.

I wait. The moons rise; night-shadows at the entrance to my den slowly slip as the half-bright lights move across the sky. Still there is no sound.

I inhale deeply, doubting my own senses. Is this just the remainder of her earlier visit? Some sweat-soaked rag left behind that is tricking my nose? Finally, my belly rumbles, and hunger overrides caution. I slip out of the den and into the darkness.

She is waiting. She watches me emerge from her own sanctuary, up on a narrow ledge. Her perch was well-chosen, giving her clear view of my den entrance, as well as up and down the abandoned street in either direction. The shadows hide her; even as the night changes, the darkness there remains deep.

She doesn't move, even after I turn to face her. I snarl, softly, but she makes no sign of having heard it. There is no hostility in the way she holds her body, nor submission, nor fear. She just watches, like an owl from her roost.

A distant scream breaks the silence. Somewhere, a few streets away, voices raise and then fall silent. I turn and stalk away, hackles raising as I go. The meat-cub makes no sense, but it is not my duty to understand her. My duty lies beyond this place, in an alley where someone has just become meat.

If I fail, more will fall.

I WAKE TO the sound of running feet. Not a pair of leather sandals hurrying to reach their home before full darkness falls. Not a few footpads chasing a victim, a thief escaping pursuers. The narrow road outside my den is awash with a river of boots and bare feet, sobs and whispers, humans and elves and dwarves, all flowing in a single direction like a panicked herd away from a predator. I wait for a pause, then slip outside, turning my attention upstream.

I stay to the shadows, navigating solely by heading in the direction that others are fleeing. In the chaos, it takes time for me to notice that I am being followed.

A pebble falls from overhead. I leap to the side, rolling away from an attack that does not come. I look up, and the meat-cub stares back at me from atop a half-fallen wall.

“What do you want?” I growl, knowing she will not understand me. *“Why are you following me?”*

She watches me. Soot-black eyes beneath a fringe of dirty yellow hair betray nothing of her intent. I am not surprised when she does not answer, but lack of surprise does not sooth my ire. I turn, loping in the direction of the shouts.

I reach the market place — little more than a wide spot at a crossroad where those few individuals with anything to sell attempt to do business with those even fewer with enough resources to buy. Rags stretched over poles offer shade to the vendors, over rough boards atop piles of rubble to hold their wares. Some folk lived, and apparently died, behind their makeshift counters.

Half the booths have been destroyed. Boards broken, cloth rent, and everything splattered with blood. The smell is strong, hot and salty and fresh. My belly groans.

A scrap-seller stands alone in the center of the ruined market. I have seen him before, but not like he is now. His flesh is torn. His guts spill over the piece of knotted rope that serves as a belt. He turns to look at me with unblinking eyes.

I am no killer. But he is already dead. He just does not know.

The moving-meat steps forward, reaching for me. On one hand, its fingertips are shredded to bone. Maybe eaten by rats before it rose. Maybe torn away as it attacked one of those who now lay scattered around the market, silent and broken. Either way, the claws of its naked finger-bones reach out, dripping gore and blood as it stumbles forward.

I drop under the dead-thing’s reach and bury my claws in the nest of snakes that once was its gut. Darting forward, I pull the ropey flesh with me, spinning the creature off balance. I slide under a counter, shouldering the heavy boards backwards as I go. The planks fall on the dead-meat’s stretched intestines, pinning them to the ground.

Fortune is with me. The meat-thing is freshly fallen, freshly rose; its insides are still strong enough to hold its outsides in place. Were it further gone, they would have simply torn away.

I drop my gory burden and slink around behind the moving-meat. A man-tall shard that once supported a rag-picker's sunshade becomes a weapon. I sweep the back of the creature's knees, toppling it to the ground, face first. Before it can right itself, I drive the wood through the creature's ribs. The bones bend, still fresh enough to bow like reeds under the strain. Leaping up, I throw my weight onto the wood. The dead-thing's ribs shatter, and I drive the sharp end of the pole into the packed earth of the street.

I have no knife to cut its limbs away. No fire to burn it to ash. I fall on it with claws and jaws, tearing its cold, shuddering flesh away one bite at a time. There is no joy in the act, no time to consume more than what forces its way down my throat as I turn the moving-meat into meat that did not move.

The bells are not enough to turn me from my duty. The Takers arrive, far too late to save the market. I hear them, but do not stop. I cannot stop until that which was, is no more.

Shouts draw near.

"Gool!" Bones break beneath my jaws.

"Wat...?" The head falls away.

"Stoppit!" The meat-thing moves no more.

Boots run towards me, their cart's harsh jangling sets my teeth on edge. I look up. Spears and eyes full of fear are pointed my direction.

I leap to my feet. There are other bodies here, slain by the dead-thing. They are likely to rise as well. My duty is clear.

The first corpse-man swings his spear, the blade as long as my arm. It slices the air in front of me with a hiss. He pulls back for another blow.

Something grabs me, fingers knotted in the fur of my arm, dragging me in the other direction. I try to pull away, as the Taker's next blow comes close enough to part my pelt. I leap back, and look down at the creature yanking me away.

Soot-black eyes meet mine.

We run.

The men of the Undertaking give up their chase. I destroyed the moving-dead, but its victims must be dealt with as well. Even as we escape back toward my den, my thoughts keep returning to the fallen... to my duty. If it were not for their spears, and for the dark-eyed cub pulling me forward, I would return to finish my work.

THE CUB HUNTS with me now. She does not eat as I eat, but what remains on those who fall is enough to keep her belly full: She trades their rags, their shoes, what little is in their pockets, for a wedge of bread here, a cup of water there.

She is small and quick. She runs the tops of ruins, of walls, like it was a broad city street. Her eyes are sharp, although her nose and ears might as well not be present for all that she uses them.

She looks away when I eat. I do not have the words to tell her of my duty, of my people. She does not have the words to tell me why she follows me.

We try.

The name she calls herself does not come to my tongue. It is like the sound a bone makes when it cracks beneath the teeth, but made far back in her throat like she has something stuck there she cannot swallow.

Instead, I call her by a word I barely remember. It means cub of one who is not mine, but who I watch over. In the times before the Dead, it was for the child of one's sister, the orphan of one's

brother, or the offspring one's mate has with other mates. Small one. Not mine. Still I watch.

She does not understand but she responds.

Her word for me is a garbled growl, barely recognizable as words. I try to explain that I have not been given a name of my own. I remember no parents to name me. I have no mate to call me a new name, different from my birth. No tribe to serve, and accept their name as my duty-name. No family. No friend. No one to call me anything other than that which I call myself.

I cannot explain that the words she mangles are not for me alone, but for my role, my people, my duty.

She does not understand, but I respond.

MY BELLY IS full, but my mind is uneasy, churning and turning until I feel ill. I wish I could vomit up what I have seen, like a bad meal, emptying my thoughts onto the ground where they would torment me no further.

The dead walk. I know it is so. I have seen it, have fed in its wake. But tonight, the Dead did not just walk.

It talked.

Worse.

It *smiled*.

The cub is beside me. It is not the first time she has slept, curled into the nest in my den. But it is the first time that I felt her presence there was as much for my comfort as her own.

She stirs in her sleep, kicking out at something that is not there. Perhaps in her dreams she battles the smiling meat-thing we saw kill a woman and her dwarf slave in the darkness earlier that night. Perhaps she pursues it, chasing it into the darkness as we tried to do, and perhaps in her dreams the dead-thing might

not elude her. Or perhaps it turns on her, instead, tearing into her as it had its earlier victims. Perhaps she runs not towards the creature, but away...

I envy the cub her dreams, disturbing or not. I cannot sleep. I cannot understand. I do not know what this new thing — this talking, smiling moving-meat — what this *wrongness* means.

Meat does not smile. The Dead do not smile.

I shake my head, hoping to drive the memory away, but it does not work. I stand, slowly so as not to wake the cub, and move towards the small room, seeking a bone to worry to calm my restless thoughts.

A sound from outside freezes me in my tracks. A shuffle, barely worth noting, but close, too close to the opening of my home. I turn my muzzle towards the entrance, panting softly to taste what little air the winding entry tunnel brings to the den. Rot. Death. Dead.

I crouch, putting one hand over my cub's mouth, to still any protests she may make at being woken. She stirs, dark eyes confused at my actions. I chuff, so softly I hope it cannot be heard outside the room, and jerk my muzzle towards the only other place to go if the entrance is blocked. The small room. The meat room.

She wants to protest. I see it in her eyes, but something in my expression stops her. She slips out of her nest of rags and through the low doorway into the darkness.

From the entry, there is another noise. Closer this time, it is more than the scuff of a careless foot against the ground. A low, clucking, repetitious noise... coming from within my territory.

I slink forward, but not before reaching for the closest thing I have to a weapon. Gnawed clean, but not splintered, the thighbone fit well in my clawed hand. I'd wrapped rags around the knobbed end, so that it would not spin in my grip, and the knee-end was thick and heavy enough to break bone, even without the jagged

stone I'd affixed there. This kind of club would cause too much trouble for me in the streets, but here in my den I made the rules.

The noise comes again, closer. I push back into the darkest crevice, just before my sleeping room, and raise my weapon. As the intruder nears, the smell grows. Shit. Piss. Rot. And old, old blood.

My eyes see well in the dark, but I do not need them to tell who, what, is violating my home. As the creature draws near, I tighten my grip on my club. When it comes within range, I swing.

The Dead moves faster than thought, folding backwards at the waist at an impossible angle. My club, denied its target, hits the far wall of the entry with a bone-jarring crash. My hand goes numb, and the weapon clatters to the ground.

The smiling meat-thing straightens and leaps for me. Its hands tighten around my throat before I can react. They squeeze, and as I struggle, the noise I'd heard earlier comes again.

Heb... heb... heb...

The dead-meat's mouth opens in a snarl, the corners arch upward. Its eyes gleam with malice... and pleasure.

Heb... heb... heb...

The Dead is laughing.

Flailing, I strike at the meat-thing with my hands. Its flesh is old and putrid. Layers of tattered skin, rancid fat, and rotting muscle shred beneath my claws. Its grip on my throat shows no sign of weakness, however. I tear at its forearms until my nails scratch bare bone, but its decaying hands are like a steel slave collar, shrinking mercilessly around my windpipe. I grab between the bones, try to yank them apart, but the creature's putrescence betrays me. I cannot keep hold.

My head reels. The meat-thing locks its unblinking gaze with mine, and begins to draw me forward. My knees buckle, and I tumble to the floor with the moving-dead on top of me. Its grip never falters.

I thrust both hands forward between us, struggling to keep the Dead away. My claws sink into rotten flesh, stopping at the rib cage. I push, but the bones bow inward and my strength is failing. Its rotted teeth gnash, biting towards me as it pulls me in. From between its blackened lips comes again that joyless laughter, although I can sense it only in the shudder of its ribs against my palms.

All I can hear is the pounding of my own heartbeat in my ears. All I can see is the mouth of a monster. All I can feel is the Dead weighing down on me. The death. My death. Darkness.

Air.

I choke on it, like I had forgotten how to breathe, while rolling across the floor. The dead-thing is still there, tumbling with me, and something... someone... else.

My cub rides the meat-thing's back, her pale hairless face barely visible over its shoulder. Her long legs, with their strangely folding knees, wrap around its waist. Her broad flat feet lock together to hold her in place. With a broken bone shard clenched in one fist, she stabs the creature over and over, spilling gore over all of us we scramble for control.

The meat-thing is still laughing.

It laughs as I struggle to catch my breath. It laughs as it plucks my cub from its back. It laughs as it tears her throat out with a single bite.

I leap, a heartbeat too late. Her blood fountains over me as I tear her body from the corpse's grasp. We roll, landing on the far side of the room. I put myself between her and the creature. Whimpers escape unbidden from my throat. She does not move. There is still a spark of life in her soot-dark eyes, but then her skin pales, whiter than white, and her eyes are as cold stone. She is gone.

From behind me, the creature laughs.

EATER OF THE DEAD

I am on my feet in an instant, my snarl drowning out the dead-thing's chuckle. I do not pause, do not think. My claws rend deep. My jaws snap bone. I kick and punch and bite and rend until there is no bit of the Dead larger than a mouthful, and no surface of my den not painted in its gore.

Crouching in its midst, my body shakes. My whines become sobs become howls that echo through the stony tomb that once was my home.

I shake my head, ears ringing. I do not want to. I do not want it.

I do not want...

Eyes averted, I cross the room, slipping in blood and guts as I go. She lies there, against the wall, pale skin spattered red.

I do not want. I do not want it. I do not want to.

She is gone.

I do not...

She is... gone.

I do...

She is...

... my duty.

Meat.

I am Eater of the Dead.



SUICIDE SEEDS

ERIN M. EVANS

BEET SEEDS ARRANGED themselves along the lines of Maesa's palm. Maybe two dozen in all — jagged nuggets that looked more like ancient mouse vertebrae than seeds. Enough for a whole other planting, if it weren't so late in the year, and if Maesa had more space to plant them. She cast an eye around the little rooftop garden, over the pots of carrots and beans and cabbage, aconite and deadman's bells and tetsgamar. The kaincha vine twirling up the straggly khapurbarus tree that was older than Maesa; she suspected that *Babi Atropa* had brought it with her, a seedling into Redoubt, more than fifty years ago. No room for more beets.

For a moment, Maesa thought of her neighbors in the Downs who might be glad of a seed or two of their own. But then she heard *Babi Atropa's* voice in her thoughts: The seeds took a great deal of work to recover. They'd last until the next year. She tipped the seeds back into their pouch.

The sun crept over the rooftops, and soon the little garden — Maesa’s oasis in the cruel landscape of Redoubt — would be broiling hot. She nudged the mushroom pots deeper under the makeshift benches, out of the heat, and tucked rags around the beans’ roots. She pulled the pot of aconite out into the center of the garden, its blue hooded flowers bobbing cheerfully as she did. Everything in order, she climbed down the ladder, into the hovel below.

The burnt and burning smell of tetsgamar leaves forced its way into Maesa’s nose. *Babi* Atropa was bent over her worktable, painstakingly shredding the pale, flat leaves into ribbons and murmuring an atonal hymn to Jirhal. The old woman’s gnarled hands moved patiently, deliberately. On the wall beyond, a faded hanging obscured the image of the goddess. Maesa felt as if Jirhal were somehow pressing at it, at the very fabric of the world.

Maesa looked over at the front door, at the dark curtain pulled wide. Anyone who wandered by would hear and see everything. All it would take was one person going to the Magisterium...

When she twitched the curtain shut, *Babi* interrupted her hymn with a sniff. She gave Maesa a dark look, and her apprentice flushed. *Babi* Atropa took the black-handled blade from beside her and pricked her withered palm. A slow drop of blood rose up along the cut — not enough. *Babi* scowled and squeezed the cut until the drop fell into the leaves. Then a second drop.

Maesa came to stand beside the ancient priestess, offering her own palm.

“If you’d been here,” *Babi* Atropa said, wincing as she squeezed the third drop from the cut, “that might have been an option. But this one’s all mine.” The offering finished, she rubbed her scarred hands together. “Bundle it up and take it to Namaar. And don’t let him tell you the price has changed, not one coin different.”

“Yes, *Babi*,” Maesa said, sweeping the leaves into a little pouch. Tetsgamar was a powerful poison, but in the right hands a powerful curative, and likely the only thing in Redoubt that would keep Namaar al-Houtet breathing.

“You’d do better to pay attention to what I’m doing,” *Babi Atropa* said. “The Watch will come or they won’t. Closing the door won’t make a difference.”

“Yes, *Babi*.” Maesa pulled the door-curtain open once more, letting in a shaft of sunlight. She did not fear the Dead even the way she feared the Magisterium. But *Babi Atropa* refused to pay such things any mind, even as she mixed poisons and called on a goddess everyone wished would stay silent.

“I have to stop on the way back and get water,” Maesa said. “Do you need anything else while I’m out?”

“Take some grain and see if you can get another fish for dinner. And Maesa?” The younger woman looked back at her mentor. The light from the doorway didn’t quite reach *Babi Atropa*, perched on her stool.

“Don’t bother looking upriver,” *Babi Atropa* said.

Namaar was grateful as always, nervous as always. No one needed to know he sought out the cures of *Babi Atropa*, respectable as he was, but her remedies worked best, after all. Nothing else loosened his cramped lungs. Maesa nodded politely as he handed over a sack full of grain and a sack full of pigeonshit, the best fertilizer in Redoubt. Maesa shoved the bottle of olive oil he passed her down into its stinking depths. The number of people who would steal pigeonshit was vanishingly small, even in the Downs.

On the path home, as the land rose away from the river, if Maesa looked back she could see the shining Old City, the home of Redoubt’s wealthy and noble.

Another world, she thought, only a short walk away.

Once, when she was small and *Babi Atropa* had still been strong enough to bring her remedies to the right customers, Maesa had pointed up at the Inner City, asking, “Which is the house of my father?”

“It doesn’t matter,” *Babi Atropa* said. “He’s not coming back, and you wouldn’t be let in if you found it.”

“But if I belong there—”

Babi Atropa had turned her around, facing down the mountain’s slope toward the outer wall, toward the wide-open world full of the fearsome Dead. “You belong here as much as you belong anywhere,” she’d said. “You look up, but you forget to look down, you forget where you could fall.”

Maesa hurried on, picturing the bright, whitewashed houses even as she kept her eyes on the dirty stones beneath her feet.

HIS NAME HAD been Marco. Or maybe Marlin? Marten? Something like that — no one in the Downs who could recall Maesa’s father was quite sure. He didn’t mix, after all, a nobleman banished out to the slums for a crime no one was sure of, but everyone speculated on. They remembered his crisp accent and his bright teeth and his handsome face with its blue-blue eyes. They remembered taking bets on how long before one of the street gangs cut him for that imperious stare. They remembered how taken with him Maesa’s mother had been.

“She ought to have known,” *Babi Atropa* said. “A man like that? Little better than a hungry ghûl.”

Her name was not *Babi Atropa*, not really. She was no one’s *babi*, no one’s mother, no one’s auntie. The Ouazi claimed she could not be Ouazi, the Angat that she was not Angat, the Surinzan that she was not one of theirs. No one could recall from where she’d

come before she lived at the end of the alley in the Downs, and now she was so very old that no human alive could have known. She'd simply always been there: The poison witch. The priestess of Jirhal.

The people of the Downs would have been handsomely rewarded if they'd handed her over to the Church, but every one of them knew the chance still remained that they'd all be dead in their beds if they did. Jirhal prized cunning, wisdom, survival. *Babi Atropa* turned the goddess's darkness into blessings, purgatives, and paralytics made into medicine. Or — for the right price — not. When Maesa's father had returned to the Inner City, when enough time had passed without word, without her mother and herself being sent for, that Maesa's mother had started walking the midnight path again to keep them fed. *Babi Atropa* came to treat sores, to clear out her womb, and Maesa's mother was crying every time.

One day she bought a small packet, two red and black seeds, bright as beads. The next morning she didn't wake up.

The Corpsemen chased Maesa from the tenement, told her to go find her rich papa. *Babi Atropa* was waiting in the street like an aspect of death.

"You killed her," Maesa said.

"The kaincha killed her," the old woman said. "And do you think she wouldn't have found a way without it?" Her dark eyes flicked over Maesa, then seven years old. "I see the second seed wasn't for you?"

Maesa's chest burned hot and sudden. "She wouldn't have done that."

"It would have been a kindness." And then *Babi Atropa* had offered her a choice of two gifts: A third kaincha seed to save her from the brutal end she was sure to meet on the streets of the Downs, or the chance to become *Babi Atropa's* apprentice.

“This is the only kindness you’ll get from me,” the old woman had warned her. “You earn your keep.”

For a long time, Maesa worried she wouldn’t be able to satisfy the grim old woman; she chased *Babi Atropa*’s approval like it was a fish in the river. *Babi Atropa* kept teaching her, kept feeding her, and did not throw her back to the Downs, and eventually Maesa realized that was as close to satisfaction — as close to affection — as she would ever get.

In the narrow alley that led to *Babi Atropa*’s home, Jerissa, a pretty whore who lived three buildings down, stood with her little son balanced on one hip, hovering close enough to the doorway that the crone’s reputation bought her safety from anyone who might think she made an easy target. She smiled nervously at Maesa, baring gapped teeth behind her dark-stained lips. The little boy lay against Jerissa’s shoulder, pale lashes wilting against his sallow cheeks.

“Not better?” Maesa asked.

Jerissa smoothed the little boy’s reddish hair. “The fever still comes and all the milk and herb-water I get into him, he shits right back out. Cries all night, off and on.”

Maesa’s stomach fluttered. A bad sign, but there were more cures to try. “I think we have something. Let me talk to *Babi*.”

Jerissa shifted her son higher up her hip, pursed her stained mouth. “I can’t pay much,” she said apologetically. “Can’t take customers while he’s crying. I’ve barely enough to get the water *he* needs.”

Bad to worse. She could already hear *Babi Atropa*: “I don’t deal in charity.” She had pushed through the curtain before she heard the man speaking.

“Whatever you ask,” he said, “I’ll pay it.”

Maesa ducked back through the curtain, hovering on the edge of the threshold. His voice hummed in her brain like a cloud of

flies, and it took a moment for her to realize Jerissa was staring at her, worried.

“Go home,” Maesa said. “Get more water in him, and in yourself. I’ll convince her.”

She didn’t watch to see when Jerissa left, but clutched the edge of the curtain in one hand. The man stood with his back to her, broad-shouldered and dressed in well-made, if simple clothes. But his voice was an Angat nobleman’s, crisp and imperious.

“Of course you will,” *Babi Atropa* said. “What you’re asking for isn’t a poultice or a powder. You need magic. And magic costs.”

The nobleman was silent, all the perils of that offer seething in the lull. Magic was proscribed — worse than proscribed. Maesa’s stomach turned. *Babi*’s spells hadn’t brought the Watch, yet. If they’d created a backlash, it had happened too far away to sort out.

“Come now,” *Babi Atropa* said. “If you thought this could be dealt with using seeds and powders alone, you would have sent your man. You know what you’re asking for. You know the price.”

“Whatever it is,” the man said again, “I’ll pay it.”

Babi Atropa smiled to herself. “Come back in two days.”

“I can’t wait two days—”

“You will,” *Babi Atropa* said. “Because that’s when I’ll be ready. Bring six weights of grain, a weight of seeds, and the boy.”

Maesa stepped into the end of the alley as the man came out. He glanced at her, hardly seeing her, nodded once. His eyes were blue, Maesa realized. Blue as aconite blossoms.

“Who was that?” she asked *Babi Atropa*.

“A customer. Is Big Meryam’s tea ready?”

“Have you met him before?”

Babi Atropa eyed her stonily. “Never in my life. Pull me down some deadman’s bells and go pick a new bunch to dry.”

A hundred more questions danced on Maesa's tongue: What did he want? Why had he come to *Babi Atropa*? Was he her father? She swallowed them all so that they twitched restlessly around her heart.

"Jerissa was here. Her boy's still sick." *Babi Atropa* squinted at her. "You gave her the herbs and salt to make a tonic two days ago," Maesa added. "Next is a tincture of khapurbarus in alcohol?"

"Well done," *Babi Atropa* said, irritably. She stood and reached for the battered tome on the shelf above her worktable, her bent back refusing to straighten. Maesa pulled the book down, setting it on the worktable.

"We have a few doses prepared," Maesa said.

Babi Atropa licked one thumb, flipping through the yellowed pages. "What's she paying with?"

Maesa hesitated. "Don't know. It'll be delayed. She hasn't been able to work while he's been sick."

The old woman stopped leafing through the book. "What a predicament for her."

"He'll die without it."

"Of course he will. He's not special."

"*Babi*," Maesa tried again. "Jerissa's a good customer. If you let her baby die—"

"Where else is she going to go?" *Babi Atropa* demanded. "The next time she catches something from one of her suitors, who's she going to turn to instead?"

Maesa pursed her mouth. "It's one tincture."

"One," *Babi Atropa* agreed. "And then another and another and another. Every sad, sorry case turns up at our door. You make a tincture for all of them? Then we have nothing to sell and we're the ones who end up dead. Is that what you want?"

"No," Maesa said.

“Tell Jerissa to come up with the grain. Otherwise, she can stop wasting that water.” She waved Maesa away. “Go pick the deadman’s bells.”

UP IN THE garden, Maesa bound the leaves of the deadman’s bells together with a strip of bark-cord, eyes on a rusty bumblebee crawling into the aconite’s dome-like flowers. It couldn’t be her father visiting *Babi* Atropa. If he were alive, wouldn’t he have come for Maesa?

Unless he didn’t know where she was — she’d left the tenement right after her mother had died. How many months had passed between his leaving and her mother’s death? The first years of her life were like a dream, all muddied and blurred, with only a handful of vivid, uncomfortable moments sure and clear in her memories. Enough that she couldn’t be completely sure the man was her father after all.

But what nobleman came down from the Inner City to the Downs, looking for *Babi* Atropa?

She blew out a breath, sure to her core that *Babi* Atropa wouldn’t tell her who the man was or what he wanted, sure that she’d never tell him if Maesa was his daughter. Her hands shook as she tied off the bundle of leaves, and she looked over at the kaincha vine, twining up the khapurbarus tree. Death for her mother tangled around life for Jerissa’s son.

Babi Atropa once told her that in its wild state, the khapurbarus would grow bigger than their little house. As it was, trapped in half a wine barrel, the tree was no thicker than Maesa’s arm, its shaggy, forking branches half of that. The tincture wasn’t hard to make — chop one of the branches into chips, smoke it on a fire and collect the distillate, purify it once and add it to a little neutral spirits. That would seal the little boy’s guts against the worms that ailed him.

She could make it herself. *Babi* would surely notice if the bottle on the shelf went missing, but not a branch of her tree; not when she couldn't climb the ladder to the roof any longer. Maesa could take Jerissa's payment late, and it wouldn't be charity. And it would give her something to do, besides wondering about the nobleman, about which house on the high cliffs was his, about whether he had a little garden.

One of the smaller branches would do nicely, Maesa thought, taking up her little hatchet.

THE LITTLE BOY wept and wailed as he slept on Jerissa's shoulder, his little fist clutching one of his mother's russet braids. Jerissa bit her lip as she bounced him, her eyes hollow and shadowed. "You won't..." Jerissa said. "You won't call *her* here. I mean, I can't let you."

"It's just medicine," Maesa said. "Jirhal's blessings aren't required. Just your fireplace. But it must be *now*." Maesa had left *Babi* Atropa sleeping through the heat of the afternoon, ostensibly to gather the remaining components of the rich man's cure. She wouldn't have long before the old woman wondered where she'd gotten to. "He's not going to survive much longer, Jerissa."

Jerissa turned from her, bouncing the little boy into the sparse room she rented. Maesa followed her in, unlacing the mouth of her bag as she did. She set the stolen equipment on the table — a shallow pan, a wide metal tube in several pieces, a clay bowl with a thinner tube up the center. Maesa began assembling the distiller. "I need a bowl."

Jerissa looked around the room. "All I have is the basin."

"Then I need the basin."

Maesa layered the chipped khapurbarus in the pan and perched it in the fire, adjusting the logs and manure chips to get the heat

right, start the chips smoking. The child wailed intermittently behind her, a sound of pain. The room smelled of shit.

Maesa locked the metal tube together, patching over the joints with a dough made of soured grains. The bowl with the thinner tube she pasted on top with a little more of the dough-glue. Smoke and the penetrating, minty smell of the khapurbarus trickled out of the hole. Jirhal's blessings were not needed, nor were they called for, but as Maesa put *Babi Atropa's* teachings to use, she felt a presence growing in the room behind her, as if the dark goddess were lingering in the breaths between the little child's cries. A bitter taste bloomed in Maesa's mouth, but she swallowed and it was gone.

It's not charity, Maesa told herself and Jirhal. *She will owe me after all.*

Maesa turned. "I need the..."

Jerissa was not in the room. The little boy sat up, awake and yowling in his cot. Maesa went and picked him up — the rags around his bottom were soaked through and he was burning up. "Poor thing," she said, ignoring the shit leaking over her arms. "Poor thing." She crossed to Jerissa's dresser and filled the little clay cup from the pitcher near to it. The faint smell of *Babi Atropa's* herbs lingered, far weaker than they should have. Maesa made the little boy drink anyway. Without water, it wouldn't matter if she could make the khapurbarus in alcohol.

"Poor thing," she said again. "Always somewhere to fall, but always somewhere to climb. We'll get you better. Yes, we will."

"Thanks," Jerissa said from the door. "I had to... go see to something." She gave Maesa a weak smile.

"Of course," Maesa said. Jerissa took the little boy and handed Maesa a dampened rag. She scrubbed her arms as best she could. At *Babi's* she would have had the water to clean herself properly, and she thought of all the things she might be leaving behind as

she took the basin from the table and inverted it over the stream of smoke.

“Don’t touch it,” Maesa said. “Not until sundown.” She handed Jerissa a little bagful of more chips. “If you stop smelling the smoke, you can add some more of these to the pan through the hole by the base. I’ll be back with the rest.”

“Thank you,” Jerissa said again.

Maesa smiled. “We’re all in this together.” She paused. “Try and sleep. You look as though you’re dead on your feet.”

“Feel it, too,” Jerissa said, with a hollow laugh. “I’ll rest after I bargain for some more water.”

Maesa left the tenement, winding her way through the Downs and into farther, safer neighborhoods, to call in favors for *Babi Atropa* — a rare herb here, a fresh hare there, new candles, charcoal. The ancient silver knife to be sharpened. Maesa paid out weight after weight of grain, and returned home again, laden down with the ingredients for the kind of magic that brought a rich man down to *Babi Atropa*’s doorstep.

In her life with *Babi Atropa*, Maesa had seen her call on Jirhal’s powers three times. Without a doubt, those were the three most terrifying moments of Maesa’s life — both for the danger they represented and the feeling that she would slide soon enough into Jirhal’s dark embrace as well.

When she returned home, *Babi Atropa* was awake and bent over the worktable, a neat pile of diced roots to one side. “You’re late,” she observed.

“Your list took a lot of running around,” Maesa said. “But I have it all, and a pair of fish for dinner.”

“Good girl,” *Babi Atropa* said, rising stiffly from her seat.

Maesa unpacked her collection. The sun drooped low in the sky; she had perhaps a half hour before sundown and the promised

deadline for Jerissa's cure. "What's the ritual for? You never told me." Maesa asked, half wanting the answer, half hoping it made *Babi Atropa* send her away so she'd stop asking inconvenient questions.

"A cure," *Babi Atropa* said, looking over the items on the table "His son is very sick. His *heir* is very sick," she added, a correction.

"His heir?" Maesa's stomach clenched.

Babi Atropa gave her a death's head grin. "Yes, but not for long. A wasting sickness. His blood has turned on him."

"You don't think he cares about his son?"

"Rich man like that? You don't pay that much grain and more for love of your own blood. You do it to protect your interests."

"It could be both."

"It isn't." She crouched down on the floor beside the ladder to the rooftop, pulled up the battered rug there, revealing a little door in the dry and cracking floorboards. Out of it she took a bundle in a leather bag, and *Babi Atropa's* grin peeled wider.

"Drain the hare and get dinner started. There's much to do tonight."



THE DARK OF the Downs made the slum all the more dangerous, the flickering oil lamps swarmed by prostitutes and jacks-for-hire so that bodies filled the meager circle of their light. Maesa hurried to Jerissa's, the hare's blood still staining the beds of her fingernails. She kept her blackened, bone-handled knife ready in her grip and the bottle of spirits weighing down the right pocket of her skirt. More than once the shadows stirred as she passed, but Maesa walked without a hood, and a steady look was enough to remind the young wolves amid those shadows not to trouble *Babi Atropa's* girl.

A safety that came at a price. She remembered the last ritual, the feeling of poison in her own blood, the nosebleed she thought

would drain her right to the base of her heart. “Jirhal tests us,” *Babi Atropa* had said. “The feeble cannot serve her.”

Maesa knocked a third time before Jerissa opened her door. She looked worse than she had that morning, her skin jaundiced and her eyes more hollow still. The smell of the rooms was atrocious. “Blood of the Dead!” Maesa cursed. “You have it, too.”

“I’ll live,” Jerissa said, her voice sounding dry.

No, you won’t, Maesa thought. She pushed past her into the room. The smoke no longer drifted from the little chimney, and beneath the hood of the basin a puddle of golden liquid pooled. The bracing smell of the *khapurbarus* dizzied her.

Enough for one, Maesa thought, her heart hammering in her chest.

“Have you drunk the tonic?” Maesa asked, breaking the crust of dried dough away from the collection bowl. There had to be a solution, a way to save both.

“Ran out,” Jerissa said. “But water’s good enough.” She clutched her stomach suddenly, and without a word, rushed from the room. Maesa cursed and cursed. With shaking hands, she poured the distillate into the bottle of spirits. Water wouldn’t be enough.

Jerissa’s son lay in his little cot, looking exactly as bad as he had that afternoon. Jerissa had been giving him all the water, Maesa realized as the whore returned.

Maesa thrust the medicine into Jerissa’s hand, her thoughts spinning. “Take this,” she said. “You should take it — you’re in worse shape. I’ll go and get the other dose from *Babi’s* stores.” Maesa already imagined *Babi Atropa’s* fury when she discovered the *khapurbarus* in spirits missing.

She needs you now, Maesa thought. *To tend the garden, to move the heavy books, to run her errands. You can do this.*

Jerissa looked at her, eyes wide. “She’ll kill you.”

“Not if she wants to survive,” Maesa said as she pulled on her cloak.

She raced down the street, ignoring onlookers and toughs, ignoring the dark and the sudden, bitter taste in her mouth. *This is how we survive*, she told the phantom goddess. *By helping one another.*

Babi *will kill you*, Maesa thought, as she plucked the bottle from the shelf. But the crone slept on, and Maesa rushed back to the tenement. Jerissa sat on the floor beside her son’s cot, her eyes dull.

“He went right to sleep,” she said when Maesa shut the door behind her. “I was worried. Well, it might have made him a little drunk.”

Maesa opened the vial and held it to Jerissa’s lips, tipping the pungent mixture into her mouth. “Swallow it all,” Maesa said. “You should have taken the first one.”

“Hardly matters,” Jerissa said, swallowing a second time as if to clear the strong brew from her mouth. “You came back quick. You saved us.” She gave Maesa a weak smile.

Maesa helped the woman into bed, pulling off the filthy linens and throwing them in the corner. By the time Maesa had disassembled the condenser and packed it away, Jerissa was still and restful. Maesa shut the door behind her, maneuvering the latch into place as she did. She’d have to find the time to check on the two of them tomorrow — after the rich man’s ritual, she realized.

Her stomach began knotting again, as if there were worms tangling her own guts.

“YOU LOOK TIRED,” Babi Atropa observed. “Are you going to be able to handle this?” She kept her hands wrapped covetously around the tome she’d pulled from beneath the floorboards, as Maesa laid out the tools on the altar.

“Depends on what you expect me to do,” Maesa said. She *was* tired — so late caring for Jerissa and her son, later still cleaning the used equipment in the water from her garden’s rain barrel. Even after she sat between the pots, worrying about the impending visit from the nameless rich man and his ailing son. Wondering if *Babi Atropa* was right after all.

“You still haven’t told me what part I play,” she said to *Babi Atropa*. “I’m beginning to think you don’t need me at all.”

Babi Atropa’s eyes shone as though Maesa had made a joke. “I think you’ve shown yourself to be quite useful, Maesa,” she said. “Given you fight your weaker urges.”

A pang of fear went through Maesa — the missing tincture, the used equipment — but *Babi Atropa* only smiled at her, a slow fearful thing. The thick sense of magic, of something reaching into the world from somewhere else, began to stifle the room.

Suddenly the curtain twitched. A pair of armed men came in, followed by the rich man from the day before, one hand on the shoulder of a bloodless and bony boy of about fourteen. Angat blue eyes peered out of hollow sockets.

“Welcome,” *Babi Atropa* said, as though they were there for nothing more than a cup of nettle tea. Maesa’s mouth grew bitter as tetsgamar leaves again as the old woman added, “Do come in.”

The rich man set his jaw and gestured curtly at his guards. They dropped their sacks before *Babi Atropa* — a thud of grain, a clank of oil in tins. The rich man held out a tiny sack of his own: seeds.

“Your first payment,” the rich man said.

“Maesa,” *Babi Atropa* said.

Was it Maesa’s imagination or did the rich man’s jaw tighten at that? *He’s not your father*, she told herself as she delved her hand into the sack of grain, letting a handful of the firm kernels run through her fingers before selecting one to taste; nutty and clean. The oil

was smooth between her fingertips and grassy on her tongue. The seeds were older — dry and faintly gray, but still potentially viable — carrots, parsnips, bloodroot. She nodded to *Babi*.

“Then we are ready. What’s your name boy?”

The sickly boy looked at his father, who nodded once a moment too late. “Perel.”

“Well, Perel,” *Babi Atropa* said, “are *you* ready?” The boy gave a timid nod, and the air felt as if it were bristling. Maesa wondered if Jirhal would approve of using her powers on such a weak creature.

Yes, she thought, knowing Babi Atropa’s answer. If using him makes us stronger.

If helping him makes us all stronger, Maesa thought. She considered the blue-eyed rich man a moment and wondered if strengthening the nobles of the Inner City would do a damned thing for Redoubt.

“Maesa, why don’t you take our guest to the gardens?” *Babi Atropa* said, never taking her eyes from the boy.

“I’d rather stay here,” the man said.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” *Babi Atropa* said.

“If you cross me, witch—”

“You’ll what?” *Babi Atropa* asked in a lazy way. “Go to the Magisterium and tell them what you paid me to do? Rest assured, my lord, I didn’t get to be this old by acting foolish. Perel will get his blessing. But it suits my needs and yours if you don’t watch. Let Maesa show you the garden on the roof.” She smiled at him. “You’ll know when to come back.”

Perel shot his father an unacknowledged look that then bounced to Maesa. She offered him a small smile, but there was no reassuring him. It wouldn’t be pleasant, it wouldn’t be pretty. It wouldn’t be all right. But he might not die.

The rich man suddenly took a step toward Maesa. “Well, then,” he said. “Let’s get this over with.” He gestured to the guards.

“One can stay,” *Babi* Atropa said, as though she were offering him something. The rich man stiffened. He glanced halfway over his shoulder and pointed at one, a broad-shouldered man with the look of one of the Ouazi. “You. Stay with my son.”

The other guard preceded Maesa and the rich man up the ladder, tense with the possibility of an ambush. Once he’d searched and re-sheathed his blade, the rich man gave the gardens a cursory pass, peering at flowers, tugging on the leaf of a bean vine. “So, you grow your food here?”

“Among other things,” Maesa said. His hand snapped back as though burned. “That one is food,” Maesa added. “Although if not boiled properly, the peas will make you very sick. We use them fresh as a purgative. In small amounts.”

“Hmm,” he said, looking up at the edge of the next building, the wall of her little garden. “You don’t have thieves?”

“We do. Once every few months I find a body. If you’re foolish enough to steal from the ‘poison witch,’ you’re too foolish to know what you can’t touch.” She crossed to the kaincha vine, its dark leaves mottled in the fading light, its pods just beginning to split. “This one is the most potent. A single seed, even uncrushed, will kill a person.”

“Fascinating.”

“It killed my mother,” she added, before she could stop herself.

A pause. “I am sorry for your loss.”

Maesa looked back at him. The nose... something flickered through her memory at the shape of his nose. “*Babi* never told me your name.”

“I was assured of my privacy.”

“Of course.” She swallowed against the bitter taste in her mouth, and her ears crackled. The eyes were blue and his nose made her remember and he might have flinched at her name. *Don’t think about it*, she told herself. But like Jirhal, the curiosity was hard to deny.

“She will save him. I assume he’s your only child.”

“He’s my trueborn son,” the man said, a little harshly. “I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

Crackling, crackling — Maesa swallowed harder and wondered if the man or his guard could taste Jirhal’s presence on their own tongues. “Why did you come to *Babi Atropa*?” Maesa asked. “I wouldn’t think folk had heard of her on the peak.”

The man eyed her. “I’d heard of her a long time ago. Never thought I’d have a need, though. Obviously.”

Maesa met his blue eyes with hers, the poison in her mouth flooding her words. “Neither did my mother, you know.”

The guard cried out suddenly. The crackling grew louder — the sound of dry stems breaking, of leaves shattering.

Maesa whipped around. The beet greens yellowed and drooped. The beans browned and coiled into whips. A head of cabbage shriveled and shattered like an ancient wasp’s nest, its leaves gray, crisp shards. All around them, the vegetables died.

And the poisonous plants flourished. The deadman’s bells shivered and swelled. The aconite bloomed, fierce and blue as the nobleman’s gaze. The tetsgamar blossoms broke open and the kaincha vine wound around the trunk of its host, as if to strangle it, the bright red eyes of its seeds peeking through the splits of their pods.

The leaves of the khapurbarus began to curl, and the enormity of what Jirhal was taking struck Maesa — the tree was irreplaceable.

And then it stopped. The air was again only thick with the stink of the river and the garden was silent save for the labored breath of the rich man and his guard.

“She’s finished,” Maesa managed, staring at the kaincha vine’s stranglehold on the tree.

The men rushed down the ladder, but Maesa didn’t follow —

not right away. She brushed the brittle leaves of each of her poor, sacrificed plants, rubbing the broken bits between her fingers as if it would tell her something she didn't know. Dead, dead, all dead. Weeks and weeks of careful work — years of collecting enough seeds for a dozen dowries, and it was lost in a moment.

The khapurbarus's leaves stayed curled, but green. *Not quite a poison, not quite a blessing*, Maesa thought. At last she climbed down the ladder, still shaking. The nobleman and his son had left, along with the guard. Blood stained the floorboards, more blood than the hare's.

"Did you kill the guard?" Maesa asked.

"Not entirely," *Babi Atropa* said, wiping her silver knife down. "He chose well — strong fellow, young. He might live, and be better off for it. Assuming his master isn't a fool."

"The plants... all the ones that weren't poisonous died." Tears suddenly sprung up in her eyes, and *Babi Atropa* frowned.

"Risen enemies," she spat. "I knew I should have asked for more." Maesa sat down and covered her face with her hands. The old woman gripped her shoulder with a sudden strength.

"You will defeat this," she said. "It is a test."

"My whole life is a test, it seems," Maesa said. "Is he my father?" *Babi Atropa* released her. "Why do you care?"

"Because I deserve to know."

"Because you think he's your escape? He's not," *Babi Atropa* demanded. "There isn't an escape."

"I'm well aware," Maesa said. Then, "Is it so wrong I think about my father?"

"It's wasted time," *Babi Atropa* said. "He doesn't want you. He never did."

Maesa turned on her. "It's my time, I'll use it how I like."

"And so shall he," *Babi Atropa* said. "Looks like he replaced you."

“Maybe,” Maesa said, turning every ounce of the old woman’s cruelty back at her. “But you can’t.”

Babi Atropa didn’t so much as flinch. “The khapurbarus in spirits is missing,” she noted. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“I thought you couldn’t stop me,” Maesa said. “And I was right.”

Babi Atropa’s cruel grin slid into Maesa’s heart like a blade. “I couldn’t stop you. But I could teach you a lesson you should have learned a long, long time ago: Every cure is a killer if you dose it wrong. Or,” she added, “if you steep deadman’s bells in it.”

MAESA RAN.

The words had no more than left *Babi* Atropa’s lips, but she ran. How much deadman’s bells? How strong had *Babi* Atropa brewed it? It wouldn’t kill instantly, not usually. But then Jerissa was already sick and the khapurbarus straining her body as it poisoned the worms in her guts. Maesa’s feet slapped the cobbled road while her thoughts weighed doses and timetables and the battle of poison and cure.

The little boy’s hysterical screaming reached her ears as she came to Jerissa’s building, and Maesa’s heart stuttered. She took the stairs two at a time, up to Jerissa’s rooms.

A small crowd hovered around the door. A big, red-faced man — Georg, a farmhand whose arm Maesa had helped *Babi* set last year — pounded on the door. “Shut that brat up, or I’m coming in there!”

“Break it down!” Maesa cried. “Break it down at once!”

Georg turned at the order, furious enough to deny her, but his eyes widened at the poison witch’s apprentice and he slammed his heavy shoulder—once, twice, three times into the door until it popped open.

Maesa shoved past him. It was dark inside, unnaturally dark. The late afternoon light cut a swath through the room that the shadows seemed to nibble, illuminating the child's empty cot and his mother's empty bed.

In one terrible, twined moment, Maesa turned toward the sound of the boy's cries. He sat pressed into the dirty corner beside the fireplace. Blood and tears streamed down both sides of the little boy's face, two rivers of red staining his shirt. His cheeks had been gouged out, his bright teeth peeking through the gruesome wounds. Pale and shaking, shock gripped him like the claws of a terrible beast.

Maesa almost bent for him, but the screaming, animal part of her brain took hold and she spun around.

High in the opposite corner of the room, what remained of Jerissa crouched, clinging to the walls like a spider waiting for prey to stumble into its trap. Her eyes were milky, a hollow half-smile on her bloodless lips.

Jerissa was Dead.

Maesa shouted and grabbed hold of the wooden chair beside her, swinging it as the creature leapt down at her, teeth bared. Jerissa flew off her feet and into the cabinet that held the heavy basin. It wouldn't stop the Dead.

Run, run, run! Maesa told herself.

Maesa scooped the little boy off the ground and held him close, running out the door and through the crowd. She heard screams follow her as Jerissa bounded out after her. One prey was as good as another and Georg's high, frantic shouts chased Maesa to the stairwell.

A neighbor rang the bell on the stairwell, the alarm for the Watch and for the Corpsemen, while Georg screamed and screamed. His tools rested beside his own rooms; a pickaxe, a shovel, a rake. *He must have just got home*, Maesa thought, absurdly. *And now he's going to die.*

The back of Maesa's neck prickled. Only if she let him.

She pried the little boy's arms off her neck and set him on the stairs. She took up the pickaxe — it was so much heavier than she expected. All the better, she thought, and realized as she ran back across the hall that she was weeping.

MAESA RETURNED TO *Babi Atropa's*, the slow walk of the condemned. The sound of the pickaxe puncturing Jerissa that first time echoed over and over in her mind. People stared at her, the bloodstained young woman holding a sobbing child that clearly wasn't hers, but they hardly felt real. With every step a bitter taste grew in the back of Maesa's mouth.

The image of Jirhal was covered once more when she pushed through the curtain. *Babi Atropa* looked up from the mortar she bent over, the bright scent of something in the air. Maesa set the little boy down on the altar pushed up against the wall.

"What do you think you're doing?" *Babi Atropa* said.

"Stitching his wounds," Maesa said, pulling out a bottle of sedative, a bottle of spirits, a pot of honey, needle and thread, and a candle.

"I take it his mother's not going to pay for that."

"She went restless."

Babi's eyebrows rose. "My, my. What an unlucky little boy."

Maesa didn't speak. She lit the candle from the fire and then held the little boy's head and tipped a dose of tetsgamar and death's bane into his mouth, before picking him up and rubbing his back, waiting for the sedative to take effect.

"Before you ask," *Babi Atropa* said. "He's not staying here."

"He's motherless because of you," Maesa said. "He stays where I say he stays."

Babi Atropa drew back. “Well. You’ve suddenly gotten quite the backbone. Impressive for someone who had to slink through my stores to do a whore a favor she never earned.”

The little boy’s body started to relax, growing heavy and slack against Maesa’s shoulder with each exhalation. She set him down on the altar again and held the needle over the flame of the candle. “If you’d done her a little kindness instead of murdering her to make a point—”

“If you’d accepted the fact you can’t save everything,” *Babi* Atropa shot back. “It’s each of our own responsibilities to survive. Jerissa failed. She failed her son, too. That’s not my problem.”

“It will be your problem!” Maesa retorted. “If we all lived like you, then we’d be worse than doomed. Redoubt can hardly stand with all of us selfish and thinking only of ourselves.”

Babi Atropa stared at her, silent a moment. “Whoever said we were going to survive?”

A chill went through Maesa, and she hugged the little boy closer.

“Jirhal teaches that survival is a blessing we must earn,” *Babi* Atropa said, and Maesa felt as if the air were growing thick again, her blood pounding like a hundred pickaxes against a hundred bodies. “Can you look at what happened to Jerissa, what we must do to have the smallest of comforts, and say that Redoubt has earned that? You’re not a fool, Maesa. Don’t act like one.

“Whatever’s left in the garden, go and pick it for the soup,” *Babi* Atropa said. Then, “Take the boy and feed him a kaincha seed. It’s a kindness. Trust me.”

Maesa hugged the little boy closer. Defiantly, she took the threaded needle, the jar of honey, and the bottle of spirits before she climbed up into the garden.

The setting sun made the garden feel even more like a graveyard.

Even walking into the space made the fragile, ashen leaves stir and shatter. There would be nothing here to eat — she knew that.

If Maesa was a fool, then Jirhal and *Babi* Atropa were ten times that. If they all died then the goddess could hardly live on as she had. They said once the gods numbered as the stars, but since the world fell, since the Dead rose, the gods had died as their worshipers did. That Jirhal had survived might be a testament to her doctrine's strength, but it had clearly reached its limits.

The scent of the aconite hit Maesa's nose. *So have you*, she thought. She set the little boy down on the ground, but he clung to her. *Babi* was right — it might be a blessing. The kaincha seeds peered out at her from their husks.

Think of it that way, Maesa thought, steeling herself. *Only the strongest can survive.*

MAESA LADLED SOUP into two bowls, her stomach still threatening to upend. She couldn't undo what she'd done. She'd long since scrubbed the mix of Jerissa and her son's blood from her hands, but it didn't feel that way. She set a bowl in front of *Babi* Atropa, and sat on the floor beside the ladder, next to her gardening tools. Maesa touched the handle of her spade, thought of the seeds she'd saved, and wondered if Jirhal's touch had tainted them, too.

Babi Atropa said nothing, but took a bite of soup, wincing at the heat. "We have to catch up on several preparations," she said. "And you'll have to make more of the liquid khapurbarus."

Maesa stirred her soup and nodded, thinking of Jerissa's grateful expression and the smell of the khapurbarus that had lingered faintly in the room she'd died in.

Babi Atropa chuckled. "At least you've toughened up." She took another bite of soup. "Spicy. What's in it?"

“Must be whatever killed the plants,” Maesa said.

Babi Atropa frowned and set her spoon down. “How many did you use?”

Maesa gripped the spoon hard, as if she could squeeze sap from the wood. “Enough.”

“Not for the boy,” *Babi* said. “In the soup. How many kaincha seeds are in the soup?” She sniffed her bowl. “Can’t be more than two.”

Maesa met *Babi Atropa’s* dark eyes. “It only takes one.”

The old woman laughed and laughed. “You are *stupid*, girl. I’ve been pledged to Jirhal since I was half your age. Did you think a single kaincha seed would bring me down?” She tilted her head as Maesa stood, fear and rage and the bitterness in her throat enough to overwhelm her. “Did you even kill the boy?” *Babi Atropa* asked.

“It’s what you always say,” Maesa told her. “Take what you can, cut away the useless bits.”

Babi laughed again coming to her feet, and Jirhal seemed to reach her bony fingers through the spheres to trail down Maesa’s neck. “Useless?” *Babi* demanded. “Where will they get their cures then? Big Meryam’s heart stops. Namaar’s lungs squeeze shut. The whores all die of pox or a baby they didn’t want.” *Babi Atropa* looked down at her, only cold. “And *you*. Where will you go?”

Maesa stood, too, retreating to stand beside her tools. “I have options.”

“High on the hill? Up to your might-be father’s door with a Restless-ravaged orphan on your back and deadman’s bells staining your fingers? You’re going to threaten to tell everyone about what happened here?”

Maesa didn’t dare look away, even though every part of her wanted to. She touched the spade like a talisman, protection from the bitterness in her mouth, the cold in *Babi’s* eyes. “I have options,” she said once more. “I can grow anything — you think people won’t pay for that?”

Babi Atropa shook her head, as close to pitying as Maesa'd ever seen. "Honestly, it's no wonder your father would spend so much to save his sickly son. If he'd died, then he might have had to come looking for his soft, feeble-minded daughter, now wouldn't he?"

The spade in Maesa's hand punched through *Babi Atropa's* stomach, the girl's knuckles flush with her mentor's ancient flesh. Maesa stared at the wound as if it were something else, someone else's act.

Babi Atropa's clawlike hands hovered in the air around the weapon, her dark eyes wide and shocked. Maesa didn't let go of the spade, even as the blood poured out over her hands again. The old woman smiled.

"Only the strongest," she said, the last words to ever pass her wicked lips.

Maesa pulled her tool from *Babi Atropa*, and for a long time she only stood over the old woman's body, as if she might leap up once more, as if Jirhal might burn through the cover and punish her. Or worse, bless her.

Where will they get their cures then? Maesa thought. Not from *Babi Atropa*. Spade still in hand, she climbed back up the ladder.

The little boy slept beneath the khapurbarus tree aided by the death's bane and tetsgamar, dark sutures sticky with honey standing out against his moon-washed cheeks. Maesa washed the spade in water from the rain barrel and pulled a heavy pot over the trap door. She needed to call for the Corpsemen. She needed to get *Babi's* body out of the house, in case the worst happened.

But first she needed to think. She sat down beside the sleeping child.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to him, stroking his reddish hair. "I don't know if this is better. I've lived it for ten years, and I still couldn't say."

Maesa would never leave the Downs. Not now; not if she believed even half of what she said she did. *Babi Atropa* was right. These people would die without her and Jirhal to make the poisons work against their sicknesses. Otherwise, there would be no saving them all, no life for Redoubt.

If Maesa stayed, so would Jerissa's son, and so he would become the assistant of the poison witch. Over and over, the cycle would run. And Jirhal would survive... so long as they did.

Her mouth itched as if a bitter tincture had dripped across her tongue.

Only the strongest, Maesa thought, and wondered if it was her own thought at all.



FORERUNNER

JANET MORRIS & CHRIS MORRIS

RED-EYED LOCUSTS came with the rising moons, adults swarming in black clouds while bands of nymphs hopped below, singing and calling, clicking their deafening chants. Redoubt's outer wall forced the nymphs on their way northwest to either climb or go around, but not even the pearly wall of the Inner City could defend against attack from the sky.

Summer in Redoubt, walled city besieged by the undead, always brought evil to light and trouble to mind.

Locusts first mean feast, then famine.

But Redoubt is accustomed to need: a city of want, city of shortage, city of refugees; dwarf-hewn from a volcano's skirts, then stolen by mankind. Its basalt ramparts braced against the mountainside, its nesting walls creating a last haven for the displaced.

This day had dawned no darker than any other, but felt ominous to Ziru, who stood to lose too much, even before the locust clouds

came. He'd been a Forerunner for less than a month. What could he have done wrong so soon? He stroked the blood-bay stallion's graying muzzle, calming it as best he could. Where was Anittas, the Eastgate Watch captain who'd bade Ziru bring this horse onto the grounds of the White Citadel and await him? What did Anittas want with Ziru? And with Erok, eldest of the Angat nobility's sixty horses, the last within these inner walls? Not even Anittas could have known yesterday, when he set this meeting, that the swarm would come today.

Overhead, vast hordes of insects from the south swooped and sang their rattling song, so loud that people shouted to be heard. Geese, robins, and grackles dove among the swarms, feasting on the wing. If the locusts stripped every terraced field, tenement garden, and window box, most of Redoubt would starve. Folk waving nets chased the insects up streets and walls and terraces, trying to catch the bugs to fry and skewer and smoke; from the ramparts, slingers stoned the feasting birds aloft and the rats scaling walls in search of dinner.

Citizens of Redoubt, when disparaging, called themselves the Doubtful, and so they were: humans and non-humans who'd abandoned all hope but this final refuge, despairing of survival. Well-nigh four hundred thousand hungry humans, elves, dwarves, and hairy corpse-eating ghûl languished in Redoubt's heat, behind cyclopean battlements, terrified of the undead its towering walls kept at bay. The precise number of Doubtters huddled here cheek by jowl? None could say. Crowded and furious, scheming and stealing, oppressing and suffering, breeding and mourning, more fell prey to one another, dangerous and desperate, than to the restless dead they all feared.

And in Redoubt, horses, like all large animals, symbolized luxury only the city's Angat rulers could afford. Or could afford in former

times. Now the gossips said the Angat nobility meant to slaughter all their horses for meat, tan the hides, render the hooves for glue, the bones for meal, the fat for tallow, and snatch their profit soonest.

Next, the chariots that Ziru's Piraya ancestors once drove at the forefront of Menhada battles would be sold for artifacts and scrap, while the Angat overlords of Redoubt grew richer yet.

"Won't happen, Erok. Can't," Ziru assured the uneasy stallion, who pawed the ground and watched the sky, flinching when stray locusts buzzed close.

Too many folk crossing the innermost court of the White Citadel's bastion stared at Ziru and the unnerved horse while the pair waited on Anittas. And waited, and waited, walking the twenty-seven-year-old stud in circles. Sweat broke out on the horse's flanks as Zileska's two moons — Aurib and his big sister Milijun, if one honored the Ouazi view — rose early in the swarm-clouded sky.

Whatever Anittas wanted with this horse and Redoubt's youngest Forerunner, it couldn't bode well for the senior stallion of the Angat band — or for Ziru, chafing under the scrutiny of overdressed functionaries and anxious rampart guards.

Fools within and chaos without defined life in Redoubt. The vaunted Fall — when the Dead first stirred — signaled not only a fall from grace but a fall from civility and freedom, as the rotters woke. Thereafter, not gods nor men or elves or dwarves or sorcerers or slaves could be trusted. Zileska became a world ruled by the undead — except for this single stronghold, offering a last, worst hope of survival to those Doubters crowded behind its walls.

To delay the inevitable, hold the wall against all comers, Ziru had spent his teen years laboring for the Watch.

"Hafod protect us all. Grant us the courage to kill without quarter, the strength to cleave our enemies, and the wisdom to know friend from foe." The Forerunner whispered a rote prayer to

invoke his hereditary war-god, not the lone god of these Angat magisters in their five tall towers and four palatial outbuildings, a stolen inner citadel raised to futility and fear.

His god supplicated, Ziru felt better prepared to face whatever awaited him here.

Overhead, the swarms veered abruptly as ibis joined the fray. Grackles cried while geese honked, chasing the clouds of insects north. As the swarm departed, the din abated, but the Forerunner's ears still rang. Erok snorted at the clearing skies.

As if Ziru's prayer were potent, Anittas came striding in a boiled horsehide breastplate and pectoral studded with brasses from bygone wars; hair long, grizzled, braided to his breast; war-belt girt, holding iron sword and bronze claw-headed ax at his hip. Ceremonial pteruges swayed over his linen shendyt; his leather and bronze greaves barely squeaked. Menhada riches bedecked Anittas. An inspiring costume, fit for a leader of Redoubt's warrior caste, one descended from charioteers, horsemen, heroes unsurpassed in times when men and women warred on the broad steppes beyond the wall.

But no more.

Death had betrayed the Menhada; Amarsset, the divine aspect of death, turned his face from the people and let the Angat and their one god eclipse honor with wealth and power. Thence came the Fall. The arrogant Angat Church of Man fielded intolerance and fear, demeaning all gods but its own in the name of defense against the Dead.

Warriors no longer sought glorious death in battle. Undead overran the land and sea. Angat hierarchs and tyrants oppressed all others, human or not. Worst of all, death came inglorious, full of fear and suspicion, since any dead hero could rise a rotter unless cleansed by fire, mummified, eaten by a ghûl, or hacked asunder.

Ziru ought to know: he was one of the last Piraya, once the Menhada's preeminent horsemen. Anittas was his uncle by marriage.

Anittas halted before him, stony eyes weighing Forerunner and horse. Around the courtyard, quiet fell; the forecourt emptied. Unseen eyes riveted upon them made Ziru's skin crawl.

"Hail, Eastgate Watcher," Ziru said formally and bowed his head, jerking on the brass chain across the stallion's nose and threaded through his halter while the horse bugled at Anittas as if the Watch captain were a mare. *Must be the pteruges, swinging like a tail...*

Or the smell of Ziru's fear. No meeting with Anittas could be harmless; his uncle served the Law's unyielding purpose.

"Hail, Nephew," said the Watch captain. "Time to slaughter this old horse you've got here. He's settled no mare this entire season, and we can use his meat for tonight's celebration alongside the locusts, as another delicacy for the feast boards. The Angat won't keep feeding that old stud, or others like him. To them, weak horses are a luxury Redoubt can no longer afford. Take him out of here and destroy him in our abattoir."

Kill Erok? Who'd done the Watch and the Angat priceless service over so many years?

"What? I can't — you can't — this horse is beloved of our gods. He's our living heritage, one of the few we have left. I cannot..."

"You can. You will. We will. And I require your presence at tonight's celebration. You're the first new Forerunner in many a day. We'll accustom the nobles to your face and what you represent: Menhada fury resurgent. Clean up and then present yourself to me in uniform over there" — Anittas pointed to the palest building — "in the old ancestral hall, second moonset. Sentries will expect you. The Angat ladies will want to meet you. As for old Erok, it's merely one more death, boy."

Merely one more death? The problem with death in Redoubt is that you can't count on it, Anittas, and you know that. You're thirty years older than I; why aren't you wiser? This stallion has his band to protect, a reason to live on, if that matters.

But Ziru was a Forerunner now; he bit his tongue and said, "Yes, Captain." No use pleading Menhada mercy if you're only a Piraya boy, born to the steppes and a wisdom all but lost, not to this walled prison called the city of Redoubt. Piraya were nearly extinct in Redoubt, bred to raise and train horses in open country. But here Ziru lived, and here he'd stay. His grandparents had sought refuge in the city seventy years past, when there was nowhere left to run but into the arms of the rotters. Today this safe-hold was assailed by restless dead outside, while inside, humans and their slaves struggled to survive another killing summer.

This war of attrition could have only one outcome: death for all in Redoubt, and even worse fates after death for many. Maybe old Erok would be better off dead.

As if reading Ziru's mind, the bay stallion threw up his head, peeled his lips back from his teeth, and blared a challenge to Anittas' death sentence. Or called upon the horse-god. Or both.

Anittas might in truth be more than Ziru's 'uncle' — his sire — or less, no blood relation, for all Ziru knew. When his Piraya parents had died young, fighting revnants, Anittas took the toddler into his Menhada household. Yet Anittas was no friend of the Piraya, nor anyone except his cronies in the ruling Angat regime. Menhada mercy, which once came dependably from whetted blades, now seldom came at all.

Anittas scowled at the horse, wheeled with a grunt, and left the way he'd come, long-striding and strong as an ox despite his age. Mystery wrapped his uncle like a second skin, and not only because he looked so hale. Some said the Watch captain belonged to the

Menhada *Barakal*, the so-called ‘silent council,’ and still performed arcane Lagran rituals in the names of Hafod and Jirhal, mystic spirit warfare, the selfsame magics most Angat clerics blamed for the Fall.

Were rumors true, Ziru might be wading into trouble deeper than a Piraya boy bred to school horses could survive. Could Anittas truly know Ziru’s heart, his thoughts? If so, then all this was a game, some sham, some scheme.

Erok would not be dinner for the Angat and their guests this night. Ziru knew what to do, and how to do it.

He’d take the stud out the Rift Gate, to the marshland by the white cedar swamp, say he was giving Erok one last ride. He’d ridden outside Redoubt often, policing the outer wall, looking for stones piled high or dirt ramps to help rotters scale it. There he’d set the stallion free, claim the horse ran away. Other horses survived outside the wall, foraging, living as horses should. Ziru had seen them; they didn’t look undead to him.

When he arrived late at the feast, Ziru would brave Anittas’ wrath. But he had his own wrath, firing up his blood. He’d make the old stud kick him — grab the horse by the testicles if he had to, or throw himself onto handy rocks to earn some likely bruises and superficial wounds. The indolent Angat wouldn’t send Foresters on foot to hunt a horse at liberty beyond the gates.

Ziru’s tutelary god, Hafod, would decide whether Erok lived or died, found a mare or his death — but when death came, it would be an honorable one. Not the death of a prisoner, a servant or a slave, but of a free creature.

As he led the horse past armed sentries with their cornel-wood spears, they saluted the Forerunner, ‘first to fight’ against the worst this world could offer, human or inhuman. His light linen chlamys and kid leggings marked him: no shield or armor for an army skirmisher who now trains militia and defenders of the Watch.

He raised a fist, saluting sentries and the gods. What he would do today would probably cost his life, one way or another, either in the doing or the consequences of having done.

He'd give his life — for a horse who'd give its life for him — before he'd slaughter a friend to grace an Angat table and fill Angat bellies.

ANITTAS KNEW THE Piraya youth would disobey his orders. Anittas would have done the same, were he that young.

Secretly, he hoped Ziru would try to save the stud. That horse had done the Angat cavalry (when they'd had one worthy of the name) invaluable service year after year. Now all that would be forgotten, and the noble beast eaten. To Anittas' mind, the Angat and the Dead and the ghûl were little different, each eating those more honorable than themselves. The old stud Erok was much like Anittas: wary, too wise to be swayed, and thus creator of his own fate.

When next Anittas met Ziru, he'd demote the boy to census taker as punishment for disobeying orders. Which orders didn't matter. Ziru had a destiny. The war-god told Anittas what to do with this boy for reasons as yet unrevealed.

Since such was the way of it with gods, Anittas headed through hungry streets littered with locusts crunching underfoot, back to his office, his guest list, and preparations. He was responsible for security at this evening's Angat celebration of their own importance, one that everyone else deemed important must attend.

He'd rented four hairy ghûl to station at the four corners of the feast hall. They were precautionary, present largely to eat casualties, if and when the event produced some.

Anittas thought they'd need the ghûl tonight. The omen of locusts merely confirmed that the world was waxing deadly. So

said the shades whispering in his ears, and the common sense of any commander of the Watch. Trouble surely would visit the fete, with such a clutch of haughty tyrants in one place, unconcerned about attack.

Passing his sentries, he balled his fist high to catch their salutes and pretended to care. He didn't.

One way or another, before morning, blood would spill, death come sniffing round. Anittas could smell it on the sultry breeze. And, if he were lucky, a few less of his Angat overlords would see the dawn.

No better evening's entertainment could be had, if one was a follower of the war-god Hafod, as Anittas was. He touched the lapis amulet, swinging from his neck on a thong, which represented Hafod driving in his celestial chariot.

Kill and eat his horses, would they? Better they eat their brothers; worth so much less, pound for pound. Eat warhorses, despite the value of their dung and piss, their harrowing of fields, their skill in crowd control and on the battlefield? For food? For a show of wealth and power? Not without paying a price beyond their single god's wildest dreams.

Outside the Inner City's Eastgate, the doomed Doubters jostled one another, thick as thieves and true to type, where Anittas' four-dwarf palanquin waited.

If Ziru were true to his combative nature, the boy would halt this short-sighted affront to gods and men — and, in the doing, become the Eastgate Watch's latest census taker, as Anittas' gods decreed.

WHEN KHEBE SAW the young warrior come bold and late to the feast in mottled battle dress, she was lost to him ere they spoke. With a swinging gait and steady gaze he walked straight up to

fearsome Anittas, whereupon a heated conversation ensued. This young man, light-eyed, with sun-kissed skin and flowing hair, was disheveled, scraped, bruised. Some might say dirty. Khebe's aunts eyed him askance and whispered.

Everyone, in fact, stared at the half-clad Menhada stranger, asking one another the obvious questions: Who was he? From what family? What bloodline? At an Angat function of this gravity, new faces were rare and nuance ruled.

Khebe's blood required her presence in the receiving queue, where the youthful warrior should have come first, but hadn't. With her two sisters and her mother, dressed in the richest silks of their family's textile business, she stood among her bee-keeping aunts, near the fish table, between the honeyed cakes and the kraters of barley beer and watered dandelion wine. There'd been talk of red meats for this high-caste feast, but none graced the tables, where only pig and kid, fish and fowl and locust, were on offer. No matter. Khebe wasn't hungry; curiosity burned in her belly and something darker squeezed her heart.

"Who *is* he, Mother?" Khebe whispered behind her hand to Lucilla, as both her sisters giggled and her aunts moued, scandalized. In the glow of pedestaled oil panniers illuminating the hall, Khebe's two pouty sisters looked more beautiful than she. But their mother eclipsed her three daughters, with her silver hair curling above proud breasts draped in russet silk. "Will he come meet us, or not?"

"Which 'he,' Khebe?" teased Lucilla, as if she didn't know her daughter's mind.

"Mother! The young one with the Eastgate Watch captain. Who else?"

"The one with the muscles, silly," said Khebe's ash-blond sister Ankonina.

"The one with the big... arms," chortled plump Klystere, blonder yet. "You know how Khebe is about... muscles."

“Klystere, I know no such thing,” chided Lucilla, stern in her mothering. “I don’t know who he is yet, but we’ll soon find out. He’s coming down the receiving line. Look.”

Khebe noticed more about the newcomer: gray linen kirtle of the off-duty Watch; hair even darker than her own, bound in braids from his temples; straight nose; a shadow of beard on his round chin; undecorated weapons and greaves; and graceful as he bent his head to this or that Angat noble.

Then he was upon them, pressing her mother’s right hand to his forehead in obeisance. “I meet you with my blood, my pledge, my liege,” he greeted Lucilla. “I’m called Ziru.”

“The Angat and the Church of Man welcome all,” she assured him in return as befit an Angat matriarch. “Ziru, whom do you serve? Of what family, from what blood do you spring?”

Ziru. Not an Angat name, and mysterious.

“Sprung from Menhada, the Piraya lines. Nephew of the Antarlus Anittas, and a Forerunner of the Watch.” His was a formal response, unruffled, soft-voiced, succinct.

The Antarlus were an ancient warrior clan, perhaps noblest of the Menhada nobility. But *Piraya*? Khebe’s heart sank. This thrill, this heart, this strapping young man at arms... was of the Piraya? She barely knew who the Piraya were, some rare and landless offshoot of the Menhada.

He dropped Lucilla’s hand, rose tall, pledged loyalty to Klystere and Ankonion, and came to Khebe. Out of sight, string players began a lilting air.

When he touched her hand, she might have been struck by lightning. When he held that hand to his forehead, she felt faint.

Then he said, very low, “My blood, my pledge, my liege,” and Khebe’s pulse thumped in her ears.

Struck dumb, she hesitated. Her lips wouldn’t work. Until she

spoke, he must maintain his bow, holding her hand against his brow, waiting. Awkward moments stretched until she managed, “Khebe. I’m Khebe.”

Her mother glared at her; Ankonion scoffed; Klystere sprayed a giggle. Her three aunts tsked.

The Forerunner straightened up, holding her hand in his as if he held a partridge egg before releasing her and making his way down the receiving line of Angat highborn.

“Mother, what’s a Forerunner?” she murmured. She had to know.

“I assure you, Khebe, I shall find out right now.” With a swirl of silk, her mother made for the formidable Anittas, her back stiff, heels tapping the black basalt floor.

Deep in misery Khebe saw her mother, hands on hips, interrogate the Eastgate Watch captain and jut her chin toward Khebe.

Oh, no, Mother, don’t...

“Shall we eat, honored Khebe?” said a low voice behind her, and there he was: Ziru, graceful as a wolf, hazel eyes earnest. “Let me fill your plate.”

“YOU’RE THE NEW Forerunner, nephew of Anittas. A skulker... some ruffian of the Watch.” Sparse blond beard working, an Angat in cobalt robes belted with gem-encrusted weapons stepped between Ziru and Khebe and the basalt arrowloop behind her. “I’m Quillius. You can leave now, horseman. I’ll watch over Khebe. I’m her suitor; she’s safe with me. You’re the Forerunner, so run along. Angat don’t run. We stand and fight.”

“Really?” Ziru assessed the Angat in an eye-blink, more concerned with scrabbling sounds that shouldn’t be coming from outside this protected tower, audible through the arrowloop. The scuffling he’d already heard twice came a third time. Only Angat

would assume the White Citadel's highest tower could keep them safe enough to pile meat on their feast-boards while so many nearby went hungry and the Dead prowled. "I'd rethink that, and run. Now. Take Khebe with you. Warn the others."

Ziru drew his curved shortsword. "*Run*," he urged again.

Misunderstanding, face flushed, Quillius drew his own shortsword. He brandished it, whuffling the air between them. "You challenge me, Piraya? Threaten me *here*?"

"Khebe," Ziru pleaded, "run." He dodged the hostile Angat's sword and pushed the girl bodily away from the arrowloop. "Run. *Now*. Inside. Find Anittas. Tell him to rouse the guard, raise the alarm, look to the arrowloops. Rotters—"

Khebe staggered and stared, incredulous, between them.

"Are you deaf, girl? Rotters!" Ziru pushed Khebe again, harder. He'd hoped to charm her, get her alone out here where this merlon jutted, steal a kiss, maybe more. Such beauty made a man forget his duty.

But not for long.

Ziru had been discovered, at the most wrong of times, by this Angat noble with a prior claim to the girl, a ceremonial blade, and a pimple nesting in his wispy goatee.

The truculent Angat reached left-handed for Khebe, but didn't catch her, too busy waving his blade at Ziru where the alcove wall jutted, obscuring what lay beyond its corner.

"Now, Khebe... run!"

With a shrug and an accusing stare, Khebe picked up her skirts, wheeled, and ran toward Anittas and her mother, who were chatting with many-braided Zalla, she who ruled the Menhada's Barakal council.

"Angat, move away." Ziru watched the arrowloop behind the angry young noble. "I need room and a clear—"

In oozed the revnant, stench first. As if boneless, this thing, once human, squeezed itself through the narrow stone loop, all parts and pieces of it reeking and gleaming with maggots and putrefaction.

Either the Angat Quillius didn't notice, couldn't smell, or didn't care. Out of the corner of one eye, Ziru saw Khebe reach Anittas.

Ziru couldn't wait.

If he waited, there'd come another rotter, and another. The restless Dead too often hunt in packs.

"Run, Quillius, or at least step aside." No time to beg, or reason; Ziru's order, sharp and low, hung between him and the Angat lordling.

Instead of heeding him, the Angat feinted at Ziru anew.

This time, Ziru met the Angat's sword-stroke, caught the blade with his.

Quillius' leaf-bladed iron sword, double-edged and far better for stabbing than Ziru's curved one, ran down the arc of Ziru's bronze blade and, redirected, neatly sliced its owner's thigh.

Blood ran down the Angat's leg. No chance now to keep the undead at bay. The smell of blood flowing amounted to an invitation.

As Quillius staggered back, shocky and off-balance, Ziru barged forward, shouldering the Angat from his path to engage the revnant emerging from the arrowloop.

This rotter had at least two hands, a chest, a head with blood-red eyes... and another pair of eyes shone behind it, ready to climb in after its fellow.

As the Forerunner struck high and sidelong — to catch the rotter across what should be a neck and shoulder and separate head and arm from trunk — Quillius leapt toward him.

In a single down-stroke, Ziru's curved blade flew through both the Angat and the foremost maggoty rotter behind him, catching Quillius first, cleaving the Angat's throat and collarbone and then that of the Dead, severing two heads and two arms.

Quillius couldn't scream. He burbled. Both portions of him dropped in his tracks.

The rotter behind the first yowled as its riven brother lurched and fell forward onto Quillius in his puddle of blood.

This second reanimated corpse, now half through the arrowloop, paused to consider first the newly dead bodies at Ziru's feet, then snap at a solitary locust buzzing by.

Lucky for Ziru that most revnants were dimwits.

He knew better than to step in Dead blood or let it spatter him, but in this skirmish neatness didn't count. Ziru straddled Quillius's body and hacked the distracted revnant in the arrowloop to pieces methodically, splitting the chest, spilling the brains.

Chunks of this rotter, teeming with phosphorescent maggots, fell inward, atop the dead Angat and the first butchered undead.

A third revnant stuck a spindly arm like a giant spider's leg through the arrowloop while Ziru hacked the second rotter to pieces with his blade.

Flattening himself against the wall to the left of the arrowloop, Ziru amputated the first spiderlike four-jointed arm, then a second waving arm that followed, and skewered the pieces, pushing them outside through the loop.

Only then did he hear men behind him yelling, and turn.

Anittas and three others, weapons drawn, were rushing the alcove, yelling for reinforcements, while horrified guests gawked behind them. Anittas bawled orders to clear the hallways and man the doors and guard the guests, and still others to send defenders to the ramparts.

How many Dead were crawling along the towers mattered no less, to Ziru's way of thinking, than how many had already found their way inside.

The Forerunner stepped carefully around the gory mess; undead blood and maggots and putrid flesh could make one ill or worse.

"I'll go, Watcher. Give me three men, torches, hooks, and rope. We'll pull them off or dump flaming oil on them. I—"

Anittas glared at him. "Boy, you'll go nowhere. What have you done here? Forerunner, answer me."

Khebe raced up to Anittas, pulling on his arm, sobbing.

Ziru considered the crowd's eyes on him, the girl with tears on her cheeks, and answered Anittas: "I killed two rotters, wounded a third. This Angat got in my way, died in the scuffle. Now let me finish the job. I need to get outside, Watcher."

The three Angat revelers with Anittas were shouting their own slurred orders so that the Eastgate Watch captain scowled. Instead of ordering men to the other arrowloops, one noble called "*To me*," the second demanded an escort out of the hall, and the third summoned sentries to the doors.

"Please, Watcher. I need to scout the grounds." Once the words left his lips, Ziru knew them to be the wrong words, but what would have been the right ones?

"I said you'll stay here with me, Forerunner." One hand on his hip, Anittas glared disapprovingly from Ziru to the pile of bloody remains, and back. "And don't look at me that way."

But Ziru's hot blood spoke for him. "Stay with you? If this tower's twenty loops each let in two or three rotters, by now they're pushing through the corridors. Keeping all these tasty Doubters confined in here will mean their deaths."

"Silence. You killed an Angat, and admit you did. Under the circumstances, I'm within the law to banish you or indenture you without trial." Anittas voice boomed. Ziru's uncle meant the crowd to hear every word; he wanted control of the situation... and the Forerunner's fate. "But I won't. In penance, you'll serve as my census taker until I'm satisfied you've learned your lesson." He turned to the three fops with him and spoke first in some Magisterium verbiage

Ziru didn't know, then in Angati, louder, when those two argued. "Get Takers and ghûl to clean up this mess before these rotters rise again and chase us around the feast-boards."

"With that Angat boy Quillius in the lead," Ziru said under his breath.

"What did I tell you? Not one more word, boy." Anittas stared-slapped him hard across the face. "Stand quiet, stand ready."

An old army saying that meant 'danger is near at hand.'

Ziru dropped his eyes, bowed his head, and saluted, then wiped his sword on a handy wall hanging before he sheathed it. He could hear Anittas' low orders to the nobles with him and Khebe's muffled sobbing that none of this was Ziru's fault. A dead Angat lay mixing bodily fluids with a rotter, because of him. Death, never to be trusted, lay on the White Citadel's floor, seeping into every crevice in the basalt, every heart, every mind here to witness. The corpsemen would soon sort the pieces of the damned from the pieces of the Angat. What would happen then to Quillius, the young Angat noble already bathed in restless blood and touched by restless maggots, none could say for certain.

What would befall Ziru, Anittas had summarily decreed: Census-taking in Redoubt was low-caste work, dangerous duty, harsh punishment. But Anittas spoke for the law, could have banished him from the Inner City, enslaved him on the spot, or expelled him from the Watch, each worse than census taking. If Ziru had not already defied Anittas by freeing the stallion beyond the wall, the Watcher might have been more lenient, or at least not announced Ziru's punishment before the most powerful people in Redoubt.

All this in front of Khebe, who peered at him from behind Anittas with round eyes nearly as red from weeping as a rotter's. After this debacle, she'd want no more to do with him; he'd gone from hero of the Watch to lowly census taker in one unforeseeable fracas.

Nor would Ziru patrol ramparts this night, leading a squad to pour burning oil on climbing remnants, or cut more to pieces. A Forerunner is first to fight. But by Anittas' decree, Ziru's Forerunner days were over. From now on he'd not be doing what he did best, but trudging through angry streets taking names and counting heads.

Nevertheless, Khebe kept watching him, as if somehow he could make everything wrong here come right.

"TMA DOLT, an imbecile," Ziru confided to the marsh grass and the stream and the stallion snuffling the back of his neck. "I should have anticipated that the Angat lordling would attack me. I should have taken him seriously."

Erok snorted in Ziru's hair, then at his cheek.

"At least *you're* thriving." He stroked the old warhorse's velvety muzzle. He'd smuggled a bag of oats out here, and with his free hand, held it up to the horse's face. The morning was muggy; tiny bugs rose in clouds from the swampy grass if Ziru moved too fast. "Now, Erok, I'll give you these oats and you'll tell me what to do." No war-gods would heed Ziru's prayers, nor entreaties from a lowly census taker coming empty-handed to an altar forgotten since ancient times.

He sat on the altar stone by the mud-caked horse. Horses were wiser than men; the clouds of insects had no interest in a horse coated with mud. In the undergrowth between swamp cedars, near the flax among the berries of the surrounding bog, he glimpsed another horse's head, black, with leery eyes and the longest whiskers he'd ever seen.

Ziru rose up, sluiced insects and dirt off the stone and poured oats on it. He should have brought some olive oil, fit libation for the war-god. But of course he hadn't. Wiping chaffy hands on his linen tunic, he told the old stud his entire tale of woe as he studied the black horse and Erok began to lick the pile of oats.

At least Erok had found a friend. Horses are herd animals, much like men. This black horse, in the dappled light between the swamp cedars behind the altar, had a fine head, gray eyebrows, tipped-in ears. She was old, but Erok had found a mare. "Build a band, old man. Make a new life." He patted the stud on the shoulder. "A better life. And someday, a better death."

Erok threw up his head and snorted, spraying Ziru with frothy oats. The black mare whinnied and disappeared into the shadows beneath the white cedars.

"Is that what you seek out here, young man? A better death?" said a phlegmy voice right behind him.

Ziru stiffened, then forced his muscles to relax. The restless seldom spoke; he didn't even know if they could. But then, who or what snuck up on him here? Embarrassed at having been surprised, hands well away from his weapons, he turned.

A face older than stone confronted him. Blue eyes, filmed with gray, looked him over. Stringy hair hung down to bony hips. A churlish mouth twitched as the stooped hag took one step toward him, then another.

"What are you?" he said, angry now that he saw this intruder was frail and unarmed.

"Me? I'm your last hope, boy. You are Piraya? You look it. I heard you all were dead."

"Not yet dead. But working on it." He looked harder. "What are you? What line? What blood?"

This crone wore hemp sandals; a rope belt held a leather pouch over her linen shift. "Me? I am Gihardu, here to tell you that death will come seeking you, creeping up on you, and that all you love be lost."

"You're too late with that warning, Gihardu." Demented? A witch? A ghost? Some new kind of undead, about to launch itself

at him? He grasped his sword's pommel, widened his stance. Who could say? Did any Gihardu live these days? If this were one, she'd be older than dirt. It hardly mattered. If this hag had heard about the tower fracas, so what? Everybody else knew. "All love's lost, and more. Already happened."

"You shall wish it so, when doom comes. Death dogs you, Piraya boy." The witch gurgled, annoyed. "The worst be yet to come. Take heed."

"You take heed. I've nothing left to lose. And the worst is always yet to come. What name have you, Gihardu, so I can say I met a ghost? No Gihardu live inside Redoubt's wall."

"Because we're wise. You be wise. I brought you warning. Heed it or be damned."

"Worse damned. I'm damned already. Once I served as a Forerunner. Now I'm a census taker. I'll take your name and add it to my list."

"Remember, Forerunner, all you love be lost..."

"I told you that's happened already. If you're some near-immortal mystic, you'd know that." Old shrew, mangy and mad and stinking worse than a rotter.

Ziru reached into his purse to get his slate. When he looked up, no overripe female stood there, only Erok's new friend, the whiskey old black mare, stamping her feet to keep away the flies, gazing at the oats Erok had left on the altar stones and scattered about on boggy ground.

The black mare snorted at him and raised her muzzle high, tail lashing, white-walled eyes gleaming. He stood between her and Erok's oats. So he backed away, hands high, shoulders dropped. "Have the oats, horse goddess."

The mare flicked her ears and walked right by him to the oats on the altar, as if she were truly a horse-goddess and this were truly

an altar frequented by gods, out in the bog and the swamp amid the flax and the berries.

He left her to it and went back the way he'd come, toward the wall.

He thought again about the Gihardu witch. No use recording her presence; he shouldn't be out here, and everyone knew no Gihardu remained in Redoubt.

All you love be lost.

He'd tried to see Khebe, but her mother refused. Twice. He'd asked Anittas why, and the Eastgate Watcher said, "You ask me why? You killed an Angat. They won't forget. Stay away from the Angat, and far away from that Angat girl. You've caused me trouble enough."

So maybe the witch told him true, but maybe not. She never did give him her name.

KHEBE SNUCK INTO the hot, moonlit night with currency in her purse and rebellion on her mind. She'd bought silence where she must. Her nanny helped her into a wicker basket with raw silk under her and over her, and off she went to her father's loading docks in a dwarf-drawn wagon, unseen and unrepentant.

Her house slaves had found out where Ziru went after work, where census takers gathered, out in the rough of the city, a place called Stoa's Throat near the Eastgate headquarters of the Watch.

She peered through the weave of the wicker basket in which she hid. She'd never been so far east, never thought to bump and jostle her way through streets where pickpockets and whores and farmers from the volcanic terraces gathered. People in tribal dress cursed folk in rags; tattooed street gangs roamed in packs, shoving and snarling at each other, fighting for breathing room on a night too warm to spend indoors. The smell from oily torches mixed

poorly with onions and garbage and unwashed humans and elves and dwarves and ghûl.

Khebe had never been so close to the outer wall of Redoubt, the city once called Elldimek by dwarves lifting blocks twice their size to dizzying heights. Here the outer wall towered, close and tall, blotting out the stars and biting the night in half, a reminder that all within lived under constant threat.

Khebe needed no reminder. She needed to see Ziru, to apologize, to explain.

Then her wagon stopped. “Goodly *era*,” came a dwarf’s voice, “we are where you wish to be.” The wicker lid of her hamper creaked open. Her chamber slaves, tonight her bearers, made a fleshy stair which she descended, from back to back to back to back, until she stood on the filthy street.

Now she spied the swinging sign, *The Stoat’s Throat*, with a painted stoat sitting on its haunches, mouth wide below a streaming cask.

“Stay, Decit,” she told her driver, and knew he would be here when she returned. Already her hamper was shut tight and her four personal slaves guarding the wagon.

The noise and smells and crowds overwhelmed her. Could she brave, alone, this smoky den of rough men and women? She’d dressed for it, as if for a masquerade, in a cowled cloak of tatted linen that reached to her ankles. Fear doubled her heart’s thump. She must press on by herself, or turn right now and leave. She couldn’t venture unremarked into this place with her slaves picking up her cloak’s hem. In places like these, hired help could be bought for a pittance, and slaves for even less, hired for the promise of a full belly and clean water.

“Good m’lady?” said Decit, deferentially disapproving, torchlight from the doorway dancing on his broad nose and swarthy skin. “Anything else?”

"I'll not be long." He'd marked her hesitation; she couldn't let her slaves see her fear. She strode bravely forth, unaccompanied.

Normally her guards would have accompanied her, one before, one behind, one on either side. But not this time, not here. With a deep gulp of rancid air, she wove her way through a sweaty throng to the bar's doorway, bumping one and then another; pushing and being pushed, collecting snarls and curses. How could all these people ever find beds?

Inside, the tavern held so many folk she couldn't see beyond them, over them, or around them. "Excuse me; sorry; please make way," she repeated, squeezing and blundering her way toward a bar four deep with men and women in Eastgate Watch attire.

The crew at the bar rippled; some turned toward her; heads bent. When she sidled between two, then two more, to reach the bar, she couldn't get the barkeep's attention but a baritone asked, "What are you supposed to be? Or are you lost? For a fee, me and mine'll take you across town, where such as you belongs."

So much for her disguise. Still, she was upon it now; she couldn't fret another night. She must find him. "I seek Ziru the Forerunner."

Hoots and guffaws answered her.

"Too late for that," one said.

"I'm a Forerunner, will I do?" rasped another over a crusty cup.

Then the baritone belonging to a hairy jaw said, "Yes, Lady Angat. If your ladyship'll come right this way..." He waved his fingers. Several of his fellows smirked; one woman looked her up and down and offered to service her for free, whatever that might mean.

Khebe had no choice but to traipse along behind this apparently friendly man, hairy and scarred and stinking like onion grass, who parted the crowd with his protruding belly and reached back a huge hand for her to grasp. Behind her, someone else said, "Keep moving."

These two guided her among the crowd, the stout baritone before her, the other voice behind, and through a door at the rear of the bar.

Khebe nearly gasped the fresher air. Less than a dozen folk huddled here, around a hewn rock that served as a table.

Her escort raised a hand, fist closed. “Ziru here? Census taker, you want this?”

Then she saw Ziru among the crowd, lithe in loose pants and open tunic.

He frowned and came toward her.

What had she done?

“I have her. I’ll get her back where she belongs, Mida. Take my place, and the meal at it.”

Every eye in the open courtyard stared at her and through her as Ziru came close and took her by the arm. “This way, now, if you please.”

The mud-brick courtyard wall included an arched doorway she hadn’t noticed. He slapped the latch and pushed open the door, still holding her as if she’d flee.

Ziru pulled her through, closing the door behind them.

To her amazement, they stood alone in a hidden court amid a grove of young fruit trees miraculously unharmed by the locust swarm. Trees in Redoubt were rare and protected. This was remarkable, real wealth among so many worthless tenements in a blighted canton.

“Now what are you doing here, Khebe? Trouble at home? A rotter incursion in your bedroom? A fight with your parents? What?”

He did blame her. She knew that now. Her eyes filled with tears. He still held her by the arm. She half folded, half fell against him; her mouth met his salty naked breast. She was trembling. All this time, she’d known what to say. Now she didn’t. “Ziru...”

“Hafod forgive me. Girl...” Then his lips were in her hair, his hands under her cloak, and for a moment her dreams of him and reality merged.

“Khebe, you can’t be here,” he said thickly. “I can’t touch you like this.” But he did.

Then he was lifting her up, her back against the brick, her thighs over his. His hands went everywhere they shouldn’t be, her calves around his buttocks.

“Ziru, please, please,” she moaned.

“Shh.”

“I love you,” she whispered, to his neck, to his chin; her breasts were burning and something she’d never felt before filled her up. “I love you like the stars, like the moons. I can’t...”

“Shh.”

Inside her, something tore. She whimpered, but then he pulled her closer, hands under her buttocks, and her whole body pulsed as he thrust deep into her. And again, urgently.

Then he stopped, still holding her, her legs wrapped around him. “We really shouldn’t have done this. Now what? Your family hunts me down?” He lowered her to the ground, arms still around her. “Look at me.”

She did. Moonlight caressed his grave face, his gentle eyes. She couldn’t think what to say.

“We can’t,” he repeated.

“We did. Ziru, I love you better than the moons love the sky. I’ll talk to my mother.”

“*Gods, no.* I’ll take you home. Explain. I never thought you’d be—”

“Chaste? Yes, of course. Until my husband’s touch. It’s—”

“And unprotected. You’re for some noble like that Angat, not for such as me,” he said, kissing her forehead, her nose, her cheeks between the words. “Now, I’ll get you home, then tell Anittas. He’ll know what I—”

“No,” she said.

He pulled back, his head cocked slightly as she explained. “I want to wake with you, sleep with you, live my days with you. Let’s hide somewhere, make a life together. After all, I am highborn. I have my dowry, my rights.”

“Impossible,” he said in an odd voice. “No chance, within the wall.”

“Possible, I’m certain. Piraya aren’t lowborn. To avoid the shame—”

He looked up, then around, then cursed. “I heard something. Get behind me, Khebe.” A different voice, this, like the voice he’d used when he’d told her to run from the White Citadel’s arrowloop.

He had no weapon. She saw his eyes search the ground, as if he’d find one there. He stooped toward a pile of refuse, sticks and pieces of stone.

Something hit Khebe hard, in the neck. She screamed and then couldn’t. Something had her throat, her arms. She struggled, but her feet left the ground.

Blood rushed in her ears. All she could see was blackness.

“YOU WHAT?” ANITTAS couldn’t believe his ears. Then he looked a second time at the census taker — the braced stance, the set jaw, the cold eyes, the balled fists at Ziru’s sides — and fury filled him. “I told you never to see that Angat girl again, and you interpret that as permission to take her maidenhead and lose her to some shadowy rotter, all in one night? If you weren’t my nephew...”

Anittas broke off with a snarl.

Shoulders squared, staring straight ahead, Ziru said, “I’d have married her. Made good.”

Anittas scoffed. “You’d have married her. You’re daft. What would an Angat family want with a Piraya as an heir-sire? At least

you haven't got four other wives, yet... that I know of. I suppose next you'll tell me it was true love between you two."

"Close enough, Watcher."

"Tell me about this rotter, and why you couldn't defend the girl you say you loved."

The Piraya's voice came hoarse, from deep in his chest. "I'm a census taker, remember? I don't carry weapons at night. I heard something. I was looking for a stick, a stone, a piece of metal, anything. The rotter came down from above — you know the Stoa's back court — or dropped from those trees out back, and grabbed her, too fast. I got Mida and some others; we looked for her, all along the rooftops and in the streets. It didn't drop her. It's still got her, as far as I know." This time, Ziru's voice shook. "So you might want to tell her family. If you don't want me to do it. Somebody should."

"I warrant they know by now. She had to get all the way over to the Stoa unmolested. Her servants know where she disappeared. But none of her slaves saw you, did they?" Another dead Angat, due to this Piraya boy. His mother would have been crushed.

"They waited out front. I saw none of them. None of them saw us... saw me."

"Thank Hafod. That's something. Go to your quarters, change into a decent uniform. Come back here straight away. Go nowhere else. Talk to no one else. Make a list of who saw you with her. Bring it here." This one ached for justice for the girl and punishment for his crime. Anittas would see to that, by and by. "Bring your weapons, climbing gear. We're going hunting for stolen Angat girls and swift arboreal rotters."

Anittas dismissed his new census taker with a disgusted wave and no salute. The war-god Hafod had been canny: This Ziru sparked trouble enough to topple the status quo, and some deserving fools along with it.

The Eastgate Watcher took a deep breath, smelled change upon the wind, and grinned.

IS SHE REALLY dead? Khebe? Gone? Permanently dead? Or will she rise again, the most beautiful rotter ever seen in Redoubt? Ziru wanted to retch, but couldn't.

She'd loved him, so she said. And he'd almost certainly got her killed. Cruel death, but a real death brings peace. If she was undead, his responsibility was clear: he'd hunt her down and kill her. He needed to know. He had to find her.

As he readied himself to go searching for her with Anittas, he thanked the war-god. Erok's handful of oats on an abandoned altar, and now Anittas himself would join the search for Khebe, help finish her if it came to that.

And it must. But kill this girl, the only one ever to touch his heart? Hunt her down like an animal — worse, like a revnant? Like the revnant she might well be?

No one knew how long it took to become a rotter; sometimes it happened quickly, sometimes not.

He got out his Forerunner panoply: his bronze single-edged blade, his claw-headed war ax, his quilted linen. Anittas wouldn't mind. He'd need to be prepared. He even got his throwing spear and sling; his leggings; soft boots, better than sandals for climbing.

Then he sat a moment on his census taker's bed in the barracks of the Eastgate stronghold of the Watch, waiting out the nausea that overswept him.

He should have told Khebe that he loved her too. Now it didn't matter.

Or did it? He'd never been in love, if love this was. If what he felt was love, why did anger rise in him, grabbing his throat?

He nearly retched, sitting very still as the room began to spin.
His gorge rose high, rose higher.

Love didn't matter. Wouldn't, unless he died trying to find her. Did rotters fall in love? If Khebe became undead, and he did too, then what? Did the Dead care about anything but killing and consuming?

With Anittas himself in the search, Ziru might find out.

As soon as he left his quarters to join the Watcher and hunt down Khebe or her corpse, his hands stopped shaking.

Love in Redoubt cost more than anyone could bear to pay. Rage, on the other hand, came free of charge. Wrath burned in him, hot enough to sear him clean of guilt, of remorse, of even fear.

But when he'd hunted the day to dusk and the moons to setting with Anittas and his best scouts, and turned up no sign of Khebe except a bit of blood in the dirt behind the Stoa, Anittas took Ziru with him to see Khebe's parents.

In their sumptuous residence, the Forerunner's chest tightened until he could hardly breathe. Would Anittas reveal Ziru's part in this tragedy to the bereaved family?

Lucilla wept, and Khebe's sisters Ankonion and Klystere tore their coifed blonde hair and wailed laments to their one god, whom the Venmir called Miraab.

Maybe if they had more gods, these Angat would have better luck.

Walking out of there at Anittas' side, Ziru recalled Erok and his black mare at the altar in the marsh and the Gihardu witch: "All you love be lost."

"What?" Anittas spat.

"Nothing, Watcher."

The hag's words would haunt Ziru every moment of every day until he found Khebe or found his own death, or both.

IN THE DARK, someone cried in pain.

The crying made her sad. It hurt to listen. The pathetic sobs disturbed her. The wails of grief made her angry. She wanted to tell the moaning voice to stop. When she opened her mouth to say so, the moaning ceased.

Then she knew. That voice was her own. The pain was her own. Her head hurt. Her throat hurt. Her heart hurt. Her most female parts hurt. And the deepest part of her hurt most of all.

Where was she? Why did she hurt? Why was she sad?

Then she remembered: She was Khebe.



TWO MOONS AND RED BREAD

NATANIA BARRON

BAHARA SLIPPED INTO Sultaar Inunwa's kitchens well after the feast preparations were completed, dark and silent as a passing shadow, through a cupboard. Such a night of festivities had left the expansive room in a strange state, the smell of heady spices and hard-working bodies lingering long after. And always the heat from the stoves, residual. Bahara couldn't remember a time when she'd found herself in the kitchens late at night and the stoves were cold. There were but a handful of hours when they *weren't* stoked.

The thief took a deep breath when Ugly Wisaal wasn't where she was supposed to be, and slunk up back against the wall. The woman was her best way into the palace, and only trusted connection in this part of Redoubt. She could almost call Ugly Wisaal a friend. Bahara thought they might even be of an age, but it was hard to tell with all her scars. She could have been twenty; she could have been fifty.

Even without the scars, though, Bahara doubted Ugly Wisaal could ever have been called beautiful. Or even plain. Hers was a face so ugly she was ignored, and that was what made her valuable to Bahara.

What made Bahara valuable to Ugly Wisaal was commerce of another sort. In her line of business — technically smuggling, she supposed — Bahara's greatest strength was finding out what people wanted, and what she could provide that no one else could. In Ugly Wisaal's case it was three things: friendship, cardamom, and erotic stories.

If one looks hard enough, every man and woman wants a specific commodity. Deal that, and they will trust you implicitly. They will mistake your knowledge for friendship, and dole out much in return.

They were the words of her teacher, the woman who had given her instruction in the arts of concealment and theft from the youngest of ages, when she and her orphaned brother Mahir were nothing more than street urchins. While Mahir learned the healing arts, Bahara stole away to the house of a woman whose name she'd never learned.

One day, her teacher was gone. The house reduced to cinders.

Bahara relaxed when she saw Ugly Wisaal emerge carrying a small loaf of bread. The ugly woman wiped sweat from her brow but looked otherwise her usual self. Expression was not her strong point, what with half of her face having been burned and melted so long ago.

"Well, I hear the first feast was a raucous success," Bahara said, slipping out of the shadows and going immediately to the cupboard.

Ugly Wisaal startled slightly, then relaxed, watching the smuggler rifle through her wares. "A perfect time to nip and slip," Ugly Wisaal agreed, using Bahara's own favorite turn of phrase.

The kitchen was one of her favorite places to find the rare and exotic. There always was one more cupboard to pillage, one more

corner to be explored where some expensive, long-forgotten item had shifted to the very back. And whereas most feasts would have required much in the way of measuring and rationing, the feast for Husam, the eldest son of the sultaar's sister, spared no expense. Theirs was an important bond, and it was reported that Husam would be picking a bride from among those offered at the fete.

But Bahara was hungry. And no promise of rare seasoning was more powerful than her stomach. Before Ugly Wisaal could argue, Bahara snatched the loaf of bread from the cook's arms and took a big bite, grinning. It was part of their banter back and forth, and usually Ugly Wisaal allowed her the insult without so much as a peep and a shy smile. Bahara was a great measure faster than Ugly Wisaal, and it never hurt to remind the woman of her strengths. Just so she didn't think she'd gone soft.

On every day before this, Ugly Wisaal had laughed and gone to the cupboard and retrieved her small store of honey essence, and given Bahara a tiny smear of it. And Bahara always acted as if the treat were not so immense, but it was. For her part, the taste of the sweet bread was beyond any treasure she'd ever stolen. Which was oftentimes confusing for her, but something she buried deep with all the other conflicting thoughts and emotions she came upon. It was the one useful habit she'd learned from her crippled brother, Mahir.

But today, Ugly Wisaal shouted and let out a high screech like some sort of crazed bird, and flapped over to her, clumsily snatching the bread out of Bahara's hands. Bahara could have kept the bread from Wisaal, but decided quickly not to.

Something was not right.

"What is this, sister? Some moon madness?" Bahara laughed, giving up easily as soon as she saw the look of concern in Ugly Wisaal's watery brown eyes.

Bring laughter whenever there is space, Bahara's teacher had told her. The simple trust a laughing man.

"You don't..." stammered Ugly Wisaal, her lips trembling. "That bread, it..."

"No one will ever notice," Bahara assured her. "There was enough food to ensure that half the city will be wanting for a week. If a little bite of bread goes missing, well, they can't hurt me if they can't find me. And they've never found me yet."

"No, no, no," Ugly Wisaal said, collapsing on one dilapidated stool and rubbing her forehead. "You don't understand, my friend."

"You're right!" Bahara said brightly, starting to worry that something truly was wrong but not allowing the thoughts to change her smile or her trajectory. "I haven't told you my last conquest, yet. It began with Prince Imal, two of his oiled concubines, and..."

"I don't want to hear any of your made-up stories!" Ugly Wisaal shouted. "You're going to die!"

Bahara closed her mouth, even though she was already preparing another lie. She had been quite certain Ugly Wisaal bought into her ruse, and the realization cut her short.

"We'll all die at some point," was all Bahara managed, albeit half-heartedly. If Wisaal had poisoned the bread — which was a stretch considering the woman's general inability to follow most recipes to the letter, let alone a poison — Bahara was likely to know the antidote, or had already been hardened against it.

Bahara swallowed and, as of yet, could sense nothing off about the food she'd just ingested.

Panic and fear are merely secondary languages of the human mind, her teacher had told her. Learn to translate, else you will fall prey to the motion.

"No, the bread. The *bread*. It had... it had my blood in it," Ugly Wisaal said, cradling the misshapen loaf in her hands like

an infant. “I was going to give it to Misk, to make him eat it. To make me feel...”

“Magic is a dream, and I will not die today,” said Bahara. She noted more tears in the woman’s face and knelt down, offering the corner of her sleeve. “He didn’t hurt you again, did he?” she asked.

Misk was the kitchen officiant, and he was infamous for hounding poor Wisaal whenever he could. He treated her ugliness as an affront to his station, even if he was as hideous as a mangy rat, himself.

“Not to me, but to one of my new scullery maids. Kiyah. He did things to her he wouldn’t to me, and now they’ve taken her away to be cleansed, but really she will be...” the cook sputtered her words and let out a trembling sob. “And I poured every bit of hate I had into that bread, and I was going to use whatever magic I could muster. Hush, I know it’s daft to even think I could be powerful enough.”

While Ugly Wisaal’s tale was concerning on some level — Bahara was surprisingly protective of the woman even if she didn’t show it — the thief was relieved to hear that the cook’s concerns were mere whimsy. Just the hopes of a simple mind. A sad mind, really. Ugly Wisaal was a woman always overlooked, and for that reason a useful tool for Bahara. But for a brief moment, she was truly concerned that there was something to worry about.

Magic. Her brother Mahir would scold her for even thinking such a thing.

“Bahara?” Wisaal asked.

Bahara smiled, charming and warm, the way she had been taught. *Let the smile meet your eyes*, her teacher had told her. *Soften everywhere but your heart and people will believe you.*

“How long has Misk terrorized you?” she asked the cook. “How many years has he embarrassed you... poked fun at you... shamed you?”

Wisaal's hairless brow crinkled and she looked away, wiping the snot from her nose with the back of her hand. "I don't remember him ever not being there. That's why I wanted to... seek revenge."

Bahara put out her bottom lip and shook her head. "But my dear, dear friend. You should know that if you wanted revenge, you only had to ask."

"But how can you help?" asked Ugly Wisaal. "You're just a petty thief."

Weave your lies with truth, and they will make the sturdiest cloaks.

"Meet me back here in an hour," Bahara said, patting the cook on the shoulder. "And we will run that man down to the flagstones."



STEALING FROM HER brother was always the hardest. He was a cripple, and had been since an unfortunate accident whilst trying to woo a woman. He did not end up with the girl, so the story went, and instead was taken in by the local apothecary, who was two sneezes from death. In repayment for knitting Mahir's legs back together, he had to take on the business.

The business was in shambles. And even after the apothecary died two years later, it had taken Mahir three years to cancel out the apothecary's debts and begin making any kind of living for himself and his sister. If you could call it such a thing. Supplies for an apothecary in Redoubt were incredibly scarce, and while Bahara could steal for him if needs be, she also never wanted to draw undue attention. Their lives were worth more than the efficacy of his cures.

Bahara knew that most people didn't even call Mahir by his name, but rather as, "The Crippled Apothecary" which, she supposed, was slightly better than their nearest competitor, known as "The Sweaty Apothecary." Her brother was a decent businessman, and a gentle soul. He still took time every day to hobble by the

house of his once beloved and catch her children running amok or glance at her cheek as she passed the window.

Mahir was predictable. She was not. They were two moons in orbit. Bahara made a habit of lying almost every day of her life. Her lies were her bed, her comfort, her solace. She even lied to herself. About not loving the boy down the street when she was twelve, about not feeling remorse, about not feeling guilty about lying. Lies upon lies.

Lies are our only commodity, her teacher had said. Learn them, love them, and they will be your strength in the darkness.

Bahara lied to Mahir because it kept him safe. Because he was an honest man who had spent most of his life crippled — for love! — and he didn't deserve to know. He thought Mahir worked in the sulbaar's stables, which explained her typically bedraggled, often scratched and bruised state. But her choice of the stables had to do with the fact that he would never be able to access them. His legs simply would not permit it, and no one would allow him — an apothecary of only middling abilities — ever through the front door. Horses could enter easily, but for the average person many stairs were required.

She was feeling quite stuffed with lies as she turned the corner down their row, expecting to see the familiar yellow extinguished from the shop. It was their dwelling and their place of work, their beds threadbare hammocks strung in the back storage room, a small kitchen fire that doubled as a cauldron base for Mahir.

But the fire was lit. It was early enough in the morning that nothing but the moons shone, but that didn't stop Bahara from reaching for one of her knives. The hope was to get more of them at home, slipping in and out before Mahir knew what had happened, but that plan clearly was not going to come to fruition.

Bahara slowed her breathing and cleared her mind. There was still the back entrance, and Mahir would be none the wiser if she

kept focused. The poison she needed was oft forgotten...

Quick as lightning, Bahara scaled the ramshackle walls behind their row, up and over and up and over again, her feet scarcely making a noise upon the sandy, dry stones. Once the Eastside might have been lovely here; as a child she had found bits and pieces of mosaic under cobblestones. But now she was lucky if her feet met the same kind of ground in four steps.

She came up short, though, when she entered the skinny alley behind the apothecary shoppe. Her brother's voice came harsh, skittering across the heavy walls. Not intended for her, no, but intercepted nonetheless.

"You said the shipment was going to arrive in the morning. I've been waiting all day, and you're damned right I want a discount," said Mahir in a tone Bahara had almost never heard him use. He was angry.

"The feast is tomorrow, you understand," said a second voice, a woman. Her voice was low, raspy. Almost playful. "We have a thousand different obligations around town, Mahir. I would have been here sooner if I could have."

Mahir sighed. He didn't have to say the woman's name because Bahara knew it already: Jaria, the smuggler. A woman she'd had many dealings with of her own. She was sharp as ghûl teeth, but even more wicked. She dealt primarily in poison and a variety of essences she claimed were gleaned from corpse refinement. Bahara was fairly certain Jaria was a charlatan, but she had claimed to have performed some miracle for some member of the sultaar's family, and so she never seemed to be out of business.

Then hands upon leather, wool. Drawn breath. Mahir's voice went low, growling. Insistent. More heavy breathing. A gasp of pleasure.

Know the story first, then write your own, Bahara's teacher had told her.

The front door would be easier, then. She had at least ten minutes.

UGLY WISAAL WAS late, but given her lack of general attention to detail it didn't worry Bahara. The kitchen was busy enough of a place, and no one would notice anything out of the ordinary in the hustle and bustle.

"I fell asleep," the cook explained. "I'm sorry."

Bahara wanted to make a snide comment, considering she only managed a handful of hours of sleep in a given day, but she smiled instead. Wisaal held an innate talent Bahara had to work years to attain: invisibility.

"No need to apologize, my friend," Bahara said. "I had business to attend to, as it were."

"You got everything you needed?" Wisaal asked.

"I took care of everything required," Bahara replied, her throat tightening. She had not told Wisaal that she was getting anything. She had simply told her that she was to meet her in an hour. "What does a woman need other than her own skill and luck to exact revenge?"

Wisaal looked confused. "Must have been a dream, then," she muttered. "Thought you went to visit your brother."

Bahara's stomach could not have gone colder if someone had poured ice directly into it.

Never let them in. Construct your cloak of lies and live in it so well they never see the flesh beneath.

"Such a strange notion," Bahara said. "If you're too tired, Wisaal, we can always do this another time. Surely there will be another feast, another celebration in, what, a year? Ten years? If the meager crops hold, if the walls do not crumble..."

Wisaal was still capable of blushing profusely, but the result was a mottled mess on her face, somehow deepening her ugliness. And with that shame, embarrassment, Bahara felt her own face go hot. Felt a strange memory, hot breath on her neck, oily skin and ragged teeth. Misk.

It was such a strange, precise memory Bahara took a step back, hitting the edge of the cupboard, as a scullery maid shoved past.

“No, no,” Wisaal backtracked. “I mean it. I won’t be missed.” She was wiping at her eyes with the backs of her hands, pressing at her cheeks where the mottled spots were only now beginning to fade. “I just don’t understand where we’re going. Misk won’t be in the kitchens...”

“...until at least noon,” Bahara finished, half a whisper. Wisaal hadn’t told her that. She’d known.

“My friend—” Wisaal began, but Bahara hushed her with her hands. They didn’t have much time if they were going to do this right.

“Now I show you my great secret. The world within the walls.”

BAHARA HAD FIRST found the meandering tunnels in the walls of the sultaar’s palace quite by accident. Infiltrating the place was one of her last tests as an apprentice to her unnamed teacher, and it had taken her weeks upon weeks of observation and mind-numbing boredom to figure it out. Her teacher had given her no instruction other than to bring back an item that would prove she had been within the sultaar’s palace.

She had spent two weeks observing the palace, and just when she was certain she would lose her mind from lack of sleep she noticed something strange about the structure. It was the rats that clued her in, how one of them was carrying a piece of bread. Not

just any bread. It was still warm when Bahara pulled it out of the eviscerated rat's little paws.

Her teacher had provided extensive maps, but there was no mention of tunnels in the ancient dwarven structure. And when Bahara slipped one of the sultaar's emblazoned buttons into her teacher's hand, there was a moment of surprise. Of wonder, even. Bahara wouldn't tell her teacher how she had managed it.

And a week later, her teacher was gone. Sometimes Bahara wondered if she had dreamed it all. But then she laughed.

"We're in the kitchens," Wisaal said, looking around as the ovens were being lit. "How do we—"

"Hush," Bahara said. They had to get to the seventh oven before it was lit. For the moment the morning servants were busy about their work and hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary.

Rather than respond to Wisaal's incoherent replies, Bahara just took her by the arm and swung her back and around. Their backs were now up against the old stones, blackened from years of fire and smelling faintly of burnt bread. There were more than twenty furnaces in the kitchens — Bahara once read that they had been forges in ancient times — but never more than half were ever lit these days. Unless it was a feast day. The seventh would be a roaring inferno before long, and they would have to find another way out.

Wisaal was trying to say something, but Bahara shushed her. The furnace lighters were coming closer, and they were going to have to move the stone quickly. Which was difficult on even a good day. On a day like today, where Bahara couldn't rely on her fast reflexes. She had the burden of Wisaal every step.

Wisaal was terrified. Their connection had not gone away, if it truly was something beyond Bahara's imagination. She shook the nausea inducing notion to the back of her mind again and proceeded to give the woman some real directions.

“You’re going to feel something click in the wall,” Bahara whispered in Wisaal’s ear. “And then it’s going to swing. It’ll feel like the ground is leaving your feet, but it’s not. It’s just a slight drop, and it’s dirt floor. Don’t scream. Bite your tongue if you have to. Because if anyone finds out...”

“The secret is dead,” Wisaal whispered back.

The same words Bahara was about to say.

Sliding her fingers down the smooth wall, Bahara found the chink. Below it was a round pebble of a protrusion. She pressed it and the wall swung. She had to grab Wisaal around the waist at the last second as they whirled away behind the ovens and were deposited on the other side.

For her part, Wisaal did not scream. But she did lose her balance, taking Bahara down with her in the process. Instead of landing in a dignified manner, they plopped out onto the dirt and the straw like a pair of corpses flung from a collection wagon.

Wisaal broke most of Bahara’s fall, and thankfully they were at the bottom of the stairwell and not the top.

Once both women were upright and Bahara lit her small torch, the questions began.

“Where does this go?” asked Wisaal, looking up above them.

From their low vantage point, the spiraling stairs seemed endless. They rose up and away into the darkness above, splintering off into a dozen directions. As long as Bahara had tried to understand the purpose of these tunnels and stairways, she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. But to her limited knowledge she assumed it had been a way to shuffle servants, or lower castes, in and around the castle for deliveries outside of the main thoroughfare. Likely it was ideal for the population in its heyday, before everything fell apart in Redoubt. Before the walls were needed everywhere. Before death wasn’t death. But now with

such a small population, either the passageways were forgotten or else ignored.

“Anywhere,” said Bahara. She had taken a while to respond because, for a moment, she was seeing the corkscrew stone steps above their heads as if for the first time. The way they kindled in the light up, every spider web and imperfection in the stone was breathtaking.

“Why aren’t you a rich woman, then?” asked Wisaal. “I thought you were a thief.”

“A good thief doesn’t plunder everything at once, and leave nothing for later. Besides, we live in a broken world. Even with this access, I can’t simply take what I want. There are always fewer stores, even among the upper class. And truth be told, I’ve learned a great deal about just how scarce their lives are becoming. It’s hard to steal what isn’t there,” Bahara explained, feeling somewhat comforted by her own response.

Too much wealth and prosperity would bring more attention than she needed. Who would she sell precious wares to? No one would risk it. So it was skimming off the top. Just in the same way Wisaal skimmed off the top of the bread.

The bread. Her blood bread.

No, not now. Not thinking about it now. There was no magic in Wisaal. There couldn’t be.

“But you could help people,” Wisaal said. “Even with a little wealth.”

Bahara snorted through her nose while she brushed hay from the front her her shirt. “Anyone I blessed with wealth would be driven down and jailed. Then they would out me. No, I have my avenues. I have my methods. The pathways here are helpful, but they’re not the center of my schemes.”

Voices in the walls. Voices in the walls.

Be ever the voice of reason, sharp and deliberate and cruel. Words will do more than blades, and be ever harder to trace.

“Let’s climb,” Bahara said when Wisaal said nothing more. She didn’t have to.

MISK DIDN'T LIVE on the same level as the princes, or any of the royal family, though he clearly thought he deserved to. Bahara had only run into the man a handful of times, never on purpose, and mostly by way of hearing him speak to the kitchen staff. He was in charge of all meals and festivities, but he fancied himself a majordomo. From Wisaal's stories, he was always groping the staff and making disgusting jokes, mostly because it was something he could get away with. He had proven himself somehow worthy to manage the miscreants who founds themselves in his employ, and his rule was absolute.

While Bahara had never killed someone outright, she had whispered hundreds of deaths from the walls. That was her deadliest trick. She learned their movements, followed them behind the walls in her world away from the chaos of the sultaar's palace. Her teacher had taught her well, and Bahara had benefitted, and her employers had benefitted. Her work was so clean they never asked her twice.

When they came out upon the third floor, where Misk would be attending to the Sultaar's son Iqbal and his exceptionally detailed whims, Bahara was feeling rather proud of herself. Wisaal exuded a perpetual sense of excitement and awe, and while the thief and assassin had never quite imagined showing the cook her great secret, now that she had she was certain it was the right decision.

Until the door behind her snapped unexpectedly, leaving Wisaal in behind the walls and Bahara exposed in the middle of the bright hallway, her shirt caught in the door like some novice cat burglar.

Then a sound went up, a manic clanging of a bell. Had Wisaal closed the door on her? Had she been betrayed?

No.

That connection again, stronger now through the fear. Wisaal was panicked, scrabbling behind the door.

Hush, Wisaal. Listen to me. Be silent. Someone is coming.

Bahara struggled against the ensnarement, twisted, felt the material rip. Wisaal obeyed her mental command, but that didn't stop Bahara from swearing a thousand curses inwardly when six guards came around the corner toward her. Four were standard issue, pikes and swords and clumsy. But the two at the front were not. They were Iqbal's elite, the red streaks across their brows denoting their devotion to him and him alone.

Iqbal. The arrogant bastard.

She managed to get herself free of the door, but not before six more guards emerged on the other side.

Trapped.

Every instinct cried for her to fight. Years of training had taught her that. But she knew she had to conserve her energy, and she didn't want to give away herself just yet. That would help no one. Least of all Wisaal.

I'll be back for you.

"Snared a rat, it appears," said one of Iqbal's elite. His name was Juti, and she knew his voice better than his face. He was barely twenty, but had been in Iqbal's employ since the age of twelve. His was a mind shaped from such a young age, that there could be little decipherable of who he once was. Bahara supposed she was not so unlike him. Different teachers, that was all.

Bahara averted her eyes, dropped her hands by her sides. Passive, entirely. Hoping they would see someone else, someone less of a threat. She could count the feet. Twelve pairs. So far outnumbered

she began to feel nauseated.

All is lost. Everything. My bread.

Wisaal.

“Don’t kill her yet. Just neutralize her.”

The voice in her head, Wisaal’s. Enough to shake her, to only see the knife coming at her from the edge of her vision. The bread. The red bread. The damned read bread.

“Bahara, we’ve finally caught you,” said a voice she knew.

Jaria, her brother’s paramour, the smuggler... the pawn of Iqbal.

“And now you can watch as the world you built and bent comes crumbling down around you.”

The knife was so precise Bahara didn’t feel it at first. It was like cold water on her back, a strange tickle. But then her legs crumpled, as useless as wet sacks of grain, and she saw Jaria’s face above hers, smeared with red and her eyes merry.

Bahara had not often contemplated death, nor found herself afraid of it. Every now and again she felt the tide of mortality pull at her, reach for her. But she was almost always able to resist falling too far.

Until now.

Her legs were gone. Useless. Broken even beyond her brother’s. The humor in that. The irony! As she lay with her face on the cool marble of Iqbal’s chambers, she only imagined the thousand ways she could kill herself, but found she was so immersed in grief that she could not yet bear the thought.

And yet she did, again and again. The poison, meant for Misk, was in her pocket. Within reach. Awaiting.

“There is nothing left of her to worry about,” Jaria was saying. “We’ve captured the only possible complication and made her situation... significantly compromised.”

Iqbal had a low voice that made him sound older than his years.

“Misk should have everything he needs then. So long as you’re certain she was working alone.”

Jaria laughed. “Of course, prince. She never works with anyone, I can assure you that. It’s what’s made her so difficult to track. We thought she might have struck up a friendship with some of the kitchen staff, but the lead proved empty. Her brother, on the other hand, knew a great deal more than I think even the poor little thief knew.”

“How long until the meal is delivered?” asked Iqbal, impatient and to the point.

“An hour at most. He will be dead before noon, and we can send out the ghûl to get him when we’re ready. My men are on standby.”

“And the walls?”

“We will begin excavation this evening. I have no doubt the discovery will be quite helpful in your future rule, but it must be done under cover of darkness. No use in alarming the already agitated staff.”

Jaria approached Bahara. “First, I will make sure she doesn’t speak a word of this. Ever.”

WISAAL. HEAR ME.

Wisaal.

Please.

The whole world is broken because of my bread. The walls. I’ll never escape. I can’t get out.

She’s dead.

My friend.

Wisaal! I’m not dead.

I’m broken. Yes. Very much so.

But I’m alone. And I can guide you. We can save the sultaar and his

family, but we do not have much time. Be brave, and cast away fear. You were made for sterner stuff.

Wisaal smoothed her hands across the stone, looking with her sense of touch by seeing nothing with her eyes. So far her thief friend had not steered her wrong. When they took her friend they took the light, and unlike her room at night, this was a darkness almost impermeable.

The thief had told her how many steps she needed to go. How many breaths to take, how to keep her nerves still.

She always had the right thing to say.

But it didn't help so much now. Now that she understood what had to be done. Doing this great feat with her lumpy, uncoordinated, scarred body. This was not what she was made for. For baking bread, yes. And stuffing pies. And hacking meat.

She was tired. Her back ached. Her feet throbbed. The thief would die, or worse, she would live broken forever and...

Enough, Wisaal. Focus. Your enemy is only as strong as your worst fear. So drain that fear of power.

Tell me how many stairs you have walked so far.

I am a hideous monster. I cannot do this.

How many steps?

I should have been first through the door.

But then I would have run away and left you to die and they would have killed the sultaar, anyway. You made this magic that connects us, and this is the price. How many steps?

Three hundred twenty six.

The cruelty of the magic. Wisaal had been given it. She had done something great and powerful and worthy of song, made true magic, wrought it from fear and desperation. But then she had gone and broken her best friend. Her only friend. Her friend who would have left her to die if the tables had been turned. Her

nameless friend who was a cheat and a liar.

It was worse because Wisaal still loved her, still needed her.

Bahara. I suppose you might not have heard it. But that is my name all the same. Will you follow my directions and help save the sultaar, Wisaal?

Is he a good man, Bahara? Is he worth saving?

No. And yes. Would you prevent the suffering of the city, this household you have served so long, in such dark times? Redoubt is already fragmented, broken. Could you live in the chaos that would ensue, knowing you could have prevented it?

No. She could not.

BAHARA LED WISAAL up what felt like another thousand stairs, always twisting and meandering between the larger rooms in the sultaar's palace. The darkness was complete, only now and again did cracks appear in the seemingly impermeable dwarven stone. Voices barely traveled, but when they did it was enough so Bahara could be sure of where they were located. The link the bread had created between them seemed only to grow in strength with the pain each woman experienced.

Cobwebs and enormous spiders occasionally caused Wisaal distress, but never long enough to deter her.

One more stop. Turn to your right, Wisaal. Feel along the wall until you find a metal latch with a kind of button in the middle. Turn it precisely the way I am telling you now. Left, left, right, press, right, press, left.

Wisaal complied, slowly and deliberately, her fingers shaking. When the metal casing moved away she could not mistake the cache of weapons as she gingerly put her hand inside at Bahara's insistence.

Take what you like. They will find it before long, and all my treasure will be lost.

I am no thief.

Perhaps not. But that doesn't mean you can't use a knife, or shouldn't if the opportunity arises. Come now, don't be shy. I've seen you with the butcher's blade enough times to know you are perfectly capable of hacking a carcass. Even if you don't know what kind of meat it is.

It's different when it's dead already.

Not if you kill it fast enough, it isn't.

There was no falling back now. Wisaal was afraid, but disappointed, too. They were supposed to be enacting revenge upon Misk. Hadn't that been the plan? Now they were saving the Sultaar, and Wisaal couldn't help but regret the change of focus.

Bahara was silent, and quietly in the dark Wisaal selected her weapon. Simple. Familiar.

A cleaver.

She could not see the details but the stone handle was smooth from years of use.

Her use.

"You stole my favorite cleaver, three years ago," she whispered aloud.

Bahara did not reply.

THE THIEF DID not speak again until Wisaal stood before a doorway, the final doorway. The entrance to the sultaar's quarters. The edges lit up against the ever pressing dark, a reminder that there was light in the world, after all. Wisaal felt her heart leap with gladness, though she would be walking straight into danger.

And yet the darkness had been a comfort, too. She had been nameless and faceless for a time, a woman with a single purpose.

This is the heart of the sultaar's chambers. It is the ante room, where his lunch arrives and is taken by his guards to his bed.

How will I know the poisoned food?

You have lived your life in the kitchens. You will know the broken bread, the spoiled milk, as you knew the faces of your own children.

Bahara told her how the door pushed inward, but it was much harder to do than she anticipated. By the time it was wide enough for her to slip through, she could hear voices on the other side, discussing something in sharp tones.

And a voice she knew well.

Misk.

She could just kill him, she realized. She had a weapon now, and a teacher besides. She could slip away behind the walls and...

Where would you go, Wisaal? Who would take you in?

I could come and get you. We could move to a new district. I could help you heal.

I cannot move your hand, it's true. But revenge waits, grows in strength and poison. It is best enacted while calm of mind and heart, not with passion. Stop this assassin now, and you will be a hero.

A hero.

Wisaal. Ugly Wisaal. A hero!

The idea was so strange, so unthinkable, it truly did stop her in her tracks.

My life is dust, my friend. But you have this chance now. Now.

The door swung open and Wisaal placed herself among the shelves, blinking in the darkness. She had forgotten how beautiful colors were outside of the dark. She supposed even the kitchen would be dazzling after such an ordeal, but she did not expect opulence of this level. Just a moment in the antechamber and she knew she was in a special, important place, beyond anything she had ever seen. Wisaal reached up to touch the smooth wood, wondering how far it must have traveled to make it to Redoubt. It could not have been made by the dwarves. Not with the patterns

and interlocking zigzags. These were remnants of another life, another world. Artifacts from her people, the Ouazi. She felt a surge of pride, tears in her eyes.

There were two doors in the room. On the other side stood the tray, as yet untouched, with the sultaar's lunch. The same as it always was. The rest of the room must have served as a kind of pantry, for it was full of cups and saucers and implements of a design she had never seen in the kitchens. It smelled of tea, an ingredient so rare she had only smelled it once.

No time.

The doors shuddered.

"Someone's in there!" came a harsh whisper.

The doors opened to reveal Misk, flanked by a tall woman wearing red robes and a smear of crimson across her face. They looked as shocked to see Wisaal as she was to see them, eyes wide and their faces streaked with sweat.

"Ugly Wisaal?" asked Misk, both disgusted and surprised. His bald head was, as usual, a riddle of boils, and his thin mustache looked limp and flaccid. He could barely fit into his robes.

The woman is Jaria. The one who did this to me. Wisaal, scream as loud as you can at risk of losing your life.

She did.

Misk rushed her, she felt her side pierced. Pain, hot and precise, above her hip.

But then the door opened wide on its hinges and both assassins froze.

The sultaar himself stood in the doorway, stripped of his finery, and looking tired. Wisaal had only seen the man from a great distance, and while he was still remarkably tall, he was older than she would have thought. His hair was white about the temples, though his brows still black as ink and his beard well oiled.

He looked across at the faces before him, his gaze only glancing off of Wisaal before moving to the rest of the rather ramshackle crew.

“I’m hungry,” said the sultaar. “What is the meaning of this delay and interruption?”

There was no shortage of protection within the room; the elite, the sultaar’s most prized fighters, waited.

When no one replied, the sultaar growled: “Misk. Speak.”

Instead, Wisaal spoke, “They planned to poison you. I found out... I came to stop them.” Her voice was strained and she could feel blood dripping down her leg. It was not fatal. Not yet.

“She is a miscreant,” Misk said. “The thief in the walls, the one we told you about.”

Sultaar Inunwa said, “Is she now?”

Then he looked at her. He saw the cleaver in her hand, the blood staining the carpet, the trembling of her lips. He saw the way a leader sees people, her life written on the lines of her body, her skin, her hands. Wisaal, ugly but only herself.

“Which is the poisoned food?” asked the sultaar.

Bahara! Which is it? Help me!

Bahara!

The tray stood between them, impossibly positioned between her and the sultaar. She wanted to laugh.

It was his usual lunch after a large feast. Grains, preserved fruit, sweet rolls. The best to be found, but simple in terms of his taste.

“Your favorites are the sweet rolls,” she said. “I oversee Katu make them every morning. But these... they were rushed.” She felt stronger saying it, knowing it to be true. The pain made everything so clear.

“Good. Then, Misk, will you taste them for me? Just to be sure?” asked the sultaar.

“My lord, I have served you for two decades now...” Misk said, bowing and hiding his face.

“Yes, you have. Which is why I ask you to try these on my behalf. To prove your loyalty,” the sultaar replied with a smile that did not reach beyond his lips.

Misk shouted, lunged for the sultaar, spittle on his face. In his progress he knocked Wisaal across the face, and she felt two of her teeth crack.

But then the guards came, and the fight was over. Jaria died more quickly than Wisaal would have thought, and at the Sultaar’s hand. He snapped her neck as she begged for her life. He had been prepared, Wisaal supposed, wiping more blood from her mouth. Perhaps he was always prepared.

Power is the most valuable currency around, you know. A smart man knows he borrows every breath he takes.

Thank you, Bahara.

The Sultaar bent down to take Wisaal’s hand. “Thank you. I have a great debt to repay.”

“Iqbal...” Wisaal said.

“I know. You are not the thief in the walls, but I suspect you know where he is?”

“She... she helped me. Told me where to go. Iqbal tried to kill her.”

“We will send a surgeon, then. Once you are attended to.”

Wisaal’s wounds were cauterized, and then she followed the guards to Iqbal’s chambers. She told them of the secret within the walls, and how to use them to get throughout the castle. She expected the sultaar would have them sealed for good. Had they been dug? Had they even existed at all? Wisaal was too tired to wonder. And glad to see her friend.

Iqbal was not in his chambers, but Bahara...

“She’s been gone for quite some time,” said the surgeon. “Hours at least. Poison and injury by the looks of it. I’m sorry for your loss, Wisaal.”

He did not call her ugly.

Wisaal stared at Bahara’s face, so pale in death. Remembered her voice.

“She was never mine to lose,” said Wisaal.

The clever thief never gives what she cannot take back. It is in such a way that we remain strong, unbreakable. Until we die.

And then, let it be glorious.



CHILD OF DUST

JAYM GATES

SHE STANDS BEFORE the elders, the strange ones, her hands wreathed in that hateful light.

It bathes her in a gentle, rose-toned glow, highlighting the silvercloth robes they draped around her. She is so tiny, the strange ones loom over her. One of them reaches out, offering a cup of clear liquid, and I surge against my chains, furious. She is too young, too innocent for whatever they intend. I chew furiously on the gag they stuffed into my mouth, tasting blood and bone dust, and wish for the umpteenth time that I was stronger.

“Be still, or they will kill you, and then she will be forced to watch us burn you,” my guard whispers, casting a fearful glance at the circle. He is big for our kind, thick with muscle and covered in scars left by claw and sword, but his hold is not ungentle.

It is the threat of her seeing me burn that stills me, and I choke back a sob as I cease my gnashing. I am her mother. I should be

protecting her, but it was my foolishness that led to this.

The rings, glinting cheaply in the weak sunlight, looking like tin and glass, but ever so enticing to a toddler.

Those rings shine brightly now, the fire of the gems within as true and pure as a knight's word. Cursed treasures of an empire drowned in living corpses, perhaps, or some sorcerer's cast-aside enchantment that has found power in the twilight of our world.

The gentle, hateful light casts strange shadows over her face. Her hands rest on the beautifully-carved stone in front of her, the artifact's bands moving slowly around her fingers. Eight stout figures surround her, their blue robes heavy with silver embroidery. If this was a human ceremony, there would be low chanting, most likely the smell of blood. The only scent here is the dust of old stone, and the beguiling jasmine aura of the artifact. There is silence, and focus. We dwarves have lived in the shadows for many years, and know how to hold our peace.

Life in Redoubt has never been gentle. Even in the early days, when we slaved over the quarries and cemented the walls with our blood, we were slaves, though we did not know it yet. We were building this citadel, this fortress, against the darkness we saw rising in the world. It was to be our refuge, and we named it so — beautiful Elldimek, the “saints' refuge,” a haven for those who have never been safe in the world of men.

We were such fools. We were slaves to our hope then, to our desire for harmony. We welcomed all with open arms, and they took us for the fools we were. Yet, humanity was not the worst thing to happen to us. We were blind to the ones within our own people who saw profit where we saw beauty, power where we saw wisdom, and dominion where we saw protection.

Upon our mountain of stone, we built gardens. Upon our foundations of mountain-blood, we built libraries. We built a vision

of a beautiful future. And when the darkness came, we opened that dream to everyone, believing that they would share in our dream, help us preserve it and build something bigger, brighter, better.

Something to stave off the end of life.

We could not have been more wrong. And yet... no, it was never the humans who betrayed me. It isn't the humans who took the one thing I love away from me.

My girl is so tiny, and so brave. Although the strange ones loom large above her, she does not flinch. I try not to move, as I see that she winces if my chains rattle. Otherwise, she is still and calm, her bright eyes full of fear but observing everything. She has always seen too much.

I look back toward the time-worn stone steps they dragged me down, hoping, wishing that someone might come to save us, but the way is dark and silent as a tomb.

I am alone.



I SHOULD HAVE known she'd be gone when I got home from that place. Should never have trusted them. All of those years, all of those betrayals, how is it even possible that I believed in someone's goodness still? I should have known, and my daughter will pay the price.

I am not making much sense, am I? Forgive me, the fear is still too fresh.

I am here to warn you. To protect you from what my daughter has become. But first, you must understand what she was.

I was three when my *Angat era* pierced her mark upon my forehead. I was eighteen when she gave me to her daughter as gift to celebrate the girl's coming-of-age. And I was thirty when I gave her daughter the first payment of my soul-price.

Thirty... and desperately hiding the fact that I should be paying her for *two* souls. I was fortunate that my *era* was young, and frantic for the influence to maintain her status. Fortunate twice that she was not smart enough to realize that she could deny my plea for freedom and sell my services out, herself.

She took my price, my young slavemistress, and we signed a contract in blood. One half of all my earnings for five years. One quarter of all my earnings for five more. I was desperately poor, but I was freeing my soul, and my daughter's face would never bear the mark of servitude.

She was just one year old when I took her to get the markings that noted her as free-born. I cried for the first time since I became a woman. My daughter would never know what it was to be owned by another. I would never need fear her being sold away from me, or that she would be gifted to a cruel *erus*, or any one of a dozen other fears a slave-mother fears. She would not have much, but she would have her freedom and every tiny comfort I could give her, even if it meant I went hungry.

"Look, Mama! Look at what I found! Aren't they pretty?"

"Where did you get those? Take them off, someone will see!"

A jutting, petulant lip. "No! I found them, they're MINE."

I don't know where she discovered them. I'd given her so much freedom, they could have come from anywhere.

Although they seemed to be nothing but cheap tinsel and ruined bronze wire, in total darkness they glowed with a very soft light. When she donned them, that baleful glow spread across her face, wrapped around her fingers like rings... and resisted any mundane attempt at removal.

She forgot her gloves one day, or else lost them. Bare-handed in the market. It is not good for one of us to draw attention to ourselves, and what draws more attention than a little girl of a

slave-race, standing in the market and charming a wounded bull with the bell-like sound of her voice and the dull glow of rings clearly not of common make?

They must have seen us there, the strange ones. I knew better than to take her to the market with me again, but I left her home with the houseowner, and that was all they needed.

And now my girl was theirs.

They brought her to that circle, my innocent girl, and raised a fence of magic around her. They raised a fence around her and brought in a cage, and when the fence was raised, they opened the cage and he stumbled out, already reaching for her.

My girl has never known fear or want. I defended her from all ill, and they locked her in a circle with the thing that has nearly wiped out our race.

I wanted to cry out, but did not dare. The thought of rousing it, or exciting its rage petrified me.

My little girl *smiled* at it. And reached out a hand.

Its awful, rotting lips peeled back from its skull in a horrible parody of a grin. Easy prey. Easy, tender prey. It sprang at her, its arms outstretched.

The rings flared, and I cowered, blinded. Even through my eyelids, through my hand, I could see the rose glow of their light. I expected to hear screaming — someone's screaming, anyone's screaming — but there was only a sharp outlet of breath from the assembled ones.

Cautiously, as the light faded, I opened my eyes. My daughter was alive. The rings still glowed, though with only a fragment of light. The creature was on the floor in front of her, weeping.

I strained forward, confused and frightened. The undead thing, hateful and hungry, lay next to a tiny child and wept.

My daughter tumbled to her knees next to the monstrosity and

petted it, stroked its filthy face and chattered at it.

It leaned into her touch like a kitten.

THE STRANGE ONES bring out another cage, and release another monstrosity. The light is dimmer this time, the response less extreme, but still the tears and the calm. Again and again, they test it, until the glow seems to reach a stable point that calms the aggression and leaves the foul creatures responsive, even playful.

The corpses cluster around her, my precious girl, hanging on her every gesture. Their rotting fingers touch her with a gentle reverence. Unhinged jaws try to form words to admire her.

I have seen these things kill without mercy. We get so many outbreaks in the city, they are the norm. Everyone has lost someone to the Dead, seen the hunger with which they destroy anything in their way. Magic and steel failed us. Faith failed us. Everything failed us.

To find something, perhaps the only thing that renders the ravenous Dead subdued... this is the only power that matters now.

And it rests in the hands of my child.

The circle begins to break apart, the elders approaching cautiously. The Dead watch, curious, and reach out friendly decaying hands to welcome their new friends. An elder shies away from the stench and the creature deflates, cringing back and hiding behind my little Ulena. She scowls at the strange one and pets her new friend kindly.

One of the Dead resists, the first one she tamed, the one who crouched at her side and wept. The men shepherding it shove it forward into the crate. Just a nudge, but...

Have you ever met a child? Have you been subjected to its whims, seen its mood swing from joy to rage for no reason at all?

Have you denied one a treat, or hurt its feelings in some way? I love my daughter, more than anything, but she did not grow up in fear of punishment, and I perhaps treated her too permissively.

The soldier shoves the corpse, and my daughter's mood turns sour in the blink of an eye.

"No, you can't keep the big black cow, Ulena. We can barely feed ourselves, and I don't know how to heal things, and he's too big to even get into our room!"

"I don't care I want him he's MINE, I don't want you I want him, you're a horrible mama!" and everyone in the market was staring at her now, and she would later remember the bull's bellow of rage as it stood over the little girl. It was only when Ulena fell asleep that the bull limped off after its owner, looking confused.

Her shriek rises to ear-splitting levels, making the elders cower back and clasp their hands over their ears. The Dead around her rise to their feet and howl like dogs subjected to a high-pitched whistle, with what hands they still have pressed over their own ears.

Then blood.

I hear the sounds of tearing cloth and flesh. I don't want to look, have no choice but to listen. They bring her pieces of the strange ones, shredded meat and shattered bone, and gibber madly at her when she screams.

They look around for something else to offer her, and find the guards holding me. They bring me to her, and it is enough.

She flings herself into my arms, clinging, and the Dead celebrate, dancing clumsily around.

I AM HERE to warn you.

I am allowed to leave for food, to bring the child prophet what she needs to survive. The Dead will not leave her, nor will they allow

her to leave. More are gathering around her, called perhaps by the rings, or else created by her disciples.

I do not know. All I know is that she is changing. Her moods are darker, her joy restrained. She watches, as ever; watches as the undead gather to her, too-old thoughts moving behind her too-young eyes. Even if I could, I dare not remove the curse, for they'd surely tear us to shreds.

They will come looking for me if I do not return soon. She grows fretful if I am away too long, and her flock grows more restless each time I leave, as though the rings fear some betrayal.

Tell those you love.

Your friends, your family. Warn the Watch... the Foresters... anyone. Find someone who will listen. Find someone who will descend into the forgotten cistern and see what grows there. Someone who will level the passages and seal us inside, or burn us before we can take the city.

Tell them the Dead are gathering in the dust.

Tell them there is always a price for freedom.

THE TREACHERY OF BRIGHT YESTERDAYS

JAMES LOWDER

EVEN IN THE fusty, cluttered gloom of the junk shop, the ceramic dancer mesmerized. Elzbieta leaned close and traced the subtle progression of colors from the figure's pale gold hair to its yellow ochre dress to the exotic brown and red whorls of the ground beneath its feet. The last offered her the slightest glimpse of the Stormbreak Mountains, or how an artist had seen the earth there a century or more past. By Elzbieta's estimate, the dancer had been slip cast at least that long ago. Some older Venmir still practiced the technique, but the piece's colors were a revelation. They pushed back the shadows somehow. She was certain of that now, just as she was certain she'd never seen similar pigments elsewhere in the Downs. One more craft secret lost to her people and, perhaps, the world, abandoned in the flight from the Venmir ancestral home to the dubious safety of Redoubt.

Elzbieta took the dancer down from the shelf. It wasn't very large, but she always expected it to be lighter. Something concealed

in the humped base gave it considerable heft. In her more lofty flights of fancy, she imagined treasure hidden there — gems or jewelry or small plates engraved with arcane knowledge. The piece had likely served as the cover for a Venmiri canopic urn in her great-grandmother’s time, back before the Rising, so it might hold something extraordinary. She marveled that the dancer had survived all those years, with only a few chips and an inexpertly repaired broken arm to suggest its true age. More miraculous still was its continued presence in Haluk’s shop.

“I’ve turned down some pretty offers for that little prize since you were here last,” said the shop’s owner from a dimly lit back corner. The tone was harsh, the words clipped. He spoke loudly to be heard over the din from outside bleeding in through the thin walls. “You’re going to have to make up your mind, and quick.”

Elzbieta hadn’t looked to see where Haluk was lurking when she entered the shop. The old man’s usual spot was a low stone chair cut into the back wall, a reminder of a time when this space had been part of a dwarven hall. The seat had been designed for the comfort of the original inhabitants, so it was too wide and too short for the tall, gangly merchant. He could only settle on it awkwardly, but his customers knew to find him there.

As Elzbieta approached the low table where the junkman conducted most of his transactions, he rose from his stone perch. His arms and legs unfolded with unnerving slowness, like the limbs of some monstrous stick insect beginning to prowl. He navigated across a closed trap door and around the bundles of rags and clusters of jars filled with odd and ends. All the while, he kept his pale eyes fixed on Elzbieta. “Ain’t it a crime,” he muttered through a leer that made the young woman’s skin crawl. “Ain’t it a crime...”

Elzbieta set the figure on the table alongside the single olive oil lamp tasked with lighting the shop. All her pockets had holes

in them, so she carried her few valuables tied into a knot in her shirttail. From this cache she produced three coins and a pair of small white cubes — bone dice without pips gouged into them yet. After a moment's hesitation she took her knife from her belt and added it to the pile. The steel blade was set in a bone handle ornamented with a simple imagining of the temple-city of Venmah. Elzbieta's carving would never be mistaken for the work of a veteran artist, but it was sincere. For practical purposes, the weapon was nicely balanced and wickedly sharp.

"I can finish the dice so they fall on whatever numbers you want," she said.

"Can you make them so they vanish when someone reports me to the Bone Cutter's Guild for possessing wares fashioned by a scab?"

Elzbieta started to reply, to explain that the guild was considering her application, but the junkman cut her off. "This wouldn't be enough, not even if the dice and knife were stamped with the guildmaster's personal mark. You waste my time like this again and you'll never have the thing, you hear me? I set my price last time you were here. It's final." He gestured, indicating the rest of the shop with the flick of one long-fingered hand. "You want something else in exchange for the coins, maybe we can do a little deal."

Most of Haluk's business involved more practical merchandise: rags and thread, scraps of wood and metal and bone, detritus to be transformed into the stuff of a miserable day-to-day existence in the most desperate neighborhood of a city cut off from the world beyond its walls. Still, he would find buyers for the more exotic items readily enough. The coins weren't legal tender in Redoubt; if the governments that had minted them existed at all, it was only as shadows deformed by time and calamity. That gave them sentimental value to many, while anyone in the Downs looking to illustrate an improving fortune might want them for their novelty

and conspicuous lack of utility. If Haluk couldn't barter them away to the slum dwellers, then he'd sell them to the wealthy and privileged folk residing elsewhere in the refuge.

The junkman obtained the relics from a smaller circle. From time to time people of substance slipped into want, or people of meager means slid further into poverty, and soon enough they were bartering away their last remaining treasures. For a time the shop had boasted a Pirayan bit and an unpartnered stirrup, the only possessions of General Ottami to be recovered after the disastrous Battle of Slith. Later, an empty leather binding that had once held a hymnal used in Ezkura's mist-wrapped and mysterious high abbey. Now, the ceramic dancer Elzbieta coveted. Haluk saved these items for special transactions, especially with young women who caught his eye. The price he demanded for them was steep.

"I've had other girls trade themselves into my service before you," the junkman told Elzbieta as she looked forlornly at the figure. "They came to enjoy it, truth be told." The leer twisted his thin lips again. "I know I did. Every time."

Elzbieta grimaced and moved to gather up her offering. Before she could collect the dice and coins, a convulsive cough rattled her slight frame: the hallmark of the bone cutter. Cutters spent their days shrouded in a fine grime of the dead. It settled into the weave of their clothes and lodged in every fold and wrinkle of flesh. No amount of scrubbing could clean it completely from between fingers and toes, beneath nails, under eyelids. Elzbieta wore a mask as she worked, but the powdery dust still coated her tongue and worked its way down her throat. Eventually, every hacking, ragged breath would proclaim her profession.

"I don't know why anyone would want to join the Cutters," Haluk sniffed. "Not when the work cripples you like that. You'd be far better off with me."

“Cutting is an art. You wouldn’t understand its appeal.” Elzbieta hesitated, trying to hold her tongue, but the nature of Haluk’s offer goaded her on. “Besides, I’m certain that toiling in your service offers maladies of its own.”

“Watch your words! You’re talking to someone who has seen the Temple of Twelve Voices from the inside.” With his sharp features, pallid skin, and dark, curly hair, Haluk liked to imply he possessed an elven heritage, but in reality he was Menhada, long-lived as some of those peoples of the steppes could be, but as human as Elzbieta and most of the other refugees crowding Redoubt.

“Get out of my shop, guttersnipe. Now you’ll have to beg me to take you on as a slave.”

“You’ll never see me beg, whoremonger,” Elzbieta said.

The shop door banged open. A stout, smartly dressed man filled the warped frame. He was round-faced and paunchy in a part of the city where privation reigned. His clothes, while not ostentatious, were clean and new. Elzbieta knew him as Mefody, but he had other names, too. Rumor branded him one of the Nightcoats, who were champions of the poor and steadfast agents of justice, if you listened to the Coats and their allies, conniving and bloody-handed criminals if you listened to those who claimed to be their victims or their victims’ next of kin.

“Such discord,” he drawled as he moved into the shop. “There are quieter, more constructive ways to resolve even the most rancorous of disagreements.”

Elzbieta lowered her eyes and started for the exit, but a fat-fingered hand on her shoulder stopped her. “I wouldn’t go out there just now,” Mefody said.

She looked up to meet his gaze then, her expression cold and hard. “I’m a free woman.”

“Of course you are.” Mefody lifted his restraining hand, ostensibly to swat at a small swarm of flies that had followed him

in from the street. “Free or bound, though, you should learn to recognize good advice when you hear it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Elzbieta slammed the door behind her as she left the shop. Somewhere on the ramshackle building, around the corner from the entrance, a big square of wood shook loose and slid to the ground. Pieces of hovels were always falling off or being hammered back into place in this part of the Downs, so people scarcely noticed the crash in the constant, anxious growl that hung over the place. Haluk’s shop was part of a warren of shacks and lean-tos crammed inside the gutted frame of a once-glorious hall. The sounds of hungry infants sobbing, uneven barrow wheels rumbling on the flagstones, and beggars chanting their desperate pleas to passers-by rose up to the vaulted stone ceiling overhead and echoed back upon themselves, until the drone became a palpable, jostling companion. Anyone familiar with the area knew to expect it.

So it was the silence that first drew Elzbieta’s attention, not the sight of the corpse clawing at the air across the alley from Haluk’s door. In some ways, the thing resembled the rest of the slum-dwellers: painfully thin and clad in clothes that would have been discarded as rags in the Old City. Not long ago it had been one of them, before it had been dragged from life by sickness or starvation and recast as something monstrous. Elzbieta had seen the man lying in the gutter when she entered the junk shop earlier; he could have been there for hours or days, just one more luckless wretch of the Downs. No one could explain how the man had escaped death’s embrace, nor, for that matter, why the dead had been rising up to plague the living for nearly a century. There was no pattern in their resurrections, no set way in which the creatures acted or appeared. Some guessed at the cause, laying the blame on mad gods or sinful mortals or some other source that suited their

philosophies, but all anyone knew for certain was that death was no longer final and the restless things that returned hated the living.

The small crowd surrounding the living dead man could see that hatred on its face. It stared out at the shambles and its inhabitants through blank white orbs, head bowed a little, mouth open in a gaping scowl. It swayed as it looked around, like a man woken abruptly from a deep sleep. Whenever the people close to it tried to back away, the thing lurched forward and vomited a cloud of black flies. The insects made no noise. Neither did the two children huddled together directly before the swaying corpse — the man's daughters, Elzbieta guessed. Their screams were silenced by the dead man somehow, like everything else closer than two bodies' length remove. That realization held no surprise for Elzbieta. She had witnessed rotters, as the risen things were known in the Downs, that could climb smooth walls on limbs that bent the wrong way and others that could be set aflame yet never burn. Some attacked the living immediately, with relentless fury. Others took their time before striking, as if wallowing in the fear they created.

Elzbieta was far enough away that she could move without drawing the thing's attention. By the time she heard the bells of the Corpsemen sounding, she had already crept to an intersecting alley and identified her escape route. She would be gone before the armed disposal squad arrived. The Takers would be intent on their target — the animate dead thing — and would collect it even if their heavy blades claimed the lives of a few unfortunate bystanders in the process. Best, then, to be somewhere else before the carnage commenced.

She found herself anxious to get outside the stifling confines of the hall. The skylights cut into the building's roof were ingenious, like so many dwarven creations, but they'd been at least partially covered by leaves and grime that no one could be bothered to

remove. The mirrors that had helped diffuse the light throughout the building had been broken or pillaged long ago, too, so that sunlight touched few areas of the hall directly and then only for a few hours a day. It left the place shadow-wrapped and gray, where the blazing sun did not bleach it white. Elzbieta strained to see colors in the shacks or the people, but they'd all been bled away. She was surrounded by a dead world peopled by skeletons in the making. A holding area for the raw materials that would, sooner rather than later, end up on her workbench.

Elzbieta squinted at the sudden bright sunlight and shaded her eyes with one hand as she passed at last through the empty frame that had once held the hall's massive copper doors. They'd been removed by the denizens of the Downs long ago, hammered thin and cut apart for use in the construction of their shacks. As she descended the front steps, though, she could see few fragments of the doors worked into any of the nearby structures. The pieces were durable enough that they attracted the unwelcome attention of thieves, so they inevitably ended up in the hands of the scavengers' leaders or junkmen like Haluk. The few copper sheets still attached to the local dwellings were signs of the occupant's favor with one underworld faction or another. The patron's symbol appeared somewhere on the piece, if you bothered to look closely enough, though it was generally considered wise to assume that the patron was someone you wouldn't want to offend and move on without looking.

That's what Elzbieta did as she threaded her way among the hovels, past knots of quarreling thugs and traveling water merchants hawking their wares. The water-sellers did enough business this far from the river to justify carting their barrels along the narrow alleys, and paying for the guards to keep the desperate from swarming them and taking what they needed. She scarcely noticed the stink as she overtook a waste hauler, collecting the only thing some of

the poor had to sell. Like everything else in Redoubt, it would be recycled, turned into fuel or fertilizer. There was no shame in hoarding waste to exchange for a few water tokens or enough money for a handful of grain. Even Haluk's offer of slavery wasn't the worst of it. Elzbieta had seen men and women in the Downs so fraught that they accepted far darker fates in the hopes of keeping themselves or their families alive for a few days more.

In a crowded square closer to the river, she paused to listen to a trio of young women singing. Song had proved an efficient means of spreading news in Redoubt. Even if the resources had existed to expend parchment and ink on broadsheets, too many of the poor were illiterate to make the printed page effective. Anyone with the money to pay could hire a singer to deliver a message. This particular trio was sharing the Angat Church of Man's latest pronouncements on sin and its impact on the olive harvest. That, at least, was the message Elzbieta took from the performance, though she would readily admit that her mind had wandered during the final verse. She was always on the alert for pickpockets in crowds like this, but her attention had also been captured by a far more unusual distraction: the sound of children's laughter.

The performance at an end, the faithful and the curious went about their business, but Elzbieta lingered, searching the square for the children. She spotted them dancing around something laid out at the base of a dry fountain. When she realized what it was, she cursed loudly and started toward them at a run.

The barefoot children scattered like leaves caught in the claws of a winter wind. Their joyless cries of triumph trailed after them. In their wake lay a short, squat body, head covered by a mound of earth and stone. The broad chest was not moving; the hands folded across it remained perfectly still.

Elzbieta uncovered the dwarf's face and gently shook him. "Wake up, Izzeddin."

After a time, the dwarf stirred. He gasped a little like a landed fish before his breathing settled into a steady rhythm and his large eyes opened. "Did the young ones leave my tokens?" he asked, voice raspy and deep.

Elzbieta shook her head. "I told you, that grift only works if you have someone to deal with the marks after you get buried."

The dwarves of Redoubt could hold their breath for remarkable periods of time, like the deep-diving leviathans that roamed the world's oceans, and Izzeddin had struck upon an idea for exploiting this ability to earn a few water tokens — wager with humans who'd had little traffic with dwarves that they could bury him for an hour or two with no ill effects. The centuries had not been kind to the dwarf, though, and his addled brain could never quite work out the proper staging for the scam. He typically ended up buried in earth and stone, then nodding off before he could gather his winnings.

"You're fortunate someone didn't mistake you for a corpse, or worse, a rotter," Elzbieta said as she crouched down to help clean the dirt from the dwarf's scraggly white beard.

"Spirits of forge and hearth bless you for coming to my aid," he said. "Yet again."

Elzbieta doubted the ancestors of the dwarves would be raining good luck down upon her, not when they'd so obviously abandoned their own people. Redoubt had been the dwarves' city, back before the Rising — Elldimek, as it was known then — and in return for their hospitality to the frightened humans and elves fleeing the undead, they'd had their home wrenched from their control. With few exceptions, the dwarves were now the lowest of the low, despised even by the luckless inhabitants of the Downs.

Izzeddin launched into a story about the old times, a short but stirring epic chronicling his defense of a small desert caravan against a much larger ghûl hunting pack. The fog typically clouding the dwarf's mind seemed to part when he told one of his tales. Elzbieta hesitated at first, reluctant to let something capture her full attention in a public place like this, but despite her better judgment, she fell under its spell. She sympathized with the dwarf's beautiful longing for the time before the undead plague; the dancer in Haluk's shop spoke to the same longing in her. And once Izzeddin started his telling, the bone cutter could feel them both traversing the distance between the sad reality of the present and the heroic past. For a time she dwelt there.

"Wonderful," a familiar voice droned at the tale's conclusion, pulling Elzbieta back to the dry fountain and the square. She looked up to find Mefody standing over her, a small, cloth-wrapped bundle tucked under his left arm. The Ouazi woman at his side positioned herself next to Mefody like a bodyguard, but it took Elzbieta a moment to see the weapons she carried; a small dirk and a *girga* hung at her belt. When the bone cutter tried to rise, the Ouazi woman stepped forward, hand on her knife, and shook her head. That was enough to make Elzbieta settle back onto the cobblestones, though she now had one eye open for an escape route.

"You seem to be following me, Mefody," she said.

"Perhaps I am," he replied. "Or perhaps I saw my old friend Izzeddin here and remembered that I had a message for him." He leaned close to the dwarf and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "I've heard that Karzhaddi is taking up a collection for the least fortunate of your people."

At the name of the reclusive dwarf rumored to be the leader of the Nightcoats, Izzeddin straightened his ragged clothing, as if for inspection, and dug into his pockets. "Ah, the little monsters

robbed me. I had a few coins — wait, I still have something to give.”

The dwarf reached into his boot and came out with a grimy water token, which he presented to Mefody with great ceremony.

“My thanks,” Mefody said, slipping the token into his purse. He turned to Elzbieta and held out a hand. “Would you like to donate something to a good cause? No amount too small.”

She stared for a moment his puffy, mushroom-white fingers, stunned by his audacity. He was like something that grew up out of the misery and decay in the Outer City.

“No?” he said. “Well, not everyone has Izzeddin’s generous spirit, but you might want to reconsider. Even our mutual friend Haluk opened his heart and — no, we both know that’s not true. Let’s just say Haluk understood that generosity was more than its own reward here. Say, his gift might interest you.”

He shifted the bundle from under his arm and carefully unwrapped the contents. For a moment Elzbieta held her breath, terrified that Mefody would pull the cloth back to reveal the Vemiri dancer. “They’re Angat ritual tokens,” he said, holding up a small glass jar containing three stone balls, one black and two white. “At one time, they were used for membership votes in Angat secret societies. The black one is supposed to bring dreadful bad luck, though I’ve never believed in that sort of thing.”

The dwarf made a sign to ward off evil. Mefody gave the jar to his bodyguard and held out a hand to help Elzbieta to her feet. She stood without touching him. “I wasn’t being entirely honest just now,” he said, deftly guiding her a few steps from Izzeddin. “The Angat tokens are a gift I’m delivering from Haluk to the masters of the Bone Cutter’s Guild. Do you think he is trying to smooth your path to membership or...? Well, a black ball is a black ball, even among the guilds.”

“Why are you telling me this? What do you want from me?”

“Excellent questions. Just the ones you should be asking. I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed, though. You’ll get nowhere demanding anything that I don’t offer. For now, I’ve given you this information. Do with it what you will.”

He gestured to his Ouazi bodyguard. Elzbieta turned to find the woman had been watching them closely. The wrapped jar lay at her feet. The *girga* dangled in her right hand, a stone already cradled in the sling. At the sign from Mefody, the guard relaxed and unloaded the weapon.

“As for you, friend dwarf,” Mefody called, “have no fear. The world will right itself one day soon and this place will again be worthy of the name Saints’ Refuge.” He smiled a cherubic, round-cheeked smile. “You just have to maintain your faith that the order of things will be restored through your struggle and sacrifice in the challenging times ahead.”

Elzbieta gave Izzeddin one of her last remaining water tokens before she left the square. For a moment she considered pressing him to promise that he would use it only for himself, but she departed with only a halfhearted warning against trying the breathing grift again until he had a suitable partner.

She wandered for a time after first starting out for the Bone Cutter’s Guild to plead her case, then changing her mind. She made it a few blocks toward the underground cutting shop that employed her, wondering if she might be able to focus enough on her work to shake the overwhelming dread sinking its talons into her chest, making her heart tremble and her lungs ache. She abandoned that plan, too, and followed the flow of the crowds through the byways of the Downs until twilight settled over the ghetto.

Elzbieta’s bed was a stone altar, the centerpiece of a tiny temple to Dzaa, one of the lesser gods of the Second Ascension. Superstition kept the human refugees from stealing the slab or

contesting the bone cutter's claim to the space. Dzaa was reportedly a spiteful little god, so they were willing to let her draw its wrath, if her continued presence displeased Dzaa, and unwilling to anger the god, if her continued presence somehow pleased it. For her part, Elzbieta wished that just once the unyielding stone would bend to her body when she lay down to sleep and not the other way around.

Spectacular dreams washed over her the moment consciousness fled. She saw Redoubt as it had been before the Rising, and the temple-city of Venmah when her people still called it home. The Battle of Slith played out across distant hills. The armies were like toy soldiers moving through a diorama, and the slaughter and the suffering were kept at such a remove that nothing about the conflict alarmed her. It was all as it should have been, and should be again, once the ceramic figure was hers and the dancer reclaimed her place atop the Stormbreak Mountains. A vast army of dwarves supplicated themselves before the dancer twirling on the peak, their bent backs like scales armoring the mountainside, down and down, even to the plain below. When Elzbieta looked again, the dancer was once more a motionless ceramic figure, resting on an outstretched palm, now the clawlike hand of Haluk, now the pale and bloated hand of Mefody.

Elzbieta awoke bathed in sweat and gasping for breath. When her coughing subsided, she huddled in the darkness, cursing her powerlessness and fighting back angry tears. Several hours still remained before dawn when she finally slipped her knife into her belt and started for Haluk's.

She had learned long ago to move quickly and with purpose through the twisted alleys of the Downs, so anyone watching her would think she had someplace pressing to be — and, perhaps, someone waiting for her. There was nothing more dangerous in the slums than to be seen as alone. This was especially true in the

small hours of the morning, when most of the people skulking from shadow to shadow did so with ill intent. After she made her way through the gaping, empty portal to the hall, wound through the warren of shacks, and came at last to the junkman's shop, the bone cutter realized that she had more in common with those sneak thieves and cat burglars than she might want to admit.

The front door to Haluk's shop was locked, but it didn't take long for Elzbieta to find another way in. The board that had shaken loose from the side of the building still lay where it had fallen, and the hole it left was large enough for her to crawl through. The shop was dark, but Elzbieta had come prepared. She listened until she was certain the junkman was sleeping in another room, then lighted a small taper and made her way to her grail.

Haluk had returned the dancer to its shelf. She took it down and let its reassuring weight steady her trembling hand. She didn't dare look at it until she was back to the hole in the wall and ready to make her escape. Only then did she pause to study the figure in the candlelight.

Now that the dancer was finally hers, its colors did not seem so remarkable. She saw them as they were; the pigments had been applied cleverly enough, but they were nothing special.

She felt a chasm open in her chest. The gaping emptiness swelled. It swallowed her heart and the light of the taper, the dancer, and everything else. Elzbieta stood at the center of the void, holding back a scream. Her throat constricted.

The first hacking exhalation doubled her over, and both the taper and the figure slipped from her grasp. She heard the crash of the ceramic shattering on the stone floor only distantly, through her gasping coughs. She collapsed to her knees. In the light from the guttering taper, ghostly and shifting, Elzbieta stared without comprehension at the fragments spread around her. A dark, solid

lump lay at the center of the ruin. After a time, she understood that the humped base had exploded. Gasping more softly now, she reached for the thing that had given the figure its weight.

A stone. The treasure hidden within the base had been a common stone.

Elzbieta turned it over in her hand, examining it from every side. She spotted the guild stamp just as she heard the trap door creak open. Like all the other crafters in Redoubt, the forgers marked their work. They just hid the mark well.

“If you’re a thief, I have the protection of the Coats,” Haluk shouted. He was still ducked below the level of the floor. The light from his olive oil lamp shone up through the open trap.

Elzbieta got slowly to her feet. Her body throbbed with the terrible blankness inside her.

“If that’s you, Mefody, at least give me a day or two to get you the extra money, you greedy bastard.” Haluk crept up a few steps and peered into his shop. “Well, well,” he said when he saw the bone cutter. A familiar leer twisted his lips as he crawled up the rest of the basement steps. “Ain’t it a crime...”

Reflexes honed by years surviving in the Downs prompted Elzbieta to draw her knife as Haluk came close, and it was reflex prompted her to slash at his outstretched hand when he reached for her. His scream did not penetrate the void surrounding her, but something else did. When Elzbieta held up her bloodied knife in a defensive stance, the colors caught her eye and expanded to fill the emptiness within her: the white of the bone handle, the silver-gray of the blade, the crimson of the freshly spilled gore. These colors were true, and they were hers. With them, she might paint a future.

Wordlessly, she tackled the man and set to work expanding her palette, at first with all the subtle shades of red her blade could uncover, and then, as the aching slow hours dragged on until

THE TREACHERY OF BRIGHT YESTERDAYS

daybreak, with every other hue and tint that she could wring from the doomed junkman.

BLOOD AND STONE, EVER BINDING

DAMIEN ANGELICA WALTERS

FINGERS AND TOES crooked into cracks and crevices in the stone, Ona makes her way up the wall. She's small in stature, like her mother was, with wiry muscles and long, skinny fingers — well suited for climbing. The barest hint of the rising sun pricks the dark with light's promise, but Ona pays the shadows no mind. She's made the climb numerous times in full dark. Scaling the wall requires a precise touch, patience, and strength, not sight.

Summer's end is only a fortnight in the past, but the air is cool with only a hint of a breeze. Behind her, the city is quiet, or at least as quiet as it ever is.

Ona gives a quick whistle when she nears the top, though there's no need. The sentries here are accustomed to seeing her. More importantly, they knew her mum, respected her reputation, and understand that Ona plans to follow in her footsteps.

With her fingers gripping the top edge white-knuckle tight,

she swings one leg up, uses it to pull her body entire. Once atop the wall, she gets to her feet, brushing the grime from her hands and adjusting the strap of her empty satchel.

In the shadows, Redoubt bears a strong resemblance to a midden heap. The Inner City, home to the wealthy and the men in charge of governing all, is nestled against the mountain; the Outer City, home to the men and women struggling to put food in their bellies and clothing on their backs, spills out in chaos, and empty ground stands between it and the wall. And beyond the wall? A world of natural riches, of olive groves, and streams that flow freely. Air that smells not of the press of too many bodies in too small a space. Perfect, save for the Dead who claim it as their own. They would claim Redoubt, too, if not for the wall protecting it. Ona suspects that one day they will, but she's careful not to say such a thing to her father.

"Does your da know you're out here again?" a sentry asks.

Ona nods at Ade. "Of course." She stretches her arms high. Flexes fingers and toes. There's room enough at the top of the wall for two sentries to pass each other side by side without touching. Room enough to fight and kill, if need be.

She looks out across the land beyond the wall. "Anything?" she asks.

Ade shakes his head. "Naught for a few days and even then, it was only one, mostly rotted and slow."

She nods but pans her gaze from side to side. No movement, save the tree branches. "I won't be long."

"Olives?"

"Aye, want some?"

"If you can spare a few."

She nods again.

"You'll make a fierce Forester one day."

“I know,” she says with a grin.

Ade doesn't tell her to be careful or to watch her step, part of the reason she likes him the best of all those who guard this section of the wall. He treats her like a person, not a child, and not like she's stupid. She's a month shy from her fifteenth name day, and while she might be from the Outer City, she knows her letters. Her mum insisted on it.

She descends the outside wall with the same caution, a dance of reaching arms, fingers, and toes. When she reaches the bottom, she pauses only to slip on her shoes and tie the laces. The threadies belonged to her mum; they're crude and well-worn, patched many times by her da. She *can* climb while wearing them but prefers not to. The rat skin is ugly, but durable. Her breeches and vest are of the same; the breeches her da's handiwork, the tunic her own. And none reek of rodent.

Lesser skilled or unscrupulous tanners don't smoke the hides when finished, so the skin retains the oil that makes them smell. Her da jokes that walking around with rat stink feet is no better than going barefoot. Ona agrees, but even more importantly, no smell to her clothing and threadies means naught extra to serve as a lure for the Dead. The scent of her own flesh is lure enough.

She lopes across the bare land between wall and treeline, listening for anything out of the ordinary. Mum always told her it was dangerous to rely on sight alone and taught her blindfolded. It's this time of the morning, near dark, that Ona puts those lessons to use.

The crackle of twigs belongs to squirrels or chipmunks, a whisper belongs to a clutch of leaves, the faint smell of honeysuckle and the stronger of pine belong to a stretch of land without the Dead. The sick-sweet odor of rotting flesh always gives them away first.

Once Ona slips into the olive grove, she works quickly, filling her empty satchel while keeping alert. Mum always said Ona was better than she ever was; Ona hopes so.

A twig breaks, the sharp snap bright and loud, and Ona freezes in place. Slowly, she slides her olivewood spike from the sheath on her back and scents the air. There, a faint kiss of decay. Not too close, but not far enough away for her liking either. What would she do if her mum stumbled out of the wood now with arms outstretched and teeth gnashing with hunger?

Ona fingers her spike. Like it or not, she'd do what was needful. A spike might not be enough to fully destroy one of the Dead — only cremation or rendering is capable of that — but the spike *can* be used to cripple all its limbs, making certain the rotter is incapable of pursuit. Ona's never done it, but she knows how. Still, it's no easy task and, even then, only one of last resort, so she finishes her work quickly and heads back for the wall, casting glances over her shoulder all the while. *Are you out there, Mum?* she thinks.

Are you dead or are you Dead?

INSIDE THE WALL, the city curves to meet the open land as the white of a toenail joins the pink. Her neighborhood takes up one small corner, separated on all sides by an alleyway. Stories say there were two brothers who didn't get along, but in order to keep peace with their mother they kept their houses close, yet dared to make the space between them wider than was customary, and as the city grew, people kept the width of the alley the same. Da says the story isn't true, that the width is due to a natural delineation in the ground. No matter the truth, the alleyway allows for easy travel from one end of the neighborhood to the opposite side.

Although the alleyway, and not home, is her destination, Ona winds her way between the houses, through passageways too narrow for two people to pass by without turning sideways, and woe to the unwary if you pass a pregnant woman or someone with laden arms.

Or if someone decides to flout city edict and dump their chamber pot, something that happens far too frequently.

When Ona was younger, while she and Mum walked the passages, Mum would point out various sounds, and Ona would have to identify the direction of their origin. Not an easy task when every morning the alleyway filled with people trading goods and services, and the sound of their bartering carried far and wide.

Ona emerges into the alley, into a mix of laughter, conversation, and good-natured arguments as people haggle. She trades a handful of olives for a small apple and eats it while walking.

“Look who it is,” a familiar voice calls out from behind, and Ona spins round with a smile on her face. Lorin, her mum’s friend and fellow Forester, is standing with hands on hips, dressed in her leathers, grinning wide. The woman gives her a quick embrace and holds her at arm’s length. “You’ve been running and climbing, haven’t you?”

“Every day,” Ona says.

Lorin nods. “That’s a good lass. It will make the training easier on you. You *are* still going to try, aren’t you?”

“Aye.”

“What’ve you got in there,” Lorin says, nodding toward Ona’s satchel.

“Olives. Want some?”

“No need of that, girl. I’ve plenty. You keep them for you and your da.”

Another man in leathers comes down the alley, heading toward them, and Lorin reaches into her own satchel. Ona can’t see what she pulls out but feels its weight when Lorin drops it in her bag. “Just a little something.” Lorin nods to the man and rests one hand on Ona’s shoulder. “I’m needed, but tell your da that I’ll come round to see him soon. And you keep practicing; your sixteenth name day will be here before you know it.”

“I will.”

Ona watches them walk away, noticing the nods and respectful distance everyone gives them. Without the Foresters to find and fetch supplies from beyond the wall, the city would’ve consumed itself by now. “Down to the bone and into the marrow,” Mum was fond of saying.

The loud bells of the Corpsemen clang and Ona shivers. She hates their caged carts and the bodies within, knowing what the Takers will do to them. The dismemberment and destruction may be necessary to prevent them from rising as the Dead, but necessary doesn’t mean pleasant. The bells are the only sound that haunts her nightmares, the only sound she can’t ever ignore. They clang again, and Ona races home.

AFTER FEEDING THE goats and preparing the olives for curing, Ona opens her satchel. Lorin gave her two peaches, large and unbruised. She smiles and sets them aside on the larder shelf inside. Her da’s voice rings outside as he bids farewell to his apprentice, Rase, and then ducks through the entrance of their one-room home. It’s small but as clean as they can possibly keep it, and unlike many, they keep their chamber pot outside.

“Good day?” Ona asks.

He nods. “The traps were all full, and we even caught a few of the bigger ones. You?”

She shows him her haul of olives. “And I saw Lorin in trader’s row, and she gave us two peaches. Good ones, too, no soft spots.”

“A good day, then?” He lifts one eyebrow.

“Aye, the woods were quiet.”

His eyes get the faraway look they hold whenever he thinks of Mum, but he doesn’t say anything aloud. What would he say, anyway? What’s done is done. The gone are gone.

After they eat, he reclines on a cushion with his feet up and Ona sees that a recently mended tear in the sole of his threadies has split open.

“Da? You need to make yourself a new pair,” Ona says, nodding toward his foot.

He shakes his head. “One more pair for me makes one less pair to trade. You know that. I’ll mend it tomorrow.”

“But you’ve mended it twice already.”

He peers at the hole. “The stitching must’ve been weak.”

Ona bites the inside of her cheek to keep her words inside. Da’s stitching is never weak; it’s the worn rat skin itself that’s the problem.

“It’s dangerous to walk around in the city filth.”

“I’ve been walking around in the city filth for a long time. My feet are used to it by now.”

Ona snorts. Da isn’t the only tanner in Redoubt, but he’s the only one in their section of the city, and he’s the only one who cares enough to make threadies wearable for more than one season. Most use the least amount of leather as possible — more trades that way — but her da’s threadies have soles made of several layers to make them durable. Maybe not the fancy boots the inner city folk wear, but they do the trick, as he’s wont to say.

He coughs, his shoulders quavering with the sudden force, fumbles for a scrap of cloth, and spits.

“Da?”

He waves her concern away as though it were a gnat. “I’m fine, just breathing in rat guts all day. They stink enough to make anyone cough.”



ONA WAKES IN the middle of the night to the sound of muffled coughing. Her father’s pallet is empty, the blankets pushed

aside. She finds him hunched over, a cloth to his mouth, in the narrow walkway that leads to the goat pen, the rat cages, and the tanning yard.

She keeps just out of sight, listening to the cough — wet and thick and coming from deep in his chest. Much stronger than a cough from breathing in rat guts. When he finally quiets, she softly clears her throat.

He startles and curls his hand around the cloth. “What are you doing awake, girl?”

“I heard you coughing.”

“So much for coming outside to keep from waking you, eh?”

“Are you all right? And no more rat gut rubbish, if you please.”

Her da smiles and tousles her hair. “A bit of a cold come early in the season, I think. Naught more than that.”

He coughs again, a little softer this time, but his breath wheezes when the cough ends. She catches her lower lip between her teeth.

“I’ll go see Emarin tomorrow and get a poultice for your chest.”

“No need of that. It will pass.”

“Aye, but the poultice will help ease the cough while it does.”

He turns away, wiping his mouth with the cloth. “You sound like your mum.”

“She was a smart woman.”

“She was. Fine, if you want to get a poultice, I won’t stop you.”

“And will you use it?”

He stifles another cough. “I will.”

ON HER WAY back from the herbwoman’s, the poultice safe in a twist of waxed cloth, Ona slows her steps. From the closest house, she hears coughing, and again from another further away. After an unusual summer, sickness often blooms like wildflowers beyond

the wall, but this summer was neither overly wet nor terribly dry. She scratches her head. They aren't the typical dry coughs from smoke fires and dirt dust; they sound as if people have throats full of porridge. Later in the year, near the first snowfall, she'd expect to hear such a thing. Now, it seems odd.

She replays her visit to Emerin. The woman ushered her in, gave her the poultice, and sent her back on her way with almost no conversation, just a few nods and half-to-herself mutters. Naught unusual there, except instead of making Ona wait while she made the poultice, she had it at the ready, as though she knew *someone* would be paying her a visit. But remedies were the herbwoman's stock in trade, so she'd like as not have them ready, wouldn't she?

A simple explanation, and her da likes to say that the simple truth is almost always the right truth, unless it's a political matter, but Mum always said to trust her gut.

And her gut doesn't like what she hears.

SHE WAKES IN the middle of the night again, but to whispering, not a cough. Three voices, one of which belongs to her da. The words aren't quite loud enough for her to make out, yet the urgency and worry is clear. When her da returns, questions linger on her tongue but she feigns sleep. For the now, it seems the wisest thing to do.

ON THE OPEN land between city and wall, Ona runs. While she can't begin the Forester training until her sixteenth name day, Mum told her the best way to make certain she was prepared was to train herself beforehand. More than half the people who join the Foresters drop out before the training is complete; many others make it nearly to the end only to wind up with broken bones or

infections. They're all allowed to return later and try again if they wish. Most do not.

Thighs and calves aching, Ona pushes herself to run faster. Back and forth, side to side, touching the ground each time she turns in another direction.

You must run faster than you think you can, and then run even faster. Speed can save your life.

It didn't save you, Mum, Ona thinks. Not in the end. But the truth is, they don't know exactly what happened. Her mum's team was racing back to the wall, barely outrunning a small pack of rotters, and they heard her shriek... but no one saw her fall. When they went back to check the next day, they found no blood, no torn clothing, no hair, no dropped weapons. But if she lived, why didn't she come back? There was no reason for her to stay away and every reason to return. And why had no Forester seen her as a rotter since? As such, they could only declare her dead, but not Dead.

Ona's heel slides on a pebble and she goes down hard, skinning her palms. With a grunt, she gets back to her feet, breathing hard. Luckily, she didn't tear a hole in her breeches. A muscle in her calf seizes painfully, a sign that she's pushed too hard, so she heads back to the city, passing first the adjoining neighborhood, then her own. Ten paces in, she stops and heads back to the dividing line, her head cocked. The adjoining neighborhood is filled with raucous laughter, some tainted with casual cruelty, some with genuine mirth. She hears shouts and arguments — heated bartering, no doubt, and the steady hum of civil conversation. But when she advances again toward her neighborhood, the noises fall. There are gaps where sound, where voices, should be, and in their place, she hears the muffled catch of coughing. She rubs her hands together, wincing at the sting of forgotten wounds.

IN THE TANNING yard, Rase, sweaty and red-faced, is washing freshly scraped rat skins with rainwater and setting them on the stretching rack to dry. At the end of the yard, the innards are rendering in a large pot suspended over a low flame, fat floating in a yellow scum at the top. A smaller pot, covered to keep out bugs, contains the brains her da will mash with water into a paste and spread on the skins once dry. The smell of it all is a noxious blend that makes Ona's eyes water.

She uses a bit of rainwater from their collection barrel to clean the blood from her hands. Near the rendering pot, her da is talking with a man Ona recognizes by face, but not by name. The man is gesturing with his hands, but when he sees Ona his hands fall still and his eyes narrow. Her da rests one hand on the man's arm; the man shakes him off with a frown and storms off.

"Who was that?" Ona asks Rase.

"Samon. A butcher, I think."

Ona frowns and glances at the goat pen. Her da hasn't mentioned slaughtering any of them, and he always goes to Meric. As she turns to leave, she hears coughing. When she looks over her shoulder, it's Rase, not her da. When his cough subsides, he refuses to meet her gaze.

Instead of returning to the field to run, she walks along the passageways between the houses, listening. Too many coughs, too many whispers, and not nearly enough people outside. Ona knows the neighborhood, knows the people, and this isn't right. It doesn't sound right at all.

WHISPERS AGAIN IN the middle of the night. This time, she hears the words *render*, *the Watch*, *bones*, and *careful*. When her da comes

back inside, she lights a small lamp, and he stops in his tracks.

“Da? What’s going on? Please, I know something is and you’ve got to tell me.”

He huffs out a breath. “Damn your ears. I should’ve known better than to talk about it nearby. You are definitely your mother’s child.”

“What’s wrong?”

He sinks down on his pallet and runs a hand through his hair, avoiding her eyes. “People are sick. A few more than usual.”

A few? Ona bites back the words before they creep out.

“But you needn’t worry. Everything will be fine. People are taking precautions, that’s all. Staying inside more. Poultices and the like.”

He smiles, but Ona doesn’t like the look of it. It’s too big, for one thing. Too cheery, as though they’re speaking of threadies and olives instead of illness, and he has shadows beneath his eyes that aren’t an effect of the flickering light. And sickness has naught to do with bones and rendering.

“I’m not a child anymore, Da. You can tell me the truth.”

“That *is* the truth. Now put out the light so we can both go back to sleep.”

She does, but she stares into the shadows for a long time.

HER DA COUGHS on his way out in the morning, and a scrap of something pale tumbles to the floor unnoticed. Ona waits until she’s sure he won’t return, then fetches the cloth. The fabric is damp and clotted together. Specks of reddish brown dot the center.

She pinches the inside of her cheek between her teeth. Maybe he cut himself and used the cloth to wipe the blood. She dresses quickly and creeps to the tanning yard to watch him work. Surprisingly, he’s alone.

In the bright sunlight, she can see that his skin is ashen, his movements slow, and he pauses now and again to either cough or spit into another cloth. She steps back, out of sight, and makes her footfalls heavy on her return. When she kisses his cheek, his cheek is too warm. There are no fresh wounds on his hands or forearms — *the simple truth is always the right truth*, she thinks — and the cloth feels like a weight in her pocket. She can't find the words to ask; instead she asks, "Where's Jase?"

"He's helping his da with something today."

He averts his eyes when he speaks. Coughs again.

"If you want to lie down, I can take over for a bit."

He looks up from the skin he's scraping. "I'm fine enough to work, girl."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure enough."

"Mayhap I'll go see Lorin before I run. I'll take some of the cured olives and see if she has any more peaches."

"No, not today. I want you to stay close to home. And no climbing over the wall, either."

"Why?"

"Because I said so. Mind me now, girl."

His words are sharp and Ona's own dissolve in her throat.

"Here, you *can* help me. Grab another rat and the gutting knife."

She wants to argue, but one look at his colorless face and she grabs a rat instead, wincing at its still warm but lifeless body.

ONA MAKES HER way between houses, hearing muffled coughing the way entire. Her da was off collecting traps, and while he didn't tell her to stay close by, he didn't tell her not to. When she nears the alleyway, she doesn't hear laughter and bartering, and when she

emerges into the space, empty of people, carts, and produce, she stands with her elbows cupped into her palms.

A chill dances down her spine when she begins to walk its length. On the far side, people are going about their business, but more than one has a cloth tied over their mouth. One woman carrying a basket of mended clothing catches Ona's gaze. The woman shakes her head hard and casts her eyes to the left. Ona begins to approach her; the woman shakes her head even harder and scurries away.

The chill turns to ice water in her veins as a man wielding a crude spear steps in the space the woman vacated. Although he's pressing a cloth to his mouth, his eyes hold a steady resolve. But beneath it, fear. Fingers trembling, Ona spins on her heels and ducks into the nearest passageway, but she feels the weight of the man's gaze even when she falls out of sight and breaks into a run.

Her da isn't in the tanning yard as she expects. He's inside, awake, but seated on his pallet, his skin the color of mother's milk. When he sees her, his eyes widen. "What's wrong?"

"Trader's row is empty, and I saw a man with a spear and his mouth covered."

His hands clench into fists. "Stay here. I mean it."

He's gone before she can reply, and remains gone long enough that she's on the verge of leaving the house to try and find him when he finally returns. He sinks down on his pallet, his face shadowed.

"What's wrong, Da?" She crosses her arms over her chest, stands firm.

"Fine," he says, pointing to her own pallet. "Sit."

When she does, he looks down at the cloth in his hands for a long time before speaking. "It's wet lung. A sickness," — he touches his chest — "here. Trader's row is empty so it won't spread anywhere else. And the man with the spear... well, people are afraid. Wet lung spreads quickly."

“So why don’t I have it? I’ve been around you and you’re sick.”

He nods. “Aye, but not everyone gets it. A lot do, but not everyone.”

“How long will it take for it to go away?”

An unbearable silence stretches like a rat’s unspooled intestine.

“Da?”

“We don’t know. But until it does, you must stay close to home.”

“But—”

“No arguments. Now come help me in the yard. We’ve rats to skin.”

UNDER THE COVER of darkness, with her father snoring deeply, Ona slips from their house and climbs to the top of the wall. Ade is standing with his arms folded across his chest, his face unreadable.

“Olives,” she says, the word more of something to fill the quiet than an explanation.

“Not tonight,” he says, taking a step back.

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t let you down tonight. Go back home,” he says.

“But, I—”

“Go back, Ona.” He rests his hand on the cudgel hanging at his belt. “Now.”

With slow steps, she returns home. Ade’s never turned her away. Not once. She creeps into the house as quietly as possible, but as soon as she does, her da lights the lamp.

“Where were you?”

“I went to climb.” She swallows hard. “But Ade wouldn’t let me over the wall.”

His face darkens and when he speaks, his words are sharp. “Dwarves’ blood, girl, I thought I told you no climbing. I thought

I told you to stay close to home.”

“I know, but—”

“What did Ade say?”

“He didn’t say anything. He just told me to go home.”

He coughs into a cloth and when it subsides, he gives a long shuddering sigh. “Go back to sleep.”

ONA HELPS HER da in the yard, cares for their goats, and tries not to grumble too much. The days pass slowly. Her da’s cough continues. From time to time, other neighborhood men come to see him, and they speak of the illness. More people are sick, but she wouldn’t need to hear them say it to know it for truth; the days and nights are filled with coughing and muffled crying.

HER DAS PALLET is empty when she wakes. She walks to the yard and stops when she sees him in the company of three other men. “We can’t hide it anymore,” one man says. “The—”

Seeing Ona, he falls silent.

“Ona, go back inside,” her da says.

She nods, but takes her time and hears the man when he continues. “The Corpse men know, and not a one of them will trade payment for silence. How long do you think we have?”

“They wouldn’t. We’ve quarantined ourselves,” her da says.

“It may not be enough.”

“I’m telling you they won’t.”

“Don’t be a fool, Matin. They’ll do what they want.”

When the men leave, Ona returns to the yard.

“You were listening,” her da says.

“Aye. What did he mean, the corpse men know?”

“The sickness is...worse than we thought it would be. And people are dying. We’re afraid...”

“Afraid of what?”

“Afraid it will get even worse. In the morning, I want you to go to Lorin’s, and I want you to stay with her until this sickness is done.”

“Why? If I’m not sick by now...”

“You will do as I say.” He fixes her with a dark look.

“But how will I get past the men with the spears?”

“I trust you’ll find a way. You’re fast like your mum. Scurry quick and they’ll have no choice but to leave you be.”

“What if Lorin won’t let me stay?”

“She will. I know she will.”

His eyes say otherwise, and Ona presses her hands together to quell the shake in her hands.

THE CRY IS high and sharp, cut off almost as quickly as it rises in the air, but Ona, halfway to sleep, is instantly alert. She sits up as her da shakes her arm.

“Wake up, girl.”

“I’m awake. What’s wrong?” Shouts rise in the distance, followed by screams. “What’s happening, Da? What is it?”

“You have to go. Now. Put on your leathers.”

The bells of the Undertaking clang, but they can’t conceal the cries of pain.

Ona scrambles into her clothes. “What are they doing?”

“What they think needs to be done to keep the sickness from spreading.”

She hears an animal bleat, a child shrieking, “No!” A woman calling out for them to stop, to please stop.

“Are they—”

“Aye. Move it, girl.” He grabs her threadies, thrusts them toward her, and starts tossing provisions in her satchel.

“Where will we go?” she asks, beginning to tie her laces.

“I’m not going anywhere. *You* are.”

Ona pauses. “No. No, Da. I won’t leave you here. I *can’t*.”

“You have no choice.” He bends down and ties the laces on her other threadie.

“But not everyone is sick.”

“Listen.” He points toward the doorway. Another scream pierces the night, cuts off at its apex. “Do you think that matters? If you stay, they’ll kill you.”

“But if you stay—”

He presses two fingers against her lips. “Quiet. I’ll hide, I’ll be fine.” She sees the lie in his eyes, sees that he knows she does, too. He drapes the satchel across her body and hands her the sheathed olivewood spike, a blade, and a cudgel.

“Da?”

“Take them all. You might need them.”

“I won’t.”

“You do what you need to do. Find Lorin, if you can. If not, find someplace to hide until it’s over. You’re not sick and the city is so big, no one will know where you came from.”

She folds into his arms, sobbing, her fingers clutching his nightclothes tight. “Da, I’m scared.”

He kisses her forehead, pushes her away. “I know, but you’re smart and you’re fast. I know you’ll be okay. I love you, my girl. Now and always. Remember that.” He glances out the door and pulls her outside. “Now go. The way is clear.”

Fighting tears, she creeps into the passageway, moving as quickly and as quietly as possible between the houses. She looks

back, but her da has already gone back inside. Tears course down her cheeks and she wipes them on her sleeve.

She doesn't even make it halfway to the alley when she hears soldiers. She takes a deep breath and peeks around the corner. Soldiers with spears, their faces grim. She hears the unmistakable sound of a cudgel thumping against a skull and shudders.

She can't get to the alley, which means she can't get to Lorin, and she can't stay here. Not if she wants to live. She slips back into the shadows, scrubs her face with her hands. What if she goes back home? If the soldiers try anything, she can fight. She can protect herself, and her da, too.

She hears another scream, another wet thump. The tears return, and for a moment, she can't move, can barely breathe. Finally, a too-close shout breaks the spell.

There *is* someplace she can go. Someplace she knows well enough. She swallows a laugh that tastes bitter and hollow; death or Death isn't much of a choice.

She runs back through the passages, crouching low. The smell of blood is thick in the air, the echoes of screams even thicker. She pauses at the edge of the open field. Even though shrouded in shadows, it seems wider, bigger. She'll never make it. Never.

A wavering scream pierces the night. Ona presses her lips together tight and, keeping as low to the ground as possible, she races across the open land. The taste of dread is sharp and biting in her mouth. She waits to hear a soldier's shout, the sound of footsteps, feel the weight of a cudgel or the point of a spear, but the city's decision to conceal the bloodshed under cover of night serves her well.

She reaches the wall and her knees buckle, but there's no time to rest now. No time for worry or fear. She climbs, not stopping to remove her threadies. The way is harder and slower, she bites back

a curse as the soles slip on the stone, and her forearms ache when she swings her legs over the top.

“What do you think you’re doing?” a harsh voice says.

She scrambles to her feet. “Ade, it’s me, Ona.”

He holds up a hand, steps back. “Go back, girl.”

“Do you know what they’re doing? What they’re going to do to my da? What they’ll do to me?”

He says naught. Touches the cudgel hanging from his belt.

“I’m not sick.”

More screams carry through the air and Ade winces. Ona scratches her shoulder, her fingers near the spike’s end. *Do what you need to do*, Da said. But can she? Another scream, a shout, a child shrieking for its mum. The bells of the Corpsemen clang. Her back straightens.

“You won’t have a chance out there.” Ade says. “You won’t make it a fortnight.”

“I don’t have a chance in here, either. Out there, maybe I will. I can stay out just long enough for the worry to pass, then come back. No one will know but you. I’m fast and I have good ears, and you can always smell the rotters. Even the fresh ones stink. I won’t have to stay out there too long. Please, let me at least have the chance. And if the worst happens...” Her hand tightens on the spike. “At least the Dead don’t kill each other.”

He winces again and turns away. “If you’re going to go, do it quick.”

With her heart racing madness she descends, and at the bottom, pauses to scent the air. No decay. No movement in the darkness. She’ll be quiet, she’ll be careful, and she’ll be fast.

She’ll be faster than her mum ever was.



THE SENSE OF EXILE

C.A. SULEIMAN

THERE IS NO work today.

On any ordinary day, the tribesman would be doing what tribesmen do when they live under the largesse of a personage as munificent as the Sultaar Inunwa: That, being whatever he is asked to do.

But this tribesman, whose name is Q'teeb, has instead been tasked with a duty that will take him all of the day and most of the night to fulfill. And he *will* fulfill it, even if it costs him a day's wage. Even if it jeopardizes the standing of his line within the tribe. Even if the sultaar himself disapproves.

In Q'teeb's tribe, as in other Ouazi tribes, the tribal leadership holds only so much influence and self-hegemony as the house of the sultaar will allow. Even though the sultaar was intended to be merely the religious head and spiritual voice of the Ouazi, everything changed after his people abandoned their lands and their nomadic ways and took root behind the walls of the so-

called “Saints’ Refuge” that was the dwarves’ ancestral home on the surface of Zileska.

Since then the sultaar has done exactly what the nobility of the other human cultures has done, which is to consolidate power and invest in the system they all devised in the Accord of Last Redoubt, signed after they wrestled control of the world’s last living city from those who built it and let them in.

The dwarves called it *Elldimek* then, but Elldimek is gone. Humanity has seen to that.

Even though enslaved, the dwarves couldn’t just go along with the Accord in that one regard, to see their home as that human document proscribed they must — as “Redoubt,” an unfamiliar word in the tongue of betrayer conquerors. Not in the immediate aftermath of its signing, decades ago now, and not in the years that followed. For a time the dwarves protested by referring to it in secret by its original name, savoring the memory of Elldimek in their mouths as well as in their hearts, but even if the new authorities had not cracked down on the practice as hard as they did (and the campaign was brutal, indeed — all done in the name of a name), the truth was that Elldimek *was* long gone.

Humanity had seen to that.

And so discussion of Elldimek dwindled over time along with all living memory of it. Rumor holds that the so-called “ashen priests” still use the term in their hoary ritual practices, but such things are not for the surface world at all and certainly not for the likes of an Ouazi tribesman like Q’teeb. But something to which a person like Q’teeb *is* privy is the term for what the enslaved dwarves of Redoubt choose to call their city instead.

The first time he hears the word “Çellintojek” with any clarity, Q’teeb stands in shadow. He waits Dockside for his connection, a sullen Venmir who failed to come through the last time but whose

wares are generally worth both the trouble and the wait, and has just leaned against a stiff post under a ratty but shade-worthy awning when the two dwarf men walk by. Like many dwarves, they bear the marks of their forced servitude: twin studs in each ear, facial hair aplenty, no weapons. Like many dwarves, they opt to speak their own tongue when in conversation with each other.

And like many dwarves, they don't know that Q'teeb has spent the previous four years learning their language to the best of his ability — that he is now nearly fluent in the dwarven lingual mode. He realizes he's heard the word before, in passings similar to this one, but could never parse out what it meant. Context never seemed to help, even when he thought he grasped the gist of dialogue's flow.

Q'teeb approaches the two men, hands out and palms up, the city-wide signatory for unarmed and peaceful intent. Nonetheless, he is a human man and they are dwarven slaves, and thus both fall silent and guarded as they turn dour faces his way.

"Apologies for intruding," he says. "May I trouble you with a question before you go about your business?"

The slaves don't reply, but neither do they turn away. Q'teeb presses on.

"This word, Çellintojek. What does it mean?" When the two dwarves look at each other warily, he adds, "I ask only for myself. I am blessed enough to call no man *erus* and will do you no harm."

A look of dawning awareness falls across one slave's face, and he whispers something to the other in their native language. To Q'teeb's ears, he thinks he makes out the words "brother," "killer," and "exiled." The mask of blooming apprehension spreads like a contagion to the other dwarf's face.

In the tongue of his oppressor, the first slave says, "Çellintojek is what has become of our home. A new word for a new reality. It

means our ‘stolen hearth.’”

Q’teeb understands now. “Ah, this is a combination word, a true piece of the city’s slavespeech. *Bizin çellinto tojek*. ‘Our stolen hearth.’”

All four eyes before him widen, but neither slave says a word.

Q’teeb nods, thanks them, and sends them on their way, but long after his Venmir confederate has shown up and made good on the deal they arranged the week prior, the name resonates in him, and all the long way from the fish-smearred dock to his aging father’s shack in Eastside, he ponders it.

“Çellintojek,” the tribesman mutters to himself as he walks emburdened.

“Bizin çellinto tojek.”

“DID YOU GET them?” His father’s voice is harsh, thick with the years and heavy with impatience.

“Yes, father,” says Q’teeb, as he moves past the older man in the doorway and into the sparseness of the modest room beyond. As if accustomed to always having to prove his word good, he swings the pack from off his back as he walks and sets it atop a wooden table with one uneven leg. The table wobbles angrily when he unfastens the pack’s ties to present its contents for inspection.

His father, who looks very much like an older and whiter version of himself, shuffles across the wood-plank floor toward him. The chief difference between father and son is that where Q’teeb’s eyes are deep-set, but rich and dark with color, his father’s eyes are bulging scirms of milky cataracts. Unable to distinguish beyond sprays of light and dark, his father sees primarily by laying his hands upon things, and he does so now, sifting through each item in the pack as if for inventory.

“I don’t see them here...” he mutters, digging one arm down into the depths of the sack.

“You don’t see anything, father,” Q’teeb mutters back.

At this, the old man slams a fist down on the table, which nearly capsizes as a result of the force. “Impudent dog of a worthless son! Do you think this a *jest*? Some sport for fools?” His face has gone the color of fresh beets. Flecks of spittle dot his lips and the tuft of ghostly hair surrounding them.

“No, father.” Q’teeb’s voice is small, even in the smallness of the ramshackle room.

“Are you a worthless brother, as well? Is that what you are to Nekba?”

Q’teeb can only hang his head and pray that the tears don’t come for him again.

“Is that what you are?” the elder repeats.

Even though his father’s eyes don’t see him, Q’teeb looks right into them now. “No, father.”

“Then where are they? These supplies mean nothing if you die trying to get them out.”

“They are there, father. Check the fold inside.”

His father rummages further and quickly produces a handful of iron pieces, each well made and altogether out of place next to the array of comestibles he has already unloaded onto the table. “There are only four climbing spikes here. I advised you to get eight, if not more.”

“Four will do, father,” Q’teeb says reassuringly. “After all, I only have two hands and two feet.”

If humor may be found in this, it is lost on the old man. “Hmph. And now we have no choice.”

Father sets down the iron spikes and leaves son to return all the items to their rightful places, either inside the pack or on his person, in preparation for imminent departure. Shuffling to the far side of the room, the aging tribesman retrieves one last item from a

hide pouch he has secreted away there, and this he clutches to his chest as he shuffles his sightless way back to the table and to Q'teeb.

"Take this, too," he instructs. Sitting atop his outstretched palm rests a coiled lump of leather. "Not for Nekba, but for the tribal warden in Aurib-Naa. For Maloufi."

When Q'teeb recognizes the object, he shakes his head defiantly. "That's not needed, father. They'll let me through without it. Please... do not give them your falconer's blind. Grief enough your sight is taken from you, Nekba from us both. We need not compound tragedy by giving up our past."

For the first time, his father's countenance softens, the ruddiness draining from his face. "Son... this is the *best* we can hope for, not the worst. If our plan finds success, it will mean your making this trip many times; not just once, tonight. And that kind of arrangement with Maloufi requires sacrifice. This is something I know he desires. Think of it as the pendent seal pressed into our agreement with the house of the moon god."

"Baba..." Q'teeb sighs.

"Do not 'baba' me, you ungrateful goat. Take the blind, and with it do your duty."

As usual, his father's words are harsh.

As usual, buried somewhere deep inside them, there is love.

IT TAKES THE younger tribesman all afternoon and evening to reach Aurib-Naa, home of those Ouazi-in-self-exile and one of only two sovereign parcels of land within the perimeter of the city of Redoubt. Like the other parcel, the notorious Jepourah compound, the village of Aurib-Naa is largely self-governing — still beholden to the manorial jurisdiction of the Magisterium and the Watch, but otherwise receiving neither scrutiny nor aid from the powers of the Inner City. Just like

the members of the Jepourah schism, its inhabitants choose a hard life of social isolation out of spiritual obligation.

To get there, Q'teeb must first traverse half the width of the Inner City, making his way on foot from the clustered homes of the predominantly Ouazi neighborhoods in Eastside, west to the river, and from there down the Riverwalk, traversing half the *length* of the Inner City, to the Southgate.

To the dismay of the Ouazi, the most treacherous part of this journey is the opening league: getting out of Eastside. While certainly living better than their Outer City counterparts, the residents of the district Q'teeb calls home are among the poorest residents of the Inner City; apart from the sultaar, his extended family, the tribe from which he hails, and the two tribes with whom his house holds strongest alliance, the rest of his people live largely at the whim of those same cultural elites. The humiliation and inequality pair poorly with the traditional Ouazi mindset, which is a thing of lasting pride and questing nature. This, of course, begets frustration, which thus begets crime.

And Q'teeb is alone, traveling visibly encumbered with overstuffed bags of wares.

He is also armed, of course, but his first plan for making it out of the Inner City with his health and belongings intact is to avoid confrontation entirely. All his plan requires is an old pair of shit-stained leather gauntlets, and when he first espies the duo of shady figures trailing him from one block down (an Ouazi boy, no older than fifteen, and the boy's much older female Surinzan companion) he reaches down and slips them on.

At about the same time, Q'teeb begins to slow his gait, moving now as though he himself must be stalking someone. Out of the corner of his eye the tribesman sees the two would-be thieves catch each other up, pausing to see what their would-be quarry will do

next, and he suppresses a smile.

“Ooh!” he exclaims just loud enough for the pair to hear. “What have we here...”

Gazed fixed at the ground ahead, Q'teeb moves quickly but demonstratively to a spot in the middle of the road, where he stops so short it takes a moment for foot traffic to divert around him. Feigning excitement, he bends down and rises a heartbeat later holding a flattened disc of manure up high into the air, like a trophy. (He hopes it is of the horse variety, but it doesn't really matter.)

“Yes, indeed!” beams Q'teeb at an ample volume. “You'll fetch well!” He speaks to the shit, even looks at it approvingly, but he is course *talking* to the pair behind him. Between the drawn carts of the Undertaking, which criss-cross the streets of every district multiple times a day, and the (mostly) natural accumulations of the living masses, the dung can pile up fast along the streets of Redoubt. And although just about everything has a value or potential use in this city, the ignominious duty of shit collection is generally reserved for only the poorest of the poor, and generally not done by individual enterprise anywhere in the Inner City — not even in Eastside.

When the two observing Q'teeb watch him stow the horse pie in the pack he's carrying, they move off with a shared look of disgust so profound he almost laughs aloud and ruins his own gambit. They may be desperate Eastside thieves, but they want no part of his sack of pressed manure patties.

By the time he passes beneath the Southgate portcullis, his gloves are off and his smile is wide.

MADE ON FOOT, the trek from the Southgate, where the Kolobus River exits the Inner City, down to Aurib-Naa would take so long

that Q'teeb would be exhausted when he finally arrived and in no shape to fulfill the rest of his duty. Instead, Q'teeb pauses outside the Southgate wall to acquire a horse for the day, courtesy of the enterprising Menhada collective that runs an Outer City livery stable for just these sorts of occasions. Historically, the Ouazi are nowhere near the horsemasters the Menhada are, but they take to horses quickly and with fondness, and Q'teeb thrills at the chance to ride, however expensive the experience might be. He passes through many tracts of farmland, each one regulated to ensure steady food production for the city's hundreds of thousands of souls, with the wind in his hair and the sound of clopping hooves comforting him from somewhere down below.

Even on horseback the trip takes all afternoon, and the sun has already set below the horizon when Q'teeb canters to a stop at the fencepost that signifies the outer perimeter of the Ouazi village. Soon enough, the moon that his people personify as Aurib, the Beautiful One, will rise to fullness and cast his pale eye over all he surveys. As instructed, Q'teeb waits at the fence for one of the locals to attend him, and it isn't long before a tribesman dressed in linen and carrying a spear approaches. After exchanging the customary blessings of Aurib, the two men proceed on foot to a nearby pavilion where the sentry invites Q'teeb to tie up his horse and take a seat on a long wooden bench within. As darkness settles across the face of the mountain, torch lights puff into being all around the village.

From what his father told him, Aurib-Naa maintains four tribal wardens — one for each tribe that calls the village home — and Maloufi the Elder is one such personage. Q'teeb doesn't know what sort of history the man has with his father, finds it inappropriate to delve deep into the matter, knows only that one exists and that Maloufi is the man with whom he must engage if he is to fulfill his duty.

The warden arrives not alone, bearing the mien of a man ready to welcome a fellow tribesman over a warm cup of dollroot tea or maybe goat's milk, but in the company of two figures whose manner of expertise is visibly martial in nature. The man with Maloufi is clearly *fairouk*, an Ouazi social and military tradition going back centuries. Each *fairouk* is a master of not merely the Ouazi cultural weapon, the *girga*, but also the art of the moving body form. During the Second Ascension a common-held view was that there were none so quick nor as dangerous unarmed as an Ouazi *fairouk*. (Apart from an elf, that is; but then, during that era the entirety of the known *world* lagged behind the elves in almost every meaningful way.) It's said that they are so fast and adroit with their double-slings that they use them to success even in the heat of melee, and that wounds inflicted by a *girga* up close are even more deadly than those diluted by distance.

The woman with him is no *fairouk*, but based on appearances and on her presence here in such a role, Q'teeb is certain that she is a member of the Nerouza, the Ouazi sister tradition to the *fairouk*. More formalized in their structure, the order of the Nerouza focuses on rigor, in everything from diet to training. Each is an expert with the longdagger, using it as both ranged threat and as her weapon of choice hand-to-hand, and girls who join the Nerouza take solemn initiatory vows in which they "give children to the moon," indicating a willing sacrifice of their childbirthing potential in pursuit of their duties. When the matter of repopulating the race came to the fore, the sultaar officially disbanded the Nerouza within the Inner City, but here stands proof that Aurib-Naa never broke with tradition.

They stand guard to a man who simultaneously looks exactly as Q'teeb was expecting and not at all akin to that expectation. He stands shorter than either of his aides, but of average height for Ouazi men. His hair is an oily black and his large round eyes

carry undertones of yellow that remind Q'teeb of the big cats who according to his father once prowled the Eternal Sea. Like most Ouazi alive today Q'teeb has never been to the ancestral home of his people. Sometimes he wonders if he ever will.

The young tribesman rises to his feet and offers his host a shallow bow.

The tribal warden dismisses the gesture with a magnanimous smile and points to another bench across the narrow table from Q'teeb. "Let us sit together right here, you and I."

Q'teeb obliges, and as the other man gets settled, begins. "Blessings of Aurib be upon you. Warden, we thank you for—"

"How is your father?" When Q'teeb's expressions startles at the question, the warden leans forward, rests his elbows on the tabletop, and laces his fingers together in front of him. In the moments before Q'teeb's mind can form a proper response, it seizes the opportunity to remark at how the warden's pose is identical to the one that most Angat assume just before taking in a meal.

And then the words come. "He is very well, warden, thank you for asking."

"So your name is Q'teeb. Did you know that you are named after the greatest falconer of the first age of men?"

Q'teeb nods. "I do. My father is very proud."

"And yet... you have never seen a black falcon, let alone flown one. Have you."

Q'teeb doesn't like the feel of where this is going, but he is not about to be impolite. Not here. Not tonight. "I have not had the pleasure, warden."

This man Maloufi leans back away from the table and crosses his arms over his chest. "And how would you, of course, being forever locked up behind the walls of a wayward dunghheap like Redoubt."

Q'teeb is no one, politically speaking, and does not begin to

understand why the warden wants to engage him on *this* particular topic, but in the event that it's some test of mettle on the warden's part, the proper thing — the *Ouazi* thing — is to stand in polite respect... but to stand all the same. "Our tribe did not forsake the house of the sultaar, as yours did. You know as well as anyone that we are obligated to remain with the rest of our kinsmen, whether inside the city walls or otherwise."

"Your tribe did not, that is true. And yet... your own family did."

With the other man's somehow predatory eyes now locked firmly on his, Q'teeb suddenly understands what is taking place on the other side of the table, and why. "You refer to Nekba."

"Is that not why you are here? Your sister Nekba?"

"You know it is, warden." Q'teeb doesn't want to look angry, but neither will he look away.

"This is the thing I find most interesting about your situation..." the other man begins, uncrossing his arms so that he might use his hands to better facilitate speech. "Had your sister *truly* done as we have done, and forsaken the corrupt security you find under the sultaar's broken wing, she would be among us today. And neither you nor your worried father would be in this position. Coming to me for help."

"I do not take your meaning, warden. She *did* forsake the sultaar and the authority of his house, just after he married the Angat noblewoman."

"Yes, but unlike everyone else who did so, she did not come *here*. She chose a life of closed-in, foul-smelling misery in the Downs over a life of faithful living among kinsmen who feel as she did."

"She did not leave her *tribe*," Q'teeb says, his tone implying it's a repetition of an already stated point. "Only what she saw as the corruption of a flawed sultaar."

"Indeed," sighs the other man. "And her choice cost her everything."

“I still do not take your meaning, warden.”

“No? Tell me again the story of her crime.”

Q'teeb's patience is wearing thin, but he holds his resolve taut. “You know our situation.”

“I would like to hear your account of it,” the warden says, crossing his arms once more.

Q'teeb takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “She'd gone down to the river that morning. One of the Hoodsmen came through, looking for a fugitive woman. He ordered all the Ouazi women in the area to remove their head scarves, thinking the fugitive may have been hiding in plain sight. Nekba did not care for how he handled the matter, and she told him so. He responded by snatching the scarf from off her head and throwing it in a bucket of fish guts. She reacted by doing the same to him.”

“Yes,” says the other man. “Yet, unmasking a Hoodsmen in public is a very serious offense.”

“Yes,” echoes Q'teeb. “One punishable by banishment.”

“Just so,” the warden says, smiling now as if he is a cat who has finally cornered the rat. “And when an Ouazi living in the Inner City is banished from it, that person can simply move to Newtown or Aurib-Naa. But when someone already living in Newtown is banished, there is no option left save...”

“Exile. Yes, I know. But the same holds true for someone living *anywhere* in the Outer City.”

At this, the tribal warden bristles visibly. “Aurib-Naa is nothing *like* Newtown, young man.”

“Technically, the House of the Moon God is as beholden to the law of the Accord as anyone.”

“The city has never *tried* to exile one of mine.” The statement isn't merely a challenge, but a trap of a kind, baiting Q'teeb into a negotiational misstep. Q'teeb *knows* the claim is false — that a

charge of the warden's very own, one Khaigar ool-Nacheen, was ordered exiled from the city not five months earlier for making war within the city limits — but choosing whether to *say* so is the true concern. The warden was daring him to bring it up, and that means that he unequivocally should not.

What Q'teeb finally says is, "The city is wise for avoiding conflict with the Ouazi."

Maloufi the Elder treats him to a low and lingering smile absent all warmth. "Indeed."

"Of course you are right," Q'teeb continues, eager to be done with all this. "My father and I do regret our family situation, and appreciate any help that you can be in our time of greatest need."

The warden nods. "And you shall have it, kinsman. Yet... what shall I have from you, I wonder."

For one lunatic moment, Q'teeb envisions himself suddenly producing the stowed manure patty and pressing it right into the other man's leering face. Rather than make a reality of that dire image, his body complies with his mind's intent and produces instead the falconer's blind his father gave him. On seeing the humble thing, the warden's eyes go wide before he can contain his own reaction, and watching the sudden power of it throws Q'teeb from the complacent perch of his own resentment.

"M... may I?" the other says almost reverently, one trembling hand reaching out over the table.

The younger man bows again, in greater earnest, hands the delicate coils of fine leather across. The elder takes them, and for the first time, Q'teeb sees a man who might once have been a boy.

FROM THE PAVILION, Q'teeb is taken by escort all the way to the back of the village, to the outer wall, where his conveyance awaits.

Although the outer wall and its defense are concerns for the entire city, the section of the wall that marks the western border of Aurib-Naa is left largely to the Ouazi to monitor and maintain. This section sits more or less halfway between the two nearest city strongholds along the outer wall (at the Mountain Gate and the River Gate), which makes the Ouazi guardtower at the top a great boon to city defense. Since this guardtower sits atop no exit through the wall, the Ouazi maintain a “liftgate” — in effect a muscle-powered shed that rises from the dirt floor of Aurib-Naa to the top of the wall.

Two bare-chested men stand on either side of the wood-and-stone construction and turn massive winches, which thus turn massive wheels, which in turn haul the liftgate steadily up the wall. As it rises into the darkness above with him ensconced inside, Q'teeb wonders what life has been like for his sister since he was forced to watch her escorted, crying, beyond the outer wall at blade-point.

He and his father sent her off with as many key tools and supplies as they could load her up with, but it has been weeks since that fateful day. The agreement was that even if she was faring well enough on her own (a possibility, given the recent lull in sightings of the Dead along the wall itself), that she would keep this date with her brother; that she would meet him beyond the wall on this night, take the supplies he brought for her, and share with him the things their father wanted to hear. While he had bribed one of the outer sentries to keep an eye out for her along the western run of the wall, he didn't do so expecting much in the way of a return, and his expectation in that was borne out. There has been no sign of her for some time.

Still, Q'teeb knows that she is strong, and remains full up on hope, excited to see her again.

At the top of the wall he is greeted by Ouazi guardsmen, themselves happy to see another face. As he pulls the rope and

climbing spikes from his pack, one applauds him for what he does tonight. Another nods his agreement on this, but stresses that Q'teeb must be back up the wall by daybreak. The Magisterium frowns on those who would pervert the spirit of a court-rendered sentence of exile.

When he finishes his downward climb, landing roughly on a patch of dry earth at the base of the outer wall, Q'teeb's body tenses, as though it expects immediate attack. This feeling does not disperse, although it does subside once he has stood on guard for a few minutes.

Being beyond the walls of Redoubt is very dangerous, especially at night, but he is committed to his endeavor, determined to wait as long as he can, and convinced that his sister Nekba will appear.

After almost an hour, his muscles ache from the accumulated strain and tension, the smaller of Zileska's two moons has reached its zenith, and Q'teeb begins to wonder if he should not perhaps begin to make his way along the wall, thinking that Nekba might have gotten confused or lost somehow and might now be looking for him at a different location than the one agreed upon in a hazy dialogue that took place weeks before. Just as he is about to move out, he hears a noise.

From ahead of him it comes, wafting out of the woods like an aroma of sound. Subtle, at first, it grows slowly in intensity and Q'teeb realizes this is because the source of the sound is drawing near. Setting his packs down, he draws a blade in one hand and his *girga* in the other, not spinning it actively but more than ready to whip its weighted projectile at a moment's notice.

As the sound approaches, another sound emerges below it, coming from the same direction. Unlike the first, which is a low but constant thrum of some kind, this is an intermittent sound, as if...

Footsteps, he thinks. *Feet moving slowly across dry ground.*

"Nekba?" he calls out to the dark. He tries to moderate his

volume, hoping to be heard only out to a minimal range, but his own voice sounds impossibly loud in the still of the woodland night, and he almost jumps out of his skin over it. Even quieter he adds, "Is it you?"

The noises draw closer still, and as Q'teeb peers into the dark thatch of the forestscape before him, his adjusting eyes make out the silhouette of a lone figure set against the backdrop of the night. A lone *feminine* figure, turned face-to and most definitely coming his way.

"Sister!" he exclaims as quietly as he can, though it still strikes him as piercing in the stillness. Excitement overflowing inside him now, Q'teeb begins to close the distance between himself and the figure, each step less tentative than the last. Reason does not abandon him entirely, and he still keeps his weapons to hand as he moves closer in, still focuses his senses on as much of his environment as he can, but something in the familiarity of that silhouette tells him that this *is* his big sister. It must be.

Just as he gets to within a few paces of it, the figure emerges from the shade of the tree canopy, out into the light of shining Aurib up above.

"No..." Q'teeb whispers.

The moonlit figure before him bears only a passing resemblance to his sister Nekba. It has her clothes, her hair, even her overall posture, but it is not she. In place of eyes it has only two empty pits, and in a dimly horrific daze it occurs to Q'teeb that his sister's eyeballs appear to have burst outward, covering her cheeks in a viscid gore that, while clearly stale, somehow remains fresh enough to catch and reflect the silvery light of the Beautiful One from his place on high. The dead thing produces a low, full-throated snarl his sister never could have made, and lurches forward, arms outstretched.

Before Q'teeb can ready his hands to perform the most unthinkable deed of his life, the unliving thing that was once his vibrant and uncompromising sister suddenly ceases its shambling advance. Its head cocks jerkily to one side, as though listening at a curious sound, and its hands fall to its sides.

From behind the Nekba revnant, another figure emerges... and the sight of it nearly drives the poor tribesman into the waiting arms of madness.

Once, when he was just a child, Q'teeb chanced to meet the oldest elf living in Redoubt. He recalls a drawn and sallow face, skin little more than gold-brushed parchment, and stringy hair that looked not just elderly, but somehow *molting*. The thing that steps from behind his sister's corpse, bending into view as though hidden inside her shadow, reminds him of that elf... only far, far worse. Its eyes are twin orbs of blackness, not so much reflecting the light of the moon as absorbing it. The figure's skin is *so* drawn and sallow that it looks skeletal. Although there is no wind, its long stringy hair seems to flutter behind its head in an invisible breeze blowing constantly against its wizened face.

Q'teeb looks down and sees that the creature stands not merely barefoot, but somehow poised on the very tips of its grossly overgrown toenails. It is at this moment that he realizes that those toes were the source of that first steady sound he heard: When the thing floats across the earth, it *scrapes*.

Q'teeb screams then, and although the sound is ugly and jarring in the still of the night, the desolate tribesman takes no note of it. For him, stillness is a dream. The scream is all there is.

And when the Dead thing pulling his fallen sister's strings raises a clawed hand and points one menacing talon at the city behind him, Q'teeb drops his weapons and tries to cover his ears, pawing so desperately at his head that hunks of hair start falling

away between his quaking fingers. Anything to make it stop.

His duty fulfilled, the tribesman falls to his knees, looks up into the face of his god, and weeps.



UNDER OBDURATE SIBLING moons above, the last city of mankind sleeps. Beyond its walls, that which was old is born anew. That the elf race went all but extinct during the Fall did not mean that it was *gone*.

It has returned, and with it dawns a dark new day for the people of this last redoubt.

This saints' refuge.

This stolen hearth.

This citadel of the lost.



PEOPLE OF REDOUBT

NATANIA BARRON is a word tinkerer with a lifelong love of the fantastic. She enjoys mixing horror and mythology, epic fantasy and the weird. Basically, she likes genre cocktails. Her first novel, a mythpunk fantasy, *Pilgrim of the Sky*, debuted in late 2011, and the follow-up is soon to come. A novella, *Wothwood*, is expected in late 2016. Her short stories have appeared in a wide variety of anthologies and publications, from *Weird Tales* to *The Mammoth Book of Kaiju*. She lives in Durham, NC with her family. When she's not trying to figure out how to get to Narnia, she can be found cooking, playing guitar, painting, and plotting her next adventure (on a tabletop or otherwise).

Born and raised in a small harbor town in the south of Ireland, **KEALAN PATRICK BURKE** knew from a very early age that he was going to be a horror writer. The combination of an ancient

locale, a horror-loving mother, and a family full of storytellers made it inevitable that he would end up telling stories for a living. Since those formative years, he has written five novels, over a hundred short stories, six collections, and edited four acclaimed anthologies. In 2004, he was honored with the Bram Stoker Award for his novella *The Turtle Boy*. Kealan has worked as a waiter, a drama teacher, a mapmaker, a security guard, an assembly-line worker at Apple Computers, a salesman (for a day), a bartender, landscape gardener, vocalist in a grunge band, curriculum content editor, fiction editor at Gothic.net, and, most recently, a fraud investigator. When not writing, Kealan designs book covers through his company Elderlemon Design. A number of his books have been optioned for film. Visit him on the web at www.kealanpatrickburke.com.

ERIN M. EVANS is got a degree in Anthropology from Washington University in St. Louis — and promptly stuck it in a box. Nowadays she uses that knowledge of bones, mythology, and social constructions to flesh out fantasy worlds. She is the author of the Brimstone Angels Saga, including the most recent title, *The Devil You Know*. She lives in Washington State with her husband and sons. The beans in her garden are delicious. Trust her.

JAYM GATES is an author, editor, and communications manager. Her fiction has appeared in *By Faerie Light*, *Aether Age*, *Grendel song*, *Shadowrun: Drawing Destiny*, and more. She's edited the anthologies *War Stories*, *Genius Loci*, *Eclipse Phase: After the Fall*, *Strange California*, and many more. You can find out more about her at www.jaymgates.com or on Twitter @JaymGates.

JESS HARTLEY is a novelist, editor, game designer, and fiction writer. She has written content for more than 50 roleplaying game

products, including products in both the new and classic World of Darkness game lines, as well as *Exalted* Second Edition, and *Scion*. She dwells in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and youngest daughter, along with a menagerie of other interesting creatures.

BRIAN HODGE is one of those people who always has to be making something. So far, he's made ten novels, with number eleven, *Mummy: Dawn of Heresies*, due out in late 2016. He's also authored close to 125 shorter works and four full-length collections. His first collection, *The Convulsion Factory*, was ranked by critic Stanley Wiater among the 113 best books of modern horror. He's currently wrapping up his fifth, *The Immaculate Void*. Recent works include "The Weight of the Dead," from Tor.com, and novelettes of cosmic horror in *The Mammoth Book of Cthulhu* and *Children of Lovecraft*. His oft-reprinted 2013 novella, "The Same Deep Waters as You," has recently been optioned by a London-based production studio for development for TV. He lives in Colorado, where he also likes to make music and photographs; loves everything about organic gardening except the thieving squirrels; and trains in Krav Maga and kickboxing, which are of no use at all against the squirrels. Connect through his web site (www.brianhodge.net) or Facebook (www.facebook.com/brianhodgewriter).

JAMES LOWDER has worked extensively on both sides of the editorial blotter. As a writer, his publications include the bestselling, widely translated dark fantasy novels *Prince of Lies* and *Knight of the Black Rose*; short fiction for such anthologies as *Shadows Over Baker Street*, *Genius Loci*, and *Peel Back the Skin*; and comic book scripts for DC, Image, Moonstone, and Desperado. As an editor, he's directed novel lines or series for both large and small publishing houses, and has helmed more than a dozen critically acclaimed anthologies,

including *Madness on the Orient Express*, *Hobby Games: The 100 Best*, *The Munchkin Book*, and the Books of Flesh zombie trilogy. His work has received five Origins Awards and an ENnie Award, and been a finalist for the International Horror Guild Award and the Bram Stoker Award.

ARI MARMELL would love to tell you all about his various esoteric jobs and wacky adventures on the way to becoming an author, but he doesn't have any. Ari graduated with a Creative Writing degree and — after multiple mundane jobs — broke into roleplaying games before moving on to focus on novels and other fiction. He has published with Titan Books, Pyr Books, Del Rey/Random House, and others, and has done a bit of self-publishing as well. Ari lives in an apartment that's almost as cluttered as his subconscious, with his wife, George, and two cats who are staring at him at this very moment. He finds speaking of himself in the third person awkward and strange.

ELIZABETH MASSIE is a Bram Stoker Award- and Scribe Award-winning author of novels, short fiction, media-tie ins, poetry, and nonfiction. Her novels and short story collections for adults include *Sineater*, *Hell Gate*, *Desper Hollow*, *Wire Mesh Mothers*, *Welcome Back to the Night*, *Twisted Branch* (under the pseudonym Chris Blaine), *Homeplace*, *Naked On the Edge*, *Afraid*, *The Fear Report*, *The Tudors: King Takes Queen*, *The Tudors: Thy Will Be Done*, *Dark Shadows: Dreams of the Dark*, *Versailles*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Power of Persuasion*, and more. She is the author of the Ameri-Scares series of spooky novels for middle grade readers, the Young Founders series of historical fiction for young adults, the comic book *The Phantom: Race Against Death*, and is co-author of the musical *Shenandoah Moon*. Her two newest books, *Night Benedictions* and *On the Outside Looking Up*, are

of a more spiritual nature. She is currently at work on a new adult horror novel, *Red House*, a new young adult horror novel, *Freezer Burn*, and a musical entitled *The TP Chronicles*. Massie is a ninth-generation Virginian who lives in the Shenandoah Valley with her husband, illustrator and theramin-player Cortney Skinner.

JANET MORRIS and **CHRIS MORRIS** have created numerous novels and short stories, and edited the *Heroes in Hell* series. They are original contributors to the shared universe series, *Thieves' World* and the authors of the *Sacred Band of Stepsons* series, the *Dream Dancer* series, as well as fiction and nonfiction on international security and military technology. Both have served as senior fellows of the U.S. Global Strategy Council and adjunct fellows of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and as consultants to government, academia, and industry. Janet Morris's *High Couch of Siliatra*, her first novel, was published in 1977. Chris Morris began writing music in 1966, fiction in 1984, and nonfiction in 1989, often in collaboration with Janet, and has contributed short fiction to the bestselling series *Thieves' World* and *Heroes in Hell* series. His audiobook narrations include, "The Sacred Band"; "I, the Sun"; and "Shards of the Glass Slipper". The Morrises live on Cape Cod.

Based in central Ontario, Canada, **MALCOLM SHEPPARD** is a writer and game designer who works in fantasy and horror, with the odd bit of SF on the side. Before *Tales of the Lost Citadel*, his published work took place in several disparate worlds, including *Shadowrun*, *Eclipse Phase*, and *White Wolf's World of Darkness*. Beyond games and writing, Malcolm has worked in adult education, as a knight (and occasional executioner) for a professional reenactment troupe, and at doing a bunch of boring things involving desks and screens.

DAMIEN ANGELICA WALTERS is the author of *Paper Tigers* (Dark House Press, 2016) and *Sing Me Your Scars* (Apex Publications, 2015), winner of the This is Horror Award for Short Story Collection of the Year. Her work has been nominated twice for a Bram Stoker Award, reprinted in *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy & Horror* and *The Year's Best Weird Fiction*, and published in various anthologies and magazines, including the 2016 World Fantasy Award Finalist *Cassilda's Song*, *Nightscript*, *Cemetery Dance Online*, *Nightmare Magazine*, and *Black Static*. She lives in Maryland with her husband and two rescued pit bulls. Find her on Twitter @DamienAWalters or online at damienangelicawalters.com.

MERCEDES M. YARDLEY is a dark fantasist who wears red lipstick and poisonous flowers in her hair. She is the author of many diverse works, including *Beautiful Sorrows*, *Apocalyptic Montessa* and *Nuclear Lulu: A Tale of Atomic Love*, *Pretty Little Dead Girls*, and the BONE ANGEL trilogy. She recently won the Bram Stoker Award for her story "Little Dead Red". Mercedes lives and works in Las Vegas, and you can find her online at www.abrokenlaptop.com.

C.A. SULEIMAN is the executive editor of the ongoing transmedia experiment that is the Lost Citadel. In addition, he has contributed scores of books to the hobby games industry's top properties, including *Dungeons & Dragons* and the World of Darkness. Along with being developer of the award-winning **Mummy** line, he co-authored the flagship title **Vampire: The Requiem** and created the Egyptian-fantasy world of **Hamunaptra**. He's especially proud to have shepherded development of the world's first fantasy campaign — **Dave Arneson's Blackmoor** — and to have worked alongside its storied creator until his passing in 2009. In

addition to the books he's written and developed, C.A. has written for board games, periodicals, and pure fiction. He is a long-standing member of the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts and Design (GAMA), for which he served for years and as jury foreman for the annual Origins Awards. These days, he's got his hands full as Creative Director of Make Believe Games and as line developer of its internationally acclaimed roleplaying games. He lives in the Washington, D.C. area, where his band Toll Carom is slowly but surely toiling away at its latest concept album.

C.A.'s story in this anthology is meant to springboard the Lost Citadel meta-setting into a new phase (about which he's super excited), and he hopes you'll follow the progress as the whole endeavor surges forward. You can find LC online at www.thelostcitadel.com and www.facebook.com/thelostcitadel.

If there is any justice, O.G. Redoubter **RICK HAUTALA** has found himself an easeful death.



NISABA PRESS is the fiction imprint of Green Ronin Publishing. Nisaba will be publishing novels, anthologies, and short fiction tied to the rich and varied worlds of Green Ronin's tabletop roleplaying properties. Current plans include stories of swashbuckling horror in the fantasy world of *Freeport: City of Adventure*, tales set in the romantic fantasy world of Aldea from the *Blue Rose Roleplaying Game*, superheroic adventures set in the world of Earth-Prime from *Mutants & Masterminds*, and chronicles of fantasy survival-horror in the world of *The Lost Citadel*.

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