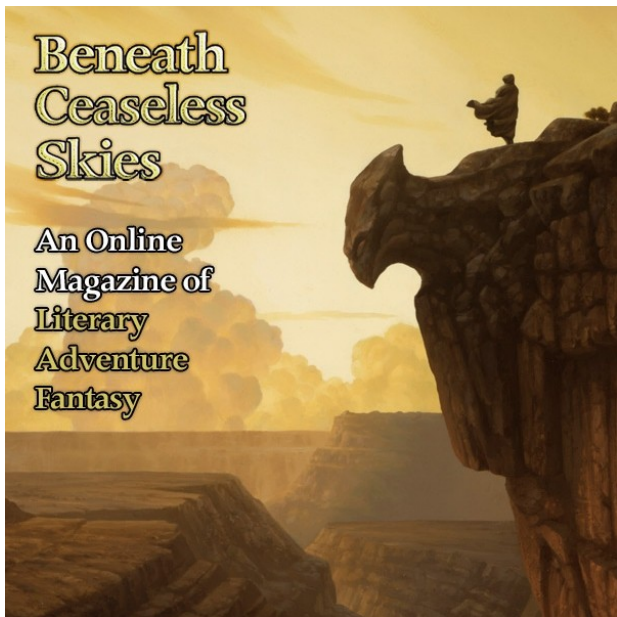


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AS THE PRAIRIE GRASSES SING

by Sarah L. Edwards

When I was just turned nine years old, my father took me again on one of his buying trips, as he had each year for as far back as I could remember. I suspect he had begun as soon as I could have been expected to talk. So far as I knew, my mother never offered objection to this scheme of one so young traveling such a distance. This time she didn't even watch us go; she only embraced me in her calm, cool arms and nodded to my father, once, before turning back inside.

And then we were bumping and rattling in my father's cart down the road and past the clamor of shop doors swinging open, of the smith banging against his anvil, of pigs snorting as they lumbered past. It was a cheerful clamor and I did not understand why my mother always shrank from it. More than once I'd found her hunched in a dark corner of the store, hands to her ears. *I* liked it. That morning as we drove I waved to pig-boys and drunkards as they caught my eye, or I stuck my tongue out at them. When a man at a cart stuck his out in return I shifted hurriedly away, but my father saw and laughed, and after a moment I laughed, too, because I was going all the

way up the coast to Makeplace with him and I could think of nothing better.

By midmorning the road we drove was no longer shaped by the city's sharp geometry but by the vagaries of the land: over the hills or around them, along the creeks until it came to shallows and then across. Sometimes my father sang stories to me, as I always loved him to do. He first sang to me of tricky, cowardly Mallon on that trip. But more often he was quiet, a strange thing for him.

I made up for it for a while, flicking my hands with the symbols they'd all taught me, my father and mother and the gray woman who lived with us, though she was gone for months at a time and always returned smelling of prairie weed. Some of the signs I'd made for myself, when I could find no other to say what I wanted. My mother always learned them gravely when I explained, but my father only ever watched long enough to grasp what I meant, and then he would go on aloud.

Yet on that trip, he watched as little as he spoke, though his ear seemed always cocked for some sound that didn't come. Once I pulled on his sleeve to make him look at my hands, and he only turned and said, "Enough, child." And that was strange in itself, for usually he called me by name as firmly as pressing a hot brand to a calf.

Sometime mid-afternoon I saw a shadow low near the road, and patted at him excitedly and pointed. It was a hare, just like those the gray woman kept sometimes in the pouch on her back. My father's arm turned suddenly tense beneath my hand, and when I looked to him in confusion the hare hopped away. I looked sadly after it. It did not know me for a friend, as the gray woman's did.

"It had other business, Ghemma," he said, but I knew he was not as disappointed as I was.

He grew very still again when we passed a hawk sitting on a lone fencepost. I shuddered at the sharp, efficient curve of its beak. I did not hate hawks as the gray woman did, but I could not like them. When I shrank back against my father, he pulled me to him in a ferocious hug. And then he began singing a hearty galumphing tune of the Shepherd Rock who hid his sheep from 'the cruel and hungry wind-blessed bandit' by gathering them all beneath him and then turning to stone.

I remember only heartiness and my father's laughter rolling over me like a pleasant thunder all the rest of that day; and that night we slept at the roadside just past a creek, where we drank and washed and took our cookwater. Even as we curled in blankets in the back of the empty cart, he was cheery, as he would be when he first came home, and I knew somehow some of it was due to me.

Yet the next day his mood had returned, and it didn't break when we met another traveler on the road and ate a quiet lunch at his fire, nor when I pleaded later for another story-song. One about a little girl, I asked, like me, tapping myself emphatically on the chest.

"Later, Ghemma" he said finally. "I know the place for story-telling—a track off the road, up into a pretty little wood. You like to go there?"

I shrugged, not sure what the tone in his voice meant nor whether I had pleased or displeased, or perhaps something else altogether.

And we did come to a track that might have been a road, once, but might as easily have been a trick of the landscape. We followed it over a crest and stopped a moment to admire the long rolls of prairie and the sinuous curve of brush crowding a creek. Then we turned down again, winding round the curves to a pretty little wood, as he'd said, a solitary copse of cottonwoods above a marsh.

Not one word did my father speak as he loosed the pony and set it grazing. It wasn't dark yet, not even late enough to stop, really, but he built a fire anyway. When I asked, he said, "I tell my stories best around a fire, is all."

He settled me at the fire with salt pork and the last of my mother's bread and, after gazing off into the prairie for a long moment, he began.

Of all the things I loved about my father, I loved his singing the most. That evening, it seemed as though he sang his very heart dry, although the tunes were soft and the story quieter, sweeter than he usually sang. At first the story was of a tinker-peddler, like him, who traveled as he willed, traded in what he fancied, and sang for bed and bread when the mood took him. Then the peddler met a woman, and suddenly the song was hers, not his. When he bought her for his bride she feared him, but slowly he learned to charm her and she to trust him. And then the truth: she was a woman who knew the minds of other things than man. She was lady of the butterflies.

My father paused to stir the fire. He did not begin again, and it seemed he had not paused but finished.

What of the lady? I asked. I flicked my hands at him, pleading, anxious, a little angry that he should stop when the song was so clearly incomplete.

"That's enough singing," he said, roughly. "The rest of it is, they settled in a village where they thought the others would leave them be. But the others didn't trust her, with her strange ways, and finally they came after her and locked her away, and they'd 'a killed her then if she hadn't been carrying a babe. And

then there was rescue that neither she nor anyone'd a right to expect. They got away and settled again, in a city where she could hide and raise her little girl. But she hated the city, with all its folks and its closed-in streets. And she was always afraid."

Told so flatly, it seemed a poor enough ending for a story, especially since my father's voice had gone dry and harsh. I didn't ask for another, and I didn't complain when he wrapped me in my blanket and set me to sleep at the fireside, saying it was 'a night best slept in the open.'

We had lain still quite a long while before I realized what he'd been saying. From his opening words, describing a peddler, I ought to have known: it *was* him, of course, and the lady was my mother.

It was too much thought to think lying down. I rolled in my blanket until I was sitting in front of the fire's embers, and then my father was awake, too, and sitting across from me.

"Something on your mind," he said.

I asked the question floating at the top: what about the butterflies? I'd never even seen any in the garden behind the store. If she was lady of the butterflies, then where were they?

He was quiet awhile before he said, "She sent 'em away. Was afraid she'd be found out again, if there were any of 'em hanging close."

Found out? I asked. Then I remembered the rest, about the village. But why? Why had they wanted to hurt her?

“Afearred of the difference in her.”

The difference.... That she could talk to the minds “of other things than man.” My mother *talked* to butterflies. And the gray woman—I flicked another question.

“Her, too,” he said, sighing. “And her hares.”

And him?

“No.”

Of course the question came around, the one he must have been waiting on, dreading.

What about me?

“I don’t know.”

It might seem silly that I should ask—wouldn’t I know better than anyone? But it had no more occurred to me that I might talk with beasts than that I would grow up to become a woman and a wife, as my mother was.

I asked him, *why* didn’t he know? Before he could answer, my thoughts were racing away again, imagining the roaches we swept from the floor, the pigs trotting past our shop, the swallows daubing mud nests under the eaves. What would they say? I didn’t like the thought of the roaches, but even they held new interest, now.

“So nobody knows,” he was saying. “If you seemed to hanker after some beetle or beast or what-you-like, then we’d know clear enough. Or if you’d talk, we’d know the other way.” He swung his head back and forth, catching ashy froth in his beard. “If you’d only talk, Ghemma, then we’d know.”

I held up my hands, wiggled my fingers.

“But don’t you want to sing? It wouldn’t matter if you’d hold a tune, though I’d bet coin to stick you would. But to hear some other voice in that house singing out besides mine....” He leaned down until his eyes glistened just above the fire’s flicker. “Why don’t you sing?”

I shrunk from the longing in his voice. I nestled deeper into my blankets, burying my hands so it was clear I had no more to say.

After a moment he looked away. “Anyway, now you’re here, maybe you’ll know. Lots more wild things out here than how we usually come. If you find kin among ‘em, that’ll make it sure.”

I didn’t answer, and after a while he blew a sigh and stretched back onto the ground.

If you’d asked me before why I never spoke, I couldn’t have told you. I wasn’t aware of not being able to; I had no sense that I couldn’t speak, if I’d wanted. I just didn’t want to. I’d learned silence from my mother, and from the gray woman

when she stayed. As I watched my mother sell the store's goods, facing the onslaught of question and demand and fumbling for the few words her mouth allowed her, I saw that speech was the intruder and silence a retreat—perhaps the only one.

So I thought that night, huddled, my mind slipping from my mother's tight face to my father's words to the calls of the crickets, the last chirps of a late-singing bird. A soft flapping flitted overhead. A coyote yipped some distance away, beyond the rise. I found myself leaning into the night, ear to the sound, as though by listening very hard I could hear the meaning in the cry.

Suddenly I could be still no longer. I glanced at my father, to see that his eyes were closed, and then I carefully uncurled from my blanket, laid it aside, and edged towards the trees.

I went slowly at first, feeling at the ground with my feet while I waited for my night-eyes. Soon by the crescent moon's glow I could make out dull black shapes as trees and boulders. I walked until I reached the creek that fed the marsh. I glanced behind me; the ember-glow of our fire was faint and nearly hidden. I could not see my father.

I huddled on a rock, wishing I had brought my blanket with me. The flapping returned above my head. I could just make out a dark, darting shape and guessed it to be a bat from

one of my father's stories. Would it talk to me? I sat very still and squinted up, wondering if I should flap, too. But I had never seen the gray woman hop, even though she spoke with hares. Nor did she make hand-signs to them. She certainly did not speak with words; unlike my mother, she didn't seem to think any need great enough to break the silence.

I knew I was not alone. Unseen things crept at the edges of my hearing, but none made any sign that they could talk to me, or that they recognized me as a friend. I began making the motions with my hands, which trembled a little. Will any of you talk to me? I asked, knowing it was futile to expect an animal to know my family's hand-signs.

Am I like my mother? I described her, her cool embraces and the silences when even her hands lay still. I told it to myself as much as any unseen creature. Yes, my mother was afraid, as my father had said. I had always known it, but namelessly, unable to step far enough from the shadow even to see its shape. I did not want that shadow to cover me. I did not want to speak with animals, if that was what it meant.

My father did not want me to. It was loneliness, I supposed, borne of my mother's long silences and the gray woman's wild ways.

And there was the other option: to speak. I heard my father again, describing the possibilities—offering a choice, it

seemed. To use words, or not. If I could not speak to wild things, then surely I could become the other thing, human. And then my mother would not fear for me any longer—as she always had, I realized.

This, this of course I would do. I would tell my father—in words, I would tell him. What should I say? I framed the thought, played it out with my fingers. “I’m not like my mother,” I would say. “I want to sing with you.” I bit at my lip, tried to imagine the sounds coming from my throat. They would be thick, likely—I had had no practice.

I want to sing.

The thought was there, my mouth even opened, but there was no sound. I felt the beginnings of panic, wondering if I was by strange chance a mute. I felt for the shapes of the sounds, pressing with my tongue, pursing my lips.

At that moment came the quivering at the edge of my mind.

It was not a voice. It was not words, barely even thought, yet the meaning was clear: a questioning. Uncertainty, yet recognition. Curiosity.

My speaking forgotten for a moment, I tried to push thought back in return, but encountered only bewilderment. I began the hand-signs again, still doubting they could be under-

stood yet desperate not to lose that other whose thought I'd felt. Don't go, I pleaded. Don't leave me alone.

The thought was clearer this time. *Lost, youngling?*

I didn't know how to answer that. Who are you? I signed.

A pause; the settling of careful decision. Slow approach. I could feel it, even judge its direction, but I couldn't tell what came. I waited, hands fisted and tense with the strain. I was not afraid that it would harm me; the fear was deeper and murkier than that.

A clump of weeds parted and a patch of silver crept through to stand in front of me, gleaming in the moonlight. For an instant I thought it a dog, and then I realized: coyote.

However it had been thinking at me, it did not any longer. It only stood, sniffing, eyes shadowed.

Scavenger.

Thief.

Destroyer of hares' nests.

My father had sung of coyotes—one had run with Mallon when it cared to. This was my speech? I could not answer my father when he spoke, could not join in his singing, so that I might know the thought of a sneaking prowler like this?

The one in front of me—a dog coyote, I suddenly knew—must have heard some of this. He growled, but even as the sound guttered in his throat I knew it was not aimed at me.

And then came a picture that was no more a picture than the thought before it had been words. It was built of scents: an acrid flavor like char, the sourness of fear, a deep inescapable scent full of warmth and life and a hint of menace. The shape it took was blurred, dim as a shadow, but utterly certain.

It was me, I realized. The odors hung about me like a garment—the smoke from the campfire, the fear seeping from my skin, the humanness of me that no soap could wash off. And in back of them I felt the coyote's repulsion, nearly as strong as my own, but tinged with curiosity.

And then came other smells that brought other pictures, though I'd never seen them before: trotting across the prairie, nose full of the scents of fieldmice, prairie grasses, and the rich warm earth beneath. The scent of spring water after a long, dry run. The sour perfume of a bitch coyote in heat.

Lost, youngling? the coyote asked again.

I sat suddenly on the ground, hands pressed against my eyes. Tears leaked from behind my palms. Then the coyote was licking me, warming me with breath that suggested rotting meat.

Go away, I thought, and it stepped back. *Go!* I said again, without trying to feel how I did it. The coyote took another step back and turned.

Wait.

It stopped.

Will you come back for me?

Call us, youngling, and we will come. Then it gave one sharp yip and dashed into the weeds.

I sniffled through my tears and tried to think. What was this creature I suddenly found myself to be? Would I become coyote? It was what the dog coyote had pictured to me, I was sure: a life knowing the world as they knew it, and knowing them more intimately than I could know myself. It was not just curiosity that tempted me. The coyote had taken me for—kin, I supposed, borrowing my father's word. At that moment it seemed as though I had no other kin in the world but that dog coyote I had just sent away.

No. I would speak, so that I'd be like other people.

I'll sing with you, Father. I will.

Still nothing. I opened my mouth and forced *some* sound from my mouth, to know I could—an ugly, shapeless cry with no hint of meaning nor tune.

I *knew* how words were to sound. I knew the modulations of my father's voice, the ups and downs that told as much as the words, and more truthfully.

And then a shadow moved in the trees and he was beside me, stroking my hair, his face wet.

I cannot speak! I told him, slapping the signs in frustration, but of course he could not see them.

“Find what you were looking for, did you?”

Lost, youngling?

I did not want to be this. I wanted to sing my father’s stories, and maybe even sing new ones. Though he didn’t admit it, I knew he made many of his own—no one else could have known the story of my mother. But what use would it be for me to make songs if I could not sing them? And I wanted my mother to touch me without the hesitation, the wondering what I was. I did not want to be afraid, as she was. I didn’t want to be this!

“Hush, my girl,” he said. I realized I was crying again. “Hush.”

I beat against his chest, the tears rolling into sobs. I didn’t want to be this.

The coyote waited—outside the range of feeling, but I knew he was there. But he would not understand what I mourned. Perhaps with him and the others of the coyote kin I would forget, but I did not want to forget. No. The instant in which I’d considered his offer was gone.

I held more tightly to my father until the heaving sobs calmed, and I was left with burning eyes and a thick, heavy

nose. I pulled away until I could see glints of moonlight across my father's face.

"You're still one of us, then?"

I nodded.

"Glad to hear it. Tell me about it sometime, hmm? It might make a song."

I stood up and took his hand, and with a grunt he rose, too. We walked back to the dead fire and settled again for sleep, my blanket snug against his this time. When my thoughts had dimmed and nearly gone dark, a bitch coyote offered a greeting as she trotted past, and I nestled deeper in and wondered why I wanted to reply.

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People keep asking Sarah what she's going to do with her life, and she keeps answering, "Wouldn't I like to know!" While she figures it out, she continues to write science fiction and fantasy, read a lot, knit (anybody need a scarf?), and wonder what to do with this math degree she just got. Her fiction has previously appeared in Writers of the Future XXIV, Aeon Specula-

tive Fiction, and Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine. Her story “The Woman and the Mountain” appeared in BCS #29 and her story “The Tinyman and Caroline” appeared in BCS #17 and in the new BCS ebook anthology The Best of Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Year One.

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AND OTHER SUCH DELIGHTS

by James Lecky

Out of the shattered glory of PameMorturas, came Wolfram Moringun the mennisinger, his Nothing Box filled with the tortured sounds of that splendidly ruined city. Across the Silent Plains and Fading Forests he came, his step and mood both light.

The delights he had uncovered in Morturas had surprised even him: ancient agonies that had left their aural imprint upon the stones, the weeping of mothers and the keening of children five thousand years dead, the dull thwack of steel upon flesh and the screams of dying men. The raw ingredients, then, for a fine puresong—perhaps the finest he had yet composed.

But even so.

Wolfram's mouth twisted in a sardonic line and his hitherto positive frame of mind abruptly dropped from him. A short week from now, the mennisingers of the Shining Cities would gather in PameFiliast to compete for the patronage of Earl Veduc. The Earl, paterfamilias of House Harkess, had let it be known that he required a funeral hymn for his wife, Countess

Alexa, who was sanctioned to appear before the United Inquisition to account for her many blasphemies and infidelities.

No one doubted that she would be found guilty and handed over to the Morder Zunft—the assassins' cartel of PameFiliias—and, naturally, the death of so noble a woman would require an appropriately mournful melody. The benefaction of the Earl was greatly to be desired, particularly for an impoverished mennisinger such as Wolfram Moringun, but would the echoes of a long-dead city be enough to secure it?

At sunset, which he judged a favorable time, Wolfram made his camp in the lee of a gnarled bristlecone pine. The tree was dead to all intents and purposes—as were most other things in the world now—with only the merest flicker of life remaining, but its shelter was more than adequate. He lit a fire, then unfurled his blue cloak, revealing the patched doublet and cracked leather breeches he wore. Like so many things about Wolfram Moringun, his clothes had been bright and fashionable once, but circumstance and his own occasionally volatile temper had cost him the patronage of many a noble until now he was little better than a common troubadour.

Still, his skill with the Nothing Box kept him in coin—albeit often from hand to mouth—and his dark good looks and silver tongue ensured that he rarely slept alone.

As the Moribund Sun sank to its rest—the rest that, one day in the not too distant future, would be a permanent one—he took the Nothing Box from the bag at his side and ran his long fingers across the keys, nodules and switches.

Unlike its owner, the Box remained in pristine condition, its surface meticulously cleaned and the small battery which powered it kept to maximum strength, more often than not fed with his own blood when no other power source was available.

To the casual observer it would appear as little more than a dull rectangle of metal with small lights and switches scattered at random across all four faces, but as Wolfram's fingers played across its surface, the box slowly began to release its secrets.

The voice of a sobbing woman, modulated from a major to minor key, blended with the rhythmic counterpoint of a cavalry charge along cobbled highways, then segued into a sharp, almost pizzicato, flurry of arrows. The fall of PameMorturas rendered into an elaborate soundscape, reduced to melody and harmony.

There were few in the world who fully understood the workings of the Nothing Box—the instrument was a mixture of antique science and bright sorcery—but the music it produced from stolen sound could soften the heart of even the stoniest of men.

And in the hands of an artist such as Wolfram Morringun it could make the gods themselves weep. The music drifted through the darkened forest, a sweet yet mournful tune, a fitting eulogy for a murdered Countess.

But even so.

“You play well, Meister.”

The music ceased abruptly, so abruptly that even the echoes of it vanished. Wolfram’s hand went to the hilt of his long dagger as he turned to the source of the voice.

“I am hardly a Meister,” he said pleasantly, “but I thank you for your compliment.”

“So much modesty in one so young.” A figure emerged from the darkness and at its appearance Wolfram bit off an involuntary oath.

He had heard tales of the golems before—what man or woman who walked the plains and forests had not—but had never fully believed them. In a world where truth, lies, myth and tradition were often inseparable from one another, who could know what was fact and what imagined? The wise man trusted the evidence of his own senses, but sometimes that evidence revealed impossible things, such as the creature standing before him now.

It was human in its shape, but fully ten feet tall. It wore no clothing, and its massive frame, with broad shoulders and tiny,

cinched waist, was both hairless and sexless, the loins as smooth as a gelding's. The creature's skin was a lustrous blue, tattered here and there to reveal the stark white of the skeleton beneath. It stared at him with bright eyes like chips of quartz. Its features were surprisingly delicate and its expression fixed and unreadable.

"The night is cold," it said. "Your fire and music are inviting. May I join you?"

"Both are yours if you wish them," Wolfram replied. The mennisinger guilds refused no one their company, a custom so ingrained that its bounds stretched even to the inhuman denizens of the waning Earth.

The creature came towards the fire, its movements lithe and silent despite its bulk.

The goilem sat opposite him and reached out its hands to the flames, although Wolfram believed that the creature felt neither warmth nor cold. "I am that which is called A. Ruah," it said in a bland, measured voice.

"Wolfram Moringun at your service."

The goilem's gaze moved to the Nothing Box. "A minnesinger? Yes?" It pronounced the word strangely, but the inversion of the vowels seemed somehow correct.

"That is so."

“A noble profession for such ignoble times.” A. Ruah’s lips contorted and, for a moment, Wolfram believed he could hear a faint whirring as the creature tried to smile. “Forgive me,” it said. “Despite much practice I find myself unable to master even simple facial expressions.”

“Much like myself,” Wolfram replied.

The golem did not try to smile again. Evidently it had not mastered irony, either. “Wither from?” it asked, the question polite and formal as befitted two strangers in the wilderness.

“The ruins of PameMorturas.”

“Whither bound?”

“To PameFiliars and the House Harkess.”

A. Ruah stared at him for a long moment and, once again, Wolfram believed he could hear weak mechanical sounds as the creature paused for thought.

“May I tell you a tale, Wolfram Moringun the Minnesinger?” It said at last.

“Of course,” Wolfram replied. “All I ask is that it is well told.” He settled himself more comfortably, wrapping his cloak around his thin frame against the night’s chill, then took some dried meat from the pouch at his belt and bit off a piece with his strong, white teeth. But his hand never strayed far from the dagger at his side. “Pray proceed.”

“I am that which is called A. Ruah,” the goilem repeated. “Like the others of my kind I was created to serve. I am a creature of ceramic and metal, of omniderm and xenograft, and I have walked the earth for many years. I helped to lay the foundations of the first Shining City, and with these strong hands of mine I built the walls and towers of Morturas.”

“You built PameMorturas?” Wolfram said. He tried to keep the disbelief from his voice—Morturas had lain in ruins for five thousand years, perhaps longer, and it was inconceivable that this creature had seen the city’s birth, let alone been its midwife.

“I and hundred of thousands like me. We built it upon the stones of the past. It was to be the greatest city of the Latter Days, a storehouse for the world’s knowledge, a beacon in the coming darkness. And for a while that beacon shone brightly.” The creature stared into the flickering flames, as if it sought remembrance within them.

“But men will always desire that which they do not possess, and the envy of the other cities was strong. They made war upon Morturas, shattered her walls and razed her towers. They slew the Curators, the Mystics, the Preservationists, and took their knowledge for their own.” A. Ruah’s voice was still bland, all but emotionless, but the goilem’s anguish was made plain by the feeble contortions of its features.

“And when they had destroyed the glory of PameMorturas, they turned their swords upon its poor servants. My kind were hunted to the brink of extinction, driven into the wastes and forests, consigned to the realm of legend. Golems!” It said the word bitterly and, once again, the strange pronunciation seemed correct.

“They were cruel, the men of the Pames—the Shining Cities of the Latter Days—but of them all the cruelest were the men of PameFilius. They destroyed my Hive Companion, that which we called A. Manus, lashed to the harnesses of four warhorses and torn to pieces in Benedict’s Square. But even so the spark of life burned long in A. Manus, so very long that with its passing I learned that which had been hitherto unknown to my kind. I learned to grieve and I learned to hate.” The creature lapsed into silence once more.

“A fine story,” Wolfram said. “And well told.” Despite the dismal chill of the night a thin sheen of sweat covered his brow.

“I needs must ask you a question,” the golem said.

“And that question would be?”

“Are you a man of PameFilius?” It lifted its head to stare directly at him.

“No,” he told it. “I serve no city.”

“Then I regret what must be done. But done it must be.” The golem rose to its feet in a single movement. “Know that I

bear you no malice, Wolfram Moringun who serves no city, but my cells require protoplasm in order to function, and this forest is poor fare at best.” Again that tortured, feeble, grinding that passed for a smile. Or an expression of grief, perhaps.

“You would kill me despite my hospitality?” Wolfram asked.

“Reluctantly, yes. My needs are great.”

It leapt through the flames towards him, hands extended, and he barely had time to roll out of its path and into the sheltering darkness.

An almighty crack resounded through the night as the pine splintered at the golem’s misjudged attack.

Wolfram ran, clutching the Nothing Box to his chest while the long, iron-hard branches of petrified trees clutched at his clothes and scraped his skin. Behind him, with long, measured steps that closed the ground between them without effort, came the creature that called itself A. Ruah.

“Please, Meister,” the creature called in its bland voice, “this chase affords us no dignity.”

Wolfram glanced behind him. The golem had drawn closer now, its bulk silhouetted in the brittle moonlight. A moment more and it would be upon him.

With desperate haste, he flicked at the switches on the Nothing Box. He could not hope to slay the creature with a sim-

ple dagger but perhaps the undiluted sounds of lost Morturas might give the golem pause and afford him the opportunity of escape. It was a forlorn hope, but his only hope for all that.

Long fingers brushed at the collar of his doublet as he spun to face A. Ruah. His hands moved frantically across the surface of the box, and with the fall of the last switch a stream of agonized sound poured from the instrument.

Five thousand years of anguish and torment shook the Fading Forest to its very roots as the phantoms of PameMorturas found the voices which had been denied to them for so very long.

And within it, echoed and reborn, was the scream of A. Ruah as it watched the city burn, saw the accumulated knowledge of lost mankind splinter and fragment, and felt once more the terrible agony of loss and expulsion. Under that onslaught, what mind—human or inhuman—would not break, save those of the mennisinger guilds, trained since birth to withstand even the deepest of horrors?

The golem fell to its knees, its lips writhing, cheeks twitching, howling its grief into the night. Then, with a faint whirr—obscenely loud in the sudden stillness—it crashed to the ground.

“I bear you no malice either, A. Ruah of PameMorturas,” Wolfram Moringun told it. “But my need to live is as great as yours.”

Then, with the heaviest rock he could lift, he smashed the goilem’s delicate features and ceramic skull to flinders.

* * *

The next day he continued his journey to PameFiliass, taking with him those pieces of A. Ruah which he judged most valuable—the quartz eyes, a handful of gold and silver cogs from the abdomen and, finest of all, its final scream, rescued from the ether and stored away in the Nothing Box. The rest he left to the forest scavengers in the certain knowledge that nothing would be wasted.

By late afternoon he had reached the Chalybs Way—that splendid yet desolate road that linked the Shining Cities of Glorias, Murias, Filiass and Valdas—and in the evening paid for his night’s lodgings at a modest inn with a smattering of pillaged silver.

He slept well that night on a goose down bed, and if his dreams were disturbed with visions of inhuman faces, they were soon forgotten in the warm embrace of the innkeeper’s daughter who lay beside him.

Another day’s travel brought him to PameFiliass, City of the Axe.

Not so darkly grand as Valdas, nor as ornate in its architecture as Glorias or, indeed, as awe-inspiring as Murias, PameFiliias nonetheless dominated the land around it. Set upon a series of rolling hills, the city's looming towers and granite walls stood starkly against the slate-grey sky.

He entered through one of the minor gates, the guards barely deigning to check his credentials. "Another damned minstrel," one of them said when he saw the Nothing Box that Wolfram carried. "Come to pick over the bones of the Countess Alexa." He was a tall man dressed in green livery, his cheeks decorated with ritual scars.

"A mennisinger, if you please," Wolfram corrected. "Here at the behest of Earl Veduc."

"You and a hundred like you. A pox on every one." The guard spat carefully at Wolfram's feet, just missing the toes of his boots.

Wolfram gave him a small, half-mocking bow in return. "May the Gods remember your name, friend," he said.

"And the Devils remember yours."

As he made his way towards the center of the city and the Citadella Harkess atop Varega Hill, a familiar voice called his name: "Morrington, you jackanape, have you grown so high and mighty that you refuse to acknowledge old friends?"

There, outside a tavern, sat a fat man resplendent in purple velvet. A man he had not seen in years. “Trinculo?”

“The very same! Come seeking the Earl’s patronage, have you?”

“What other reason could there be?”

“To see my pretty face, perhaps?”

“You are many things, Trinculo Grasso, but pretty is not one of them.”

The two men embraced. Then Trinculo ordered wine and they sat together, watching the citizens of PameFiliass pass by them.

“So you have come to play a puresong for the Countess?” Trinculo said, after the first glass.

“Aye, and you?”

The fat man smiled. “What other reason would there be for leaving PameGlorias?”

“And your employment with House Carnelian, what of that?”

Trinculo Grasso placed his glass on the tabletop and wiped his mouth with a lace kerchief before replying: “I am sad to say that my employment with that noble family has been terminated... there was a minor scandal which involved my name and the name of the Baron’s younger brother.” He shrugged deli-

cately. "It necessitated a change of pace and scenery, shall we say."

"So we are rivals for the Earl's favor then?"

The corpulent mennisinger shook his head. "Tomorrow we will be rivals, but tonight you shall stay here as my friend and good companion."

"Until tomorrow, then," Wolfram said, raising his glass in salute.

"Until tomorrow."

* * *

Morning brought the taste of stale wine and the realization that his purse had become substantially lighter than before. He had matched Trinculo Grasso glass for glass as they had talked long into the night, trading stories of their days in the Mennisinger's Blue Carnation Collegium, of individual glories and shared failure. They had parted as friends, and for that he was glad.

He dressed and made his way through the straight, broad streets of PameFiliass to the center of the city and the Citadella Harkess.

By far the tallest structure in the city, the Citadella stood at least three hundred feet tall. Like many constructions of the Latter Days, it presented a strange conglomeration of tastes and styles—the western sections elaborate and baroque, the

eastern stark and simplistic—ringed by a high, spiked wall. The House Harkess valued its privacy, it appeared, even if it was prepared to parade its indiscretions in public.

A steady stream of men and women—all mennisingers—made their way to the Citadella gates. Some wore gaudy costumes, their faces painted or, in some cases, concealed behind elaborate masks; others wore drab motley, others still simple black. All carried their precious Nothing Boxes with suitable reverence.

Few spoke, the camaraderie of their guild abandoned for the present, for all there were anxious to win the favor of the Earl. They waited patiently in the huge courtyard under the brittle light of the Moribund Sun, their attention fixed on the large dais at one end.

It was close to noon by the time the Earl Veduc and his entourage made their appearance. A dozen heralds announced their arrival, sounding shrill notes from silver trumpets. Twice that number of the Earl's household guards, resplendent in bronze Armour and emerald cloaks, ringed the dais. And behind them, conspicuous in their red masks and conical hoods, stood a small cadre of the Morder Zunft, immobile and impassive.

The Earl was a tall, slender man, dressed entirely in white, with a long sable cloak draped across his shoulders. His long

blonde hair framed a sharply-featured face. His wife stood by his side.

She was beautiful, the Countess Alexa. As tall as her husband but dark where he was pale, the yellow gown she wore emphasizing the luster of her copper skin. And haughty, too: Wolfram could see it in her eyes, in the cool indifference with which she regarded the assembled crowd.

Here is a woman who will not go to her death lightly, he thought, nor will she allow her passing to go unremarked.

“The House Harkess welcomes you,” the Earl said. His voice was soft but carried easily. He turned to his wife. “Whom would you have play first, Alexa?”

“It makes no difference,” she replied. “Choose any one you wish.”

He nodded to a man in the front row of the crowd.

“You,” he said. “Play.”

The mennisinger—one of those clad in black that Wolfram had noted earlier—unslung his Nothing Box and ran his fingers across its surface, his face furrowed with concentration.

The music was sweet and mournful. The Earl held up his hand to stop it after a few passages.

“No,” he said. He pointed to another man. “You. Play.”

His music was no less accomplished, the sounds no less somber, and bright tears filled his eyes as he played.

“No,” the Earl said again.

And so it continued throughout the long afternoon and into the encroaching chill of evening. Time and again he discarded both players and music with a curt word or, on occasion, with a slight shake of his head. The crowd thinned as the rejected players left.

At last it was Wolfram Morringun’s turn to play.

And what music he created. His sculpted notes and cascading chords—ripped from the heart of grieving PameMorturas—were sweet and somber, furious and mournful, filled with the longing of unfulfilled lives and stolen years. They spoke of things that once were and now could never be again, of the selfishness and jealousy of those who had destroyed Morturas and the destruction they had wreaked not only upon that poor city but on the future of mankind itself.

When he had done, a profound silence fell across the courtyard, and only the wind—a light breeze that gently lifted the hems of emerald green cloaks or blood-red robes—disturbed the reverence of the moment.

The Countess looked down at Wolfram and their eyes met. He saw, for the first time, the melancholy in her face, the thin, grim lines around her mouth and eyes that spoke of a spirit too proud to be shattered.

“No,” the Earl said. He motioned towards Trinculo Grasso.
“You. Play.”

The fat mennisinger stepped forward and made a courtly bow towards the Earl and his wife. Despite his bulk, Grasso moved with a light grace and every gesture delicate and well timed. Today he wore blue velvet, his face elaborately painted; powder and rouge as painstakingly and expertly applied as any of the Golden Courtesans of PameGlorias.

Where others had been somber, his hymn was light and bright, his fingers moving deftly across the surface of the Box in an increasingly complex pattern. The notes spoke of days long since past, when the earth itself was verdant and green, before the sun had begun its long slow descent towards death.

Then the music changed, minor chords creeping into the jovial melody lines until it became no longer a song of joy no longer but an obscene paeon to the pleasures of pain and death.

The Earl did not hesitate this time.

“Yes,” he said. “You will play for the death of Countess Alexa.”

The Earl and his entourage turned with a single motion and returned to the Citadella. None of them looked back.

And as Wolfram stared at the Earl’s retreating form, he felt the first stirrings of fury rise within him—a smoldering, bone-deep anger that threatened to rob him of reason. To be slighted

thus! He forced his anger down, determined to retain his usual calm demeanor, but his fingers twitched by his side, their movement all-but involuntary, as if they sought to crush the throat of the Earl Veduc.

With a single whispered blasphemy he swept out of the courtyard.

* * *

“You were robbed, my friend,” Trinculo Grasso said. They sat in Trinculo’s chambers at the inn, drinking by the light of tallow candles.

Wolfram did not correct him; instead he stared into the glass of wine on the table before him, his gaze so intense that one might have thought he sought to shatter the goblet through the power of his mind alone.

Wolfram lifted his glass and drained its contents in one long swallow. “You were chosen, I was not.” He rose and made his way towards the door. “The better man won. Let that be an end to it.”

Trinculo shook his head. “We both know that is a lie, my friend. And now that it no longer matters I can speak freely.” The fat man paused for a moment.

“I always envied your talent, Wolfram,” he said. “When we were students at the Collegium I was in awe of you, your skill

and your passion. The puresong you played today was magnificent, I would give ten years of my life to play such music.”

“As you say, it no longer matters.”

“What will you do now?”

“First, I will get gloriously drunk to celebrate both your good fortune and the death of a beautiful woman. Then in the morning I will leave PameFilius.”

“Wither bound?”

“Wherever my feet may take me.”

“If I can assist in any way....” Trinculo Grasso allowed his voice—and offer—to trail away.

“Thank you, my friend, but that will not be necessary.” Wolfram threw him an idle salute as he left the room. Grasso did not follow.

With the few remaining pieces of silver in his possession Wolfram Moringun paid his bill then went out onto the streets.

Night had fallen, sharp and cold as a razor, but despite the bitter weather and the lateness of the hour, PameFilius did not sleep. The evening bacchanal had begun as the citizens celebrated the imminent trial and death of Countess Alexa.

Colorful as peacocks they were—masked and robed in the nocturnal fashion of the city. The business of the Countess, it seemed, had divided the city in two, and as he passed through

the crowds, Wolfram Morringun heard both laughter and lamentation. Virtually all the revelers wore masks that were often superbly, but just as often crudely, fashioned in the likeness of the Countess.

As he moved towards the center of the city and the environs of the Citadella he became aware that he was being followed. The sensation was hard to place—a prickling along the nape of his neck perhaps, or an almost imperceptible itching between his shoulder blades—but impossible to ignore. He turned sharply.

And she was there.

She wore a crimson cape and hood, as if in mockery of the assassins of the Zunft, and at first it appeared that she wore no disguise. But on closer inspection he realized that she sported a facsimile of her own face, exquisitely fashioned and utterly immobile; for what better concealment could there be here?

The Countess Alexa.

It was unmistakably her. He knew the haughty set of her shoulders, the curve of her breasts and hips, her long, pale hands, and the sweep of her elegant neck.

She moved through the crowd towards him, and as she drew near he could smell the perfume she wore, provocative and intoxicating.

“You are the mennisinger,” she said. Her delicately carved lips did not move.

He bowed slightly. “Wolfram Morringun at your service, Countess.”

She placed a cool finger against his lips. “No titles, if you please.”

Alexa took his hand, as naturally as any lover, and steered him through the milling throng of people, away from the Citadella and towards a secluded little square where crystal fountains bubbled and played.

“Your music was beautiful,” she told him.

“And yet it was not chosen,” he replied, unable to keep a note of bitterness from his voice.

“It was too beautiful,” she said. “The Earl would never allow it to be played at....”

“At your funeral.” Shameful joy replaced the bitterness.

She stepped close to him, and his senses were filled once again with her heady aroma.

“No,” she said. “Never that, not while there is breath and strength still in me.” She moved closer still, their bodies touching, and he could feel the warmth of her. “I will not die. Life is too precious, too sweet. I wish to drink its wine for as long as I am able.”

“As do we all.”

Her cool hand stroked his face. “Then help me to live.”

There was glamour in her perfume—he knew magic when he was in its presence—and a soft pleading tone in her voice, but neither of them influenced his answer.

“Yes,” he said.

She took the mask from her face. Her features were exquisite, with an elegance that even the most accomplished mask-maker could not hope to replicate. Their lips met, and for a long, long moment they were lost in each other.

“Is it true what they say of you?” he asked when they broke their embrace.

“What do they say?”

“That you are a blasphemer and a heretic.”

“I neither serve or acknowledge the gods,” she told him. “And on occasion I have shattered their idols for my own amusement. Does that shock you?”

He shook his head. “The gods have rarely favored me,” he said, “and a shattered idol or two is of little account.”

“Then you do not fear their wrath?”

“Never,” he said.

She sat on the edge of a fountain and ran her fingers through the water.

“I knew you were a man of no faith the moment I looked into your eyes,” she said. “A soul so like my own. One who loves life with a fierce passion.”

“You presume much, lady,” he said. But he smiled as he said it.

“If you could procure horses,” she said, “we could be away from this place by daybreak.”

“Have the stables of the House Harkess no mounts of their own?”

“Many,” she told him, “but if I were to take them, the Earl’s guard would know of my plans at once.”

He sat beside her. “I have no coin, lady.”

“Nor I. For the Earl’s treasury is closed to me now.”

He moved closer and stroked her hair, feeling the enchantment of her perfume crackle under his fingers.

“There may be a way,” he said. “Gather yourself and I will come to you as soon as I can.”

“Where?”

“This is your city, not mine.”

“The Jawbone Gate in the eastern quarter,” she said. “It is seldom used, no one will notice our departure from it.”

They kissed again and he took his leave of her, the warm, arcane smell of her strong in his nostrils.

* * *

It was not the enchantment that informed his decision, he was certain of that. The House Harkess had insulted him, and Wolfram Moringun was a man both protective and jealous of his talents. In helping her he would harm Harkess itself—her escape would humiliate the Earl, and provide Wolfram with suitable retaliation.

He found Trinculo Grasso in his chambers where he had left him. The fat mennisinger had gotten gloriously drunk, his doublet undone to reveal the straining corset beneath.

“My friend! You have returned.”

“Ten years, you said.”

Grasso frowned, making a drunken effort to understand. “Nay, Wolfram, you have not been gone so long.”

“Ten years to play like me. Did you mean those words, Trinculo?”

Grasso shook his head, not to deny his words but to clear his senses.

“Ten years and more if that was the price,” he said.

Wolfram advanced, his Nothing Box held before him. “The music is yours if you will help me. I need horses and provisions.”

Trinculo Grasso stood, swaying ponderously under his own bulk and the influence of wine. “Cannot it not wait until the morning?”

“No,” Wolfram said.

“Very well,” the fat mennisinger replied. “The Earl will be more than happy to supply—”

“The Earl must know nothing of this,” Wolfram said, and the sudden steel in his voice gave Grasso pause. “Bring them to the Jawbone Gate as soon as you are able.”

“And the music?” he said. “You would give it freely.”

Wolfram smiled, and there was more steel in his smile. “There are always new sounds to find, new music to be made.” He stroked the surface of the Nothing Box. “The sounds of Morturas, of the Silent Plains and the Fading Forests, the death scream of the last of his kind.”

“It will be mine?”

“Yours.”

* * *

The Countess was waiting when he reached the Jawbone Gate, still clad in red, her face hidden by the deep shadows of the cowl

The streets were quiet here, although he could still hear revelry in the distance. Faint music, laughter and wailing that slipped through the narrow lanes and broad boulevards of the city, suddenly loud then reduced again as if the very stones of PameFiliast contested with the joy and grief the sounds held.

She pushed the cowl back from her face and he could see the first glimmer of trepidation in her eyes.

“The horses will be here soon,” he told her as they embraced. They held each other, sharing warmth, huddled in the shadows of the Jawbone Gate.

He did not pretend to himself that it was love that he felt for the Countess—desire, certainly, but not love. Nor did he allow himself to believe that the smell of her perfume was stronger than before, or that his actions were those of a fool.

The sound of hooves on the cobbles made him turn, and he saw Trinculo Grasso at the end of the street. He sat upon a bay gelding, his bulk dwarfing the horse, and led a second horse, a chestnut, by its bridle.

As he rode closer Grasso’s smile first broadened then faltered as he recognized the Countess.

“I thought as much, my friend,” he said to Wolfram. “Though I had hoped it was not so. It had to be the Countess, didn’t it, Wolfram? No common tavern wench would be good enough for you. I cannot allow you to take her, my friend. I cannot allow you to destroy my future with the House Harkess.”

He put his hand to his mouth and blew a sharp whistle, like a hawker calling his favorite bird.

A moment later, the assassins of the Morder Zunft emerged onto the street, silent, lithe, faces hidden beneath conical hoods. There were eight of them, naked blades held in their hands.

“Damn you, Trinculo,” Wolfram snarled.

“You have damned yourself, my friend.”

* * *

They were artists, the torturers of the Morder Zunft, justifiably proud of their ability to inflict pain. They ministered to Wolfram Moringun with cool efficiency, never allowing anger to inform their choice of implement despite the fact that he had dared to challenge both them and the United Inquisition.

He received no trial, nor did the Inquisition deign to insist upon one—there could be no doubt of his guilt, and no one in PameFiliis would protest his innocence. They required no confession, no denial, no recantation; so they tortured him for the joy of torture and as warning to those who would stand against their justice.

His limbs were racked, his fingers—those long, sensitive fingers with which he had created such beautiful music—were crushed and broken. His feet they pressed between the jaws of a vice; his skin they peeled, burned, and seared so that his body became one vast, weeping sore.

But his face remained unmarked, for the world would need to recognize him when, in due course, he was presented before the garrotte in Penitent Square.

At times, the nobility of PameFiliias would come to his dungeon. Gold would change hands and they would be allowed to witness his torture while they sipped chilled wines and nibbled on sweetmeats, remarking now and then upon the musicality of his screams. Once, through pain that was so exquisite that it was almost joyous, Wolfram saw the face of the Earl Veduc, his features set in a neutral cast, his eyes no more expressive than those of a basilisk.

Of the Countess Alexa he heard nothing. Until Trinculo Grasso came to see him.

It may have been midday or midnight. Time had no relevance in the dungeons of the Zunft, measured as it was in terms of pain and greater pain.

The door to Wolfram's cell opened, and the weak yellow light from the corridor blinded him as it cut through the all but absolute darkness.

"What have they done to you, my friend," a familiar bass voice said.

Grasso wore muted colors today, grey and dull silver, with only the merest trace of powder on his cheeks and a hit of kohl around his eyes. "My dear Wolfram, my dear, dear Wolfram."

Wolfram raised himself from the straw pallet where he lay and stared at Trinculo. Where once he had been handsome, he now was haggard, his skin sallow and stretched tightly across his cheekbones. Despite the coldness of the cell, a thin sheen of sweat covered his face and an agonized light glittered in his eyes.

“They have destroyed me, Trinculo,” he said and held up his hands. They were twisted, ruined things now, with as much articulation as a dead twig.

“I am truly sorry, Wolfram,” Grasso told him. “But what other choice did I have but to betray you?” He hunkered down, grunting as he did so. “She enchanted you, you know.”

“I know,” Wolfram said. “Though I chose to believe that my actions were my own.”

“You were ever a fool for beautiful women,” Grasso said. “She dies tomorrow. And you are to die with her. And when you die your music will die with you, all those fabulous sounds lost forever unless....”

“Unless?”

Grasso leaned closer and, even through his pain, Wolfram could see the need, the jealousy, the longing in his face.

“Unless you bequeath them to me as your own memorial.”

“And why should I do that?”

“For our past friendship, perhaps?”

Wolfram began to laugh—a wild, untamed sound that verged dangerously close to madness.

“For your own sake then,” Grasso said angrily. “I can save you the pain of the garrotte.”

The laughter ceased abruptly. “And what would you know of pain, Trinculo Grasso?”

“I know that it will take you hours to die. Days, if the Zunft wish it, grinding the bolt fraction by fraction into your neck. You think that you know pain, my friend, but the Morder Zunft will show you the true meaning of agony. I can spare you that.” He took a phial from inside his tunic and held it up to the dim light, it glowed with a subtle red hue. “This will bring instant death, instant release from your suffering.”

“I do not want your kindness, Trinculo.”

“You may change your mind on the morrow.”

“Then bring my Nothing Box to Penitent’s Square and we shall see.” Wolfram Moringun smiled as best as he was able; a rictus grin that was dreadful to behold.

“You are a fool, Wolfram.”

He left without another word, and blackness took the cell once more.

* * *

In darkness and in pain, Wolfram’s mind turned to the past, to the triumphs and tragedies of his life. He did not fear

death, but rather he mourned the extinction of his life and its joys. One more death in a dying world would make little or no difference, after all. But the fact that he would make no more music, no more love, cut him more deeply than even the white hot blades of the Morder Zunft.

Nor did he curse the Countess Alexa—for his desire had fuelled her enchantment—but he continued to curse the Earl Veduc and House Harkess for their rejection of his finest work.

There in the darkness, with rats scampering across his burned and twisted limbs, he sought a way to revenge himself upon them, even as the moments of his life ebbed away.

And at last—as the guards of the Zunft came into his cell to dress him in white robes and lead him to Penitent's Square—he found it.

* * *

Slow and solemn, the procession made its way toward the Square. Two riders of the Zunft led it, mounted upon white mares, holding the red banners of their order proudly aloft. Behind them four drummers beat out a somber tattoo. Flanked between a brace of red-clad guards and dragged on an ebony cart, Wolfram Moringun sat with his head bowed. Behind him, two more riders, two more banners.

Dawn, cold and pallid, broke as they entered Penitent Square. The Moribund Sun had come to greet him, together with the great and the good of PameFiliás.

On the far side of the Square a dais had been raised, draped with the blue and white banner of House Harkess. The Earl was there, dressed in white, as austere as an alabaster carving, and among his entourage stood Trinculo Grasso, his Nothing Box in his hands and another slung across his shoulder. To the left of the dais, slightly lower, stood another, draped in black, green, and grey, containing the representatives of the Sonnilion Temple, The Last Day Rising Church, and the Silver Branch Cathedral, robed and hooded. All around the edges of the Square stood the citizens of the Pame, come to pay their last respects or to gloat, as was their wont. Their reverent whis-pers, amplified by a thousand throats, were a sibilant roar.

Before them all, rendered in stark splintered wood, stood the garrotte scaffold. It contained a single straight-backed chair bound in iron, already occupied by the Countess Alexa, shackled into position, staring straight towards her husband.

As the cart drew level, Wolfram could see her face. The torturers of the Zunft had been no less gentle with her than they had been with him, but their work had been directed toward a different end. Her pride had been flayed from her, her arrogance scorched away, her wild spirit torn apart by their ex-

pert ministrations. An empty shell of a creature, who waited patiently and penitently for death.

Yet the sight of her still stirred him, or perhaps it was merely the last vestiges of her perfume carried on the same sharp breeze that rattled and snapped the banners of the Zunft.

He forgave her then—for her only crime had been to love life—but as he stared upwards, into the impassive face of the Earl, his hatred flared, bright and sharp.

Trinculo caught his gaze and the flames that blazed there. He leaned across to Veduc and whispered something in his ear. The Earl nodded curtly in reply. With a bow, Trinculo broke away from the House Harkess, making his way down the dais step and towards Wolfram.

As he approached, he brought a kerchief from his sleeve and pressed it to his nose.

“You smell of death, my friend,” he said.

“My Nothing Box, did you bring it?”

Trinculo laid a hand on the Box slung over his shoulder. “Here. As you asked.” He offered his other hand to Wolfram, a red-hued phial rested in his palm.

“A swift death, Trinculo. That is what you promised.”

“A swift death.” His fingers closed again. “In exchange for this.” He tapped the Nothing Box.

“Gladly,” Wolfram told him.

“Quickly then. Time is short.”

“For us all.”

Trinculo took the Nothing Box from his back and thumbed its switches: apart from a brief scatter of light nothing indicated that the machine was anything other than an inert piece of metal.

Above them, on the garrotte scaffold, the black-garbed official of the Inquisition had begun to intone a litany of Alexa’s crimes.

“Slander against the Sonnilion Temple.

“The use of forbidden magic.

“Criticism of the Last Day Rising.

“Immoral and scandalous behavior.

“Consorting with demonic forces.

“Betrayal of the United Faith.

“Destruction of Silver Branch idols.

His sonorous voice boomed out, clear and loud, even against the noise of the throng.

“Hurry, Wolfram,” Trinculo hissed. “She has only moments to live. And when she dies, you will take her place on the scaffold.”

Wolfram gestured with twisted and crippled hands, speaking softly, directing Trinculo’s fingers as they moved across the surface of the Box. He had both talent and skill, Trinculo Gras-

so, honed to a fine edge by years of training, but Wolfram Moringun had no equal among the mennisingers of the Shining Cities, and Grasso was hard pressed to follow his instructions.

“And the sentence is death,” the Inquisitor said.

The executioner stepped onto the scaffold.

Grasso worked feverishly, moving through a complex sequence of back and forth, left and right, unlocking the deep secrets of Wolfram Moringun’s Nothing Box. But Wolfram’s eyes were not upon him; rather they were upon the face of Earl Veduc.

Austere, impassive, the Earl betrayed no emotion, even as the executioner placed his hands upon the garrotte collar, even as the crowd roared like a storm crashing against the shore.

“Faster, Trinculo,” Wolfram hissed. “Faster, or my secrets will never be yours.”

The switches fell into place.

The garrotte turned, choking Alexa’s final attempt at a scream.

The Earl nodded. Once.

The mercy spike punched through the back of the Countess’ neck. She died without another sound.

But something screamed for her.

Unleashed in all its glory, the death shriek of the creature called A. Ruah erupted from the Nothing Box. Amplified and

expanded, at its core was a howl of raw hatred: for PameFiliás and the men who had destroyed all that the goilem had held dear. The soul-deep anguish of a soulless creature, a murderous wall of sound that swept across Penitent's Square and beyond.

It echoed from the towers and spires of PameFiliás, through her streets and alleys, her petrified orchards and fossilized gardens. None of those who heard it were left untouched.

Save Wolfram Moringun and Trinculo Grasso.

* * *

Out of the shattered glory of PameFiliás came Wolfram Moringun the mennisinger, his Nothing Box held in his ruined hands.

Behind him he left a swathe of destruction unseen in the world for five thousand years. But they had dared to spurn him and thus deserved no less.

He took with him the memory of Trinculo Grasso, his face white with shock at the death and destruction the scream had unleashed; the moment when the goilem's scream had shattered Earl Veduc's sternum; the sight of the cardinals of Sonnilion, Last Day, and Silver Branch torn to pieces; the survivors in the city, faces blank, ears bleeding.

He took with him and the echo of the fatal cone of sound
as it wove its way into the very stones of the city.
And other such delights.

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James Lecky is a writer based in Derry, Northern Ireland. His short fiction has appeared in or is forthcoming in a number of publications both in print and online including EDF, Mirror Dance, The Absent Willow Review, Sorcerous Signals, Emerald Eye: The Best Irish Imaginative Fiction, and The Phantom Queen Awakes. His random musings on various topics can be found on his blog, Tales From the Computerbank (<http://jameslecky.blogspot.com>). He is also the author of "The Bone House" in BCS #20.

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COVER ART

“The Canyon,” by Christophe Vacher



Christophe Vacher has provided artwork for the movie and animation industries since 1989, including the Disney films “Hercules,” “Tarzan,” and “Treasure Planet.” He served as Art Director for animated movies including the feature film “9,” for which he received an Annie Awards nomination for Best Production Design. Visit his galleries at www.vacher.com.

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