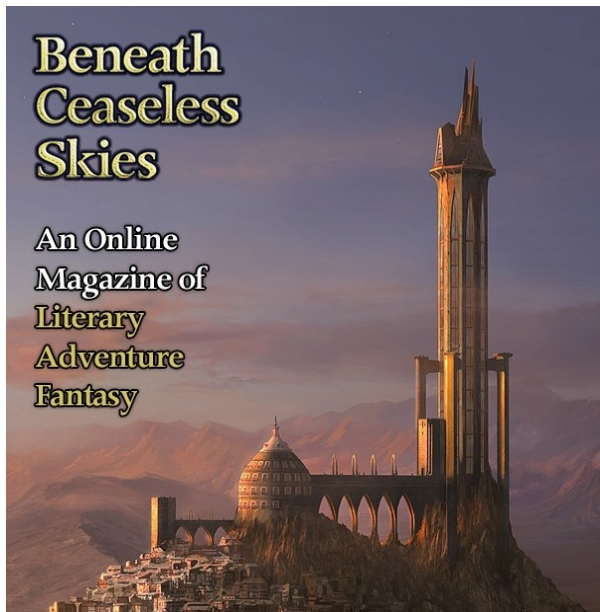


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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## THE SIX SKILLS OF MADAME LUMIERE

by Marissa Lingen

### 1. Keys Without Locks

Since Madame Lumiere's passing, many tales are told about her skills. Most of them are false. I knew her as few others did. I know her secrets—some of her secrets. With Madame Lumiere, it was not so much what she could do as what *else* she could do with it. Not the sex, but the smile; not the contraband, but the government's blessing; not the fairy magic, but the continuing human life afterwards.

Whatever world you wanted to work in, Madame Lumiere could make it work for you. Underworld, Underhill—it didn't matter.

Of course, there was always the price.

Most of her associates thought Sukey and I worked for Madame because she'd asked a price we couldn't pay any other way. They were wrong; she would never have trusted one of her debtors as close to her as she trusted Sukey and me. We could have brought her down at any time. We probably would have, too, if not for love.

Not love of her—loving Madame was about as pointless as loving a crystal chandelier. But we loved each other, and we loved the secrets. And we trusted Madame and each other, and that was more important than love.

Sukey ran the house in those days—as she does now, but the profits went into Madame’s purse, not ours. We didn’t mind. Madame took good care of us. In those days, no one was quite sure what I *did* do, but they knew I did it all for Madame.

In truth, I was the gatekeeper. A woman like Madame has a lot of use for a supernatural concierge, and I was a natural. No one ever mistook me for one of the girls of the house, with my cropped hair and my sensible shoes. I was safe. So when a man clutching his scarf to his nose to hide his face came up to my desk, I knew it might be tedious, but not in that particular way.

“I have a friend in need of assistance,” he said.

“In which room?” I said. “And is natural or supernatural assistance required?”

“She isn’t *here*,” he said, dropping the scarf for long enough to look indignant. He was the middle son of a rather stuffy family in the city, the first of his house to visit Madame’s as far as I was aware, but we keep track of the lineages just in case. If any grandee or scion or fae noble had come to me, I would have known them without a formal introduction—

although, of course, we pretend otherwise in situations where a formal introduction might be called for.

“In that case, what do you expect me to do?”

He faltered. “I was told—I was told that Madame Lumiere knows how to handle difficult cases.”

“Difficult cases are the specialty of the house, but we really must have some idea what *sort* of difficult case we are discussing.” I eyed him sternly. “If you are looking to place a foundling, I must tell you that once you have done so, you may not—”

“No! Nothing like that.”

I raised an eyebrow, no less stern than before.

“My cousin has been—put in a delicate situation. Not the kind that results in foundlings,” he hastened to add. “The kind that results in diplomatic difficulties. She needs to stay out of the eye of the public for the season. Certain parties may be tracking her movements if she leaves her home.”

“Hmm,” I said.

“The season ends in four days,” he said, looking suddenly less like a stuffy scion and more like a puppy.

“It is part of my position here to have some idea when a season ends,” I said stiffly.

“I beg your pardon.”

“How old a cousin?”

“I beg your pardon?” he repeated.

“How old is your cousin?”

“I can’t see how it—”

“If you knew what mattered, you would not be here asking for my assistance, would you?”

He looked still more abashed. “Twenty-three.”

“Maiden?” When I asked it, I thought there was a good chance he would turn indignant on me again, but apparently he had decided he was asking for my help and might as well receive it. He simply murmured, “I expect so.”

“Well enough. And you can bring her here, or did you want that to be part of the service as well?”

“If you could fetch her,” he murmured. “Her name is Josine. Josine Valdecart.” He gave me her address also.

My tact returned to me, or at least my delicacy. “Will she be expecting... persons of our situation?”

“She knows that I am sending aid. She is no missish ninny. She will go if you come for her.”

It would be well enough. I sent him off to wait in one of our parlors, guided by one of the bare-chested boys who were ubiquitous around Madame’s establishment. The customers were honor-bound to leave them be until they had hair on their chests, even sparse hair, and our charming Sukey turned into a shrieking harpy on any customer who forgot the rule, the more

so on those who pretended to forget. Other customers proved willing to help her in her wrath. The boys were both sweet and decorative in their full silk trousers; even I was protective of them, and I was notorious for my hard heart.

Oh yes. Even then, men spoke of Lucy Brown's heart of steel. Not for me the heart of stone of ballads and tales; stone is not hard enough.

But I was not particularly heartless with this man, though I had not yet determined whether he might deserve it. I would find that out when I found his cousin Josine. In the meantime I would have to figure out which of our staff would help me shift her, and with what tools.

Madame's keys open a great many things. Foremost they open locks that did not exist, or that only thought of existing. Josine Valdecart was in such a lock. It would be a matter for me of choosing the right key.

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## 2. Fairy Vegetables

Heretofore neglected in the discussions of our complicated relationship with the lands beyond are the fairy vegetables. Much has been said, by many, about the fairy fruits that tempt and change the children of man. Very little has been devoted to their more stolid cousins.

And why not? Who, indeed, can wax poetic, breathless, with lips parted, on the fairy rutabaga? The fairy cabbage, while it will certainly change your soul, will also result in the sort of undignified personal emissions that its more earthy relation produces. Even the fairy cucumber is faintly eccentric, more odd than enchanting.

And yet.

And yet that same fairy carrot, the very same fairy turnip that seemed so uninspiring, carry with them at least the same power as the fairy peach, the fairy strawberry, the delicate fairy pomegranate seeds that were once so much trouble.

If she was like other rich young ladies, Josine Valdecart would not know much about fairy vegetables, which was all to our benefit, for we could feed her enough of them to blur her identity while we moved her. The stuffy young man had claimed that his cousin was not a missish ninny, but given the outstanding magnitude of missish ninnies he had to compare her to, in his social situation... better safe than sorry. And better a willing girl than a balking one.

Sukey and I put on very sedate striped morning suits, mine in blue and hers in cream, and went to call on Miss Josine Valdecart. I carried a parasol with a nasty blade in the handle and a handkerchief filled with useful herbs. Sukey carried a basket filled with cold meat pies made with fairy vegetables, so

while we looked very respectable, we smelled a bit like a sidewalk vendor. The Valdecart housekeeper noticed when she admitted us. She did not sniff haughtily, but her nose twitched.

Sukey put a gloved hand on the woman's arm. "We mean no harm to those who live within," she said, "and if it is within our power we will do none."

"Nor to those who work within, either," I said with a little glare at Sukey. We should never forget our roots so much as that. The distinction matters.

The housekeeper gave both of us a bemused look. "Well, I thank you, and my lady certainly will too. Is that the reason for your visit? To express your goodwill?"

"We were sent on this errand by a member of your lady's family," said Sukey.

The housekeeper's smile thinned. "How nice. It wasn't my lady's aunt, Mistress—"

"A cousin," I said. "A male cousin."

"Ah."

I took a chance. "A feckless male cousin."

She nearly smiled. "Ah yes. In that case."

The housekeeper ushered us into a parlor that had been recently and hastily redecorated. The materials were all the sorts of things purchased by people who are used to only the finest quality—we would not have scorned to have wallpaper by



that maker in Madame's house, though not, I think, in that sunshine-colored hue—but thrown together in something of a panic. Sukey sat down on the straw-colored divan. I chose a pale blue armchair and regretted it instantly: it was the sort of chair one put in a parlor to encourage importunate aunts to go home.

I was glad to have the excuse to get up again when Miss Josine Valdecart entered. She was taller than Sukey, almost as tall as I am, and she wore her hair in a tidy brown knot in the back of her head. I looked down: sensible shoes, sturdy, durable. Always a good sign.

“Miss Valdecart,” said Sukey. “Miss Brown and I are here to assist you. Our methods are not always orthodox, but I assure you we can effect your removal from the premises until persons of interest are no longer—”

She fumbled for a word, and I supplied, “Interested. Just give her the pie, Sukey.” Sukey pulled it out of the hamper with a clean linen handkerchief and attempted to hand it over to Miss Valdecart.

“I don't think that'll work,” said Miss Valdecart, eyeing the cold meat pie as though it was a hissing adder.

“If your cousin thought you could get yourself out of this, he'd not have sent us,” I said tartly.

“I suppose that’s true, although he is a bit dim,” she said, “but that’s only fairy vegetables, and it’s the Rust Lords who have taken an interest.”

Sukey took a step back, taking the pie with her. We looked at each other. We must have looked a pretty pair of fools then, trying to addle the Rust Lords themselves with pies.

“I’m sorry,” Miss Valdecart added humbly. “He means well. I don’t think he understands the gravity of the situation.”

Sukey recovered quickly. “If he did not, he wouldn’t have delivered you to *our* keeping. We will get you away from the Rust Lords. The pies will not do, but our lady teaches us much that is useful in a crisis, and she expects us to use what we know.”

The housekeeper spoke up. Miss Valdecart started, clearly having forgotten she was there. Sukey and I did not forget, but we did not expect what she said: “I could eat one of the pies.”

“Do you understand what we made them with?” Sukey asked gently.

The housekeeper bobbed her head. “Madam, I have lived in this city from birth. I know a fairy vegetable when I smell one.”

“And why would you eat of them?” I asked, less gently.

“If I had one and left the house, some of the Rust Lords might follow the blurred trail, just to see whose it was. Then there would be fewer for you to deal with.”

“Then we could make our escape to our lady’s house in the Underhill ways,” said Sukey. “Oh, brave soul. Well thought. I would ask if you knew what they might do to you if they caught you out, but as you say, you have lived here since your birth.”

“I know them well enough,” said the housekeeper. “And I am a member of the Yoke and Nail. I am beyond their destruction.”

“Brave soul,” I echoed, nearly against my will, for while that august society will keep a good servant from death at the hands of the great lords, it will not spare her torment.

The housekeeper looked at Sukey and me first. “Tell your lady,” she said distinctly, “that the daughters of the ones who sewed for her last time will not forget.”

I pursed my lips. Sukey said, “And she’ll know what that means?”

“She will know.” The housekeeper turned to her mistress. “Miss Josine, child, follow the paths that these two show to you, and if you must choose between trusting them and trusting your cousin—choose them.”

“But he—”

The housekeeper sighed. “Will you believe that I know more of their world than you do?”

“Yes,” said Miss Valdecart humbly.

“Very good. Trust them.”

“All right.”

The housekeeper took the pie from Sukey. “The ones who sewed for her last time,” she repeated.

“We will remember,” I said.

She bit down, then smiled around the mouthful. “I had forgotten how good these are, how savory and fine.”

“We do our best,” said Sukey.

“And we pray that it will be good enough this time,” said the housekeeper, taking another bite. “Give me a quarter of an hour. Then go.”

She left us without any fuss, though Miss Valdecart stretched a hand out wistfully after her. “Well,” said Miss Valdecart, “you may as well call me Josine, if you know of the Rust Lords. That, I should think, would be at least as good as a personal introduction.”

“I am Sukey, and this is Lucy,” said Sukey. I nodded briefly.

“Shall we take the back stairs?” asked Josine. “Or—there is a garden that—”

“We will not need doors, my dear,” said Sukey, smiling kindly. “Not the way we’re going.”

I didn’t have time for kind smiles, as I was already treading out the carpet to prepare a gate into the Underhill ways. In any case I often didn’t make the time for kind smiles even when there were not faerie realms to gently invade.

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### 3. Underhill Ways

Madame is quick from place to place. Madame knows. The places that will not lie still from one second to another make paths for her, smooth and easy and quiet, so quiet. The cave walls of the Underhill have the grain of wood, oak and kingwood, but they are not wood. The wood-like grain swirls and twists around us. Wood is kinder to human voices. Sukey and I have been known to sing on the paths, which makes them a little bumpier, just a little, but the bumps are much easier to bear than the quiet.

On this occasion, we sang as cheerfully as we could manage, though the Underhill ways tend to twist our harmonies into something more melancholy. We are used to the sadness that comes of mortal feet in fairy lands, but I suspected Josine was not. Soon I had my suspicions confirmed.

“I have never,” said Josine a bit breathlessly, “never, never been here before.”

“I expect not,” I said.

“How did you—I saw the glowing gate,” she said.

“The gate of bone,” I supplied.

“How did you get that to come to you?”

I winced; she had hit the nail precisely on the head. I had not created a gate, I had summoned it, with my footsteps and my words and my will. But it, too, had a will, more of a will than I was comfortable with in something that was not supposed to be living, or not any more.

So did the ground under my feet.

“Madame teaches many things,” said Sukey, letting me off the hook for the moment. “It’s convenient for her if her assistants are able to act with substantial independence.”

“How do your parents feel about that?” asked Josine.

Then it was my turn to let Sukey off the hook. “We are not either of us in a circumstance where our parents have had a great deal of interest in our doings for some years now. Before we came to Madame’s service.”

Josine shook her head wonderingly. “I have been chaperoned every moment. Nearly every moment.” She scrambled over a hillock in the path, created by our conversation as the gentler bumps were by our singing. “I have barely been outside our own lands except in a carriage on the way to friends’ houses.”

I held my hand up for silence, and Josine stopped talking without needing an explanation. I whistled down the path in the silence. The whistle came back almost right. Almost. I frowned. I couldn't pinpoint quite what was wrong with it. I glanced back at Sukey, and she put an arm around Josine, able to guide her without noise. I whistled again. The echo sounded normal.

I turned to them and shrugged. "I can't find anything wrong right now. But a minute ago—there was something. I don't know."

"Maybe best not to go home for a bit," said Sukey.

Staying Underhill had its risks. We were not alone there, and as well as Madame had taught us the Underhill ways, they could still warp around us. But on the other hand, if our ruse had not worked with the Rust Lords leaving the Valdecart home, better to find it out now than to be trapped Underhill surrounded by Rust Lords, or even by the more easily thwarted fairykind.

I found a cavern where we could wait and shielded it against magic eyes. Its walls were pressurized carbon, and it glistened with moisture. Most people do not see caverns full of wet diamonds in their lifetimes. The Underhill ways are filled with many stranger things, and my first reaction was annoyance that we would have to sit on such a hard, wet

surface or remain standing. But Josine's eyes were wide, her lips slightly parted.

"Like it, do you?" I asked.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"What did you do to anger the Rust Lords, a little homebody like you?" I continued.

"They're not angry," she said softly, running a finger along the dripping gem and then wiping the water on the hem of her dress.

"Then why are you running from them?"

"They're not angry," she repeated, and for a moment I was about to demand that she answer my question. Then I saw the point.

"They like you too well."

"Too well indeed," said Josine.

"And how did they find out how well they like you, if you're as much a homebody as that?" I said. "How does a girl who's still impressed with a diamond cave, who's chaperoned all the time and barely off her own family's lands, come to the attention of the Rust Lords?"

She ducked her head. "There was a masquerade with my cousin. It was more of a romp than I am permitted to attend, lest I—"



“Lest you ruin your chances of a brilliant match,” said Sukey, very dryly. “We are aware of how these things work, though we don’t live them.”

Josine peered at her a bit anxiously. I think she had decided that Sukey was the nice one, and might have been rethinking her assessment. “There was a masquerade,” I prompted.

“My cousin feels sorry for me,” said Josine. “Felt sorry, at least. Now he feels guilty, I suppose. But he always thought it was a shame I wasn’t permitted out more. He remembers when we were children, how I was just as brave as he was and just as quick with a spell, and he doesn’t... he didn’t see any reason why they should treat me like an invalid.”

“But he does now?” said Sukey.

“I have a knack,” Josine said apologetically. “I... it’s something I know I can do, not something I know how to do, if that makes any sense. It just happens.”

“*What* just happens?”

“I put things right again,” she said.

Sukey and I looked at each other. “You reverse time?” Sukey asked, hiding her skepticism much better than I would have.

“No! I... they say you can’t put Humpty-Dumpty back together again,” said Josine. “About eggs and things? They

teach it to children because it's true, there's no use crying over spilt milk and you can't put Humpty-Dumpty back together again, because he's an egg, and smashed eggs don't work that way."

I suppose Sukey was scowling in thought. I know I was. The word Josine was looking for was "entropy." There were professors who came to Madame's, as everyone came to Madame's, and she insisted that they treat us, me and Sukey in particular but the others as well, as people, equals. For professors, treating someone as your equal means telling them at great length what you are figuring out, or what you might figure out soon, or what you think you've just figured out a minute ago if you didn't get the math wrong. They soon found out that people who manage a whorehouse, not to mention the whores themselves, are very, very keen on not getting the math wrong.

And what one of them was figuring out was called entropy.

It was exactly what Josine was talking about, things falling apart, some things only happening one direction and not another. It was the Rust Lords' greatest joy and their greatest power. And here Josine was saying she was able to reverse it, but they weren't angry with her at all, and that didn't make much sense to me.

While I was thinking all this, a plover walked across the cavern entrance, picking and pecking its little speckled brown head, as casual as a bird could be. Sukey frowned, and I did a quick spell to see through illusions and shifted shapes. It was really a plover, hatched and grown. Sukey and I looked at each other.

“Oh, a little bird,” said Josine. “Is it a fairy bird?”

I looked at her, astonished. I could not imagine that someone could say that and not make me want to take off my lovely, well-made boot and beat her with it. How twee would someone have to be to ask me to look at the sweet little fairy birdies when we were trying to shield her from some of the most deeply unpleasant forces of magic allowed within city gates? Not very twee, apparently, as Josine could manage to make it sound matter-of-fact.

“No, it’s just a plover,” I said. Josine nodded as though this was an ordinary occurrence. I got up from my dampish seat and watched the plover as it went.

“As you said,” said Sukey, sounding concerned, “just a plover.”

“And where do we find plovers?”

“Along the seashore,” said Josine with hearty good cheer.

I looked over my shoulder. Sukey did not look nearly so cheerful. “Along the... seashore,” she repeated.

The diamond cavern was damp, but we had not thought anything of that; the weather of the Underhill ways can be capricious and is certainly mysterious to the likes of us. But we both knew that there ought not to be a seashore or anything a plover could mistake for one within several miles of where we were standing.

I followed the plover. Sukey and Josine followed me. The plover was oblivious. I motioned them to wait when we got to the line where my protections from magical spying would give out, and I kept going.

Someone—or something—or the Underhill itself—had plunked an ocean down where we wanted to go.

Up until that moment, I had not been sure that we wanted to leave right away, and I was willing to stick around in the diamond cavern and talk to Josine some more about what, exactly, had happened at this masquerade ball she so foolishly attended, so that the Rust Lords would be interested in her. But the very minute I saw that misplaced ocean, I felt sure that we had to go, back to Madame's and as soon as possible. I hurried back to Sukey and Josine. The plover, presumably, hurried on to whatever it is plovers find worth hurrying for.

"Unexpected ocean," I said. I saw the whites of Josine's eyes, and I was briefly amused that she seemed to think I had gone off my nut.

“Oh dear,” said Sukey faintly.

“We can’t stay.”

“Not if they’re handing out oceans without marking the spot first,” I agreed.

“I’ll stay with the—with Josine for a moment,” said Sukey.

“And I’ll call Jenny,” I said, finishing her thought. “All right.”

I took off my boots very carefully, button by button, and then my stockings. I handed them to Sukey along with my parasol. She accepted them with equanimity though Josine stared. Next I shimmied my petticoats from under my dress, until I had only dress and shift to contend with. This stopped Josine’s staring; she politely averted her gaze.

I left them standing there, Sukey folding up my petticoats with her customary tidiness. I hitched my skirts up under my arms and waded knee-deep into the misplaced sea. I had not gone wading or swimming in the lakes often since joining Madame’s staff, as it is not a thing a person of the class I now belong to will do.

But as a child I frolicked like a young otter with my poor cousins, so I knew how to stand steady in the currents, and I knew the different ways lakes could feel under my toes. I didn’t imagine seas were much different: there were the standard sandy bottoms, and the mossy rocky bottoms, and the pointy

rocky bottoms, and the sucking muddy bottoms. All of the rocks and soil under water have been harassed and harried by water, and they feel it.

Here, I couldn't feel individual rocks at all. It was unweathered stone, such as I would expect to find under my feet in a cave that had never touched the sea. It was not particularly comfortable to walk upon barefoot, and I was not as confident of my footing. So up to the knees would have to do.

Quietly, so that Josine couldn't hear me, I called out to my colleague, my ally, my friend. And Jenny came.

Jenny had lived with me and Sukey and the others at Madame's for four years. She and Madame found out quickly enough that she was a failure as a whore—like me and Sukey—but unlike me and Sukey, she had no talents for diplomacy, administration, or much in the way of organized spellcasting.

What Jenny did have, we discovered one day, was a strong affinity for shapeshifters. For reasons none of us could understand and Jenny couldn't articulate, she loved the skinwalkers, and they loved her. With the rest of us, they were aloof and wary. Jenny may as well have been one of their furry babies for all the caution they showed her.

Two years ago, one of their number, Lisette, fell in love with a mortal man. She decided that she would spend her days

on land with him, but to give him her sealskin to hold her to the bargain seemed an unfair burden to them both. She gave it to Jenny instead, not forever but to keep for awhile. Jenny spent her days in the waters Underhill, frolicking with selkies who accepted her, if not as one of them, certainly as a dear friend and one who would help catch the strange fish who populated those waters.

What we all knew—what we never spoke a word of—was that every day Jenny lived Underhill changed her, made it harder for her to return home, and we didn't know what she would do on the day when her selkie friend wanted her skin back. We had no earthly idea, nor an Underhill one. But as none of us, up to and including Madame, had any idea what Jenny would do in any case, no one tried to stop her.

The girl-seal nosed my leg playfully, and then her flippers flung her head back in one motion, and it was Jenny in a sealskin cloak, standing up in the water next to me.

"I wish you were here for love of me," she said without preamble. "Hello, Lucy. What's happened?"

I gave her a quick hug and explained as best I could.

Jenny sighed. "Can she swim?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," I said.

“Find out, will you? I’m not sure I can get you through to a point where you can find the thread to weave a door to Madame’s again without at least a bit of swimming.”

“What if she can’t?”

“Then I call some selkiekind to help her, and Madame is in debt to the skinwalkers for the sake of a little mortal client she’s never met.”

My heart sank. “I’ll ask her, but I can’t imagine where she’d have learned. I can’t imagine where she’d have been permitted to learn. It’s not the sort of thing her people—”

“I know,” said Jenny grimly.

I waded back to shore, feet slipping uncomfortably. I never quite lost my balance, but the hem of my dress got thoroughly soaked all the same. By then I was pretty sure the dress would be a complete loss, which was a shame. I was fond of that dress. But among the things I had learned from Madame was to set priorities.

I stripped my dress off, standing before them in my shift. Sukey winced and started to unbutton her own dress. “Can you swim?” I asked Josine.

“No,” she said.

Sukey looked at me.

“Madame will have to owe the selkiefolk a favor,” I said.

“Isn’t there another way?” asked Sukey.



I raised an eyebrow and let her think over the alternatives herself. Coming out of the Underhill ways at an unknown point might land us miles from the city, or universes from it, with no way of telling how to get back where we came from—if we even survived the trip. The most prominent tales of the children who are taken Underhill are the ones who simply live there, like Jenny, but no one talks of the ones who wander into another universe, and then another, and are never seen nor heard from after.

It is possible that the Fair Folk know how to track one of our own if she strays from this universe, but if so, they aren't telling. Madame would have freed those ways to us if she could. Madame opens many paths. But that path is not open even to her.

And returning to Josine's house, going out the way we came in, would put us in no better position with regard to the Rust Lords, and waiting for the sea to shift again might do us a deal more harm than good.

Sukey thought all this herself. "Well, then," she said with a sigh. "Tell Jenny that our charge can't swim, and let's get on with it."

Once again, Josine was more game than we had any business expecting of a young woman of her upbringing. She did not make any fuss about leaving her fine dress behind, nor

about stepping forth in her shift to be bumped about by selkies. I suspected that the cave made her feel more as though she was indoors, somewhere private, but it may simply have been that she was uncommonly sensible.

Or uncommonly frightened by the Rust Lords.

I had not been swimming for quite some time, and Sukey was, I think, the same. The selkies were there to help Josine, but I was just as glad to have a nudge from time to time. I suppose we only swam for half an hour, perhaps less. It felt like much more. Then one of the selkies nudged me harder than their helpful bumps, and I hit bottom with my toes.

I stood up. The water was up past my waist, but calm. While Sukey and Josine waited, catching their breaths, I trod out the path for the gate that would take us back to Madame's in safety. I have never seen something so welcoming as the closet on the landing of the back stairs that day. I made a mental note to send someone to sop up the extra water that spilled onto the second-best carpets as we crossed over, but for the moment I was content to sit on the soggy second-best carpet in my shift and laugh wearily and breathe with Sukey and Josine.

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#### 4. The Arts of Unearthly Pleasures

It would have been too much to ask that the Rust Lords avoid our establishment while we had Josine Valdecart within it. The Rust Lords, like all other lords of power who visit our city on the borderlands, know what they like. And like so many others, what they like best is exactly what we have.

It's how we make our living.

We all know when the Rust Lords come through the door. We can hear them and feel them and smell them; we could even without Madame's training. In less highly skilled atmospheres, a room will go quiet when one of the Rust Lords walks in. Here, we are too mannerly for that, and they appreciate it, though they themselves have no manners to speak of.

Their feet fall heavily on the carpet, and around them comes the smell of rust and of moldering leaves, which does not readily dissipate no matter how many jars of potpourri we set out and no matter how thoroughly we launder the things they touch. Their voices are not loud, but the creak of them carries. They are less vivid than the ordinary fairies, more veined and mottled than the likes of us, and they shine like a slick of oil on water.

The Rust Lords ought to be very popular among our local fairy population: anything that saps the power of cold iron is well-liked, even loved, in our trade. Nearly anything.

But the Rust Lords are not. Part of the problem, of course, is that they can't completely destroy cold iron. Iron is an element. Binding it to other elements, in rust, does not make it disappear, and while smudging fairies with rusty dust is a great deal less dramatic than smiting them with swords, it turns out to be threatening all the same. And it turns out that raw destruction makes the deathless uncomfortable. I gather it hits too close to home.

In any case, we are as discreet as we can manage at segregating the Rust Lords from the ordinary clientele, and they visit but rarely and not in great numbers. Keeping them away from Josine would not, in theory, be difficult.

It was therefore with a sense of inevitability, though not a pleasant one, that I realized that unless we stayed in the landing closet forever, the door I'd opened from the Underhill ways took us directly past their section; and that, of course, some of them were in attendance.

"I smell them," Josine whispered, shrinking back against the cream-and-straw wallpaper in her wet petticoat. Her hair had draggled down the back of her neck, and for the first time she looked like the fainting noble daisy I had expected her to be.

"We won't let them get you," I said. "We won't, and Madame won't. And this is Madame's place."

“Madame won’t like it if there’s trouble, though,” said Sukey.

“Shall we go back and get Jenny’s sealskin?” I asked.

Sukey frowned at me. “If she would give it. And if it wouldn’t make them suspicious, a seal flopping and flapping along the corridors. Even the born-selkies have more manners at Madame’s than that.”

I sighed. “Why is it that those without manners feel they can presume upon those with them? If we protested that *they* were rude, they would laugh and not pay us the least attention.”

It was fortunate then, or possibly a sign of a well-run house, that one of our girls, Therese, chose that moment to ascend the back stairs. Even among our girls, Therese is uncommonly sensible. She did not say a word at our half-clad, bedraggled state, merely blinked, and then greeted us in very cautious tones.

“We’re just out of the Underhill ways and avoiding the Rust Lords,” I said, also quietly. “This is Miss Valdecart, a client we are protecting.”

“From the Rust Lords.”

“Yes.”

Therese looked us over carefully. “You’ll want something dry.”

“Ideally.”

“We can get you....” Therese hesitated.

“Do you work in the Rust Lords’ section?”

“She does,” said Sukey.

“When I’m called on,” said Therese. “Not always. But I have rooms. I have space.”

“Is there anywhere we can go from here that won’t be near their—”

Therese shook her head. “But I’ll run point.”

“They don’t want Lucy and me,” said Sukey. “It’s Josine they’re after. They might not even know we’re the ones protecting her.”

Therese winced. “I wouldn’t underestimate what the Rust Lords know.”

“All the same, if you have a choice between throwing her to them or us—”

“I understand,” said Therese. “Come on, then.”

She crept down the stairs and peered around the banister. I sighed, not sure what use this was going to be. The air was full of the smell of the Rust Lords. They were near. I would not be able to tell how near. Holding our sopping shifts out so as to avoid squelching, Sukey and Josine and I followed Therese down the stairs. Therese slipped down the hall, looking about her, and then motioned us to follow her into her room.

Happily for all of us, Therese was a bigger girl than any of us, though not as tall; we would never become ladies of fashion borrowing her clothes, but they would cover us decently enough for in Madame's house, decently enough until we could get to our own things—or, in Josine's case, to mine. In the quiet of Therese's room, I started trying to think which of my dresses I liked least, which stockings I could part with. Generosity is a virtue, but in this house we try never to take virtue to extremes.

"The things you do," said Therese, shaking her head at me. I looked a sight in her third-best dressing gown, with my hair in a long, wet braid, but I held myself proudly.

"Madame serves her customers. You know that."

"I do know that," Therese said, "and I'm only glad I serve them my way instead of yours. Now that you're not dripping all over the carpets and leaving a trail behind you, how do we get you to safety?"

I froze. Of course we'd left a wet trail. "Tell one of the servants I asked for them to steam all the carpets in this wing," I said, trying to sound calm.

Josine was the only one who did not look at me as though I'd lost my wits. The steam cleaners are hand-cranked and extremely loud. They can't be operated with fewer than four people, and six is more useful. With the smell and the noise and all the people involved, they could only be more

conspicuous if we installed flashing lights on them, and possibly some kind of tracer that penetrated into the Underhill. Some of our girls have claimed, when we have run the steam cleaners on their days off, that you can *already* hear the things all the way into the Underhill.

I had thought of all that.

I had also thought that Miss Josine Valdecart is the very last person who would be expected by her friends or relations—or, more to the point, her implacable and obsessive enemies—to be seen running a steam cleaner in the halls of a whorehouse. Even a very high-quality whorehouse such as our own.

Therese reported back: "They'll be in the hall with the steam cleaner in half an hour."

I nodded. "Good. We'll go out and join them, and that'll get us out of this wing at least. Therese, get someone to distract the Rust Lords as much as you can, please. Dance for them. Something. Try to keep your head down, Josine."

"Will I break it?"

Sukey laughed. "My dear girl, it is a steam cleaner meant to be run by the newest and lowliest of maids. We design them to be sturdy. All you have to do is turn the crank and hope your arms don't fall off."

"That sounds... I can do that," said Josine.



She almost couldn't. Of course there is no spell on the steam cleaner to make people's arms actually pop off, but she was not used to that kind of exertion. Nor, to be fair, were Sukey and I any more; and certainly not after half an hour of unaccustomed swimming. The servants who were with us had to do the lion's share of the work, poor dears.

As we came nearest to the Rust Lords, clanking and swearing, I could smell them. I had the belated realization that Sukey and I could simply have walked off to our own rooms and let Josine and the servants handle the steam cleaner. But as well as she'd kept her head, I didn't trust that it would be permanent.

We didn't have time for a bath, when we were safely into our own wing, but a quick wash-up was not beyond us. We settled our hair back into place, and I loaned Josine the green silk that made me look muddy. (I have, in my time, managed to be earthy. Muddy, no, never when I can help it.) I expected it would be a permanent loan. We settled into the parlor and drank large cups of tea and tried to pretend we had some idea of what to do next.

"There's always the...," said Sukey.

"I could try a spell that...," I said.

Josine said, "...."

I had really intended to have another biscuit or something, because I was ravenous. Apparently I was more tired than hungry, because I shut my eyes for just a moment, and my mouth tasted woolly when I heard, "Aren't the three of you a pretty tableau! I should see if that painter fellow wants to use you as models. You look likely to stay still for him, at least."

We all jumped and turned as one.

Madame was there.

\* \* \*

## 5. Stain Removal and Other Laundry Services

Madame is old, or would be old if she could be bothered to let time infringe on her borders with impunity. As she cannot she is merely a bit shiny around the edges from where time has bounced off her and left her herself. She always wears a white dress with white or iridescent embroidery, white stockings and white slippers, and her charm bag is white-on-white as well. Under gaslight, starlight, or candlelight, Madame sparkles.

No one knows what she does in sunlight.

She offered Josine her hand graciously, turned as though Josine might kiss it. Josine shook it instead, and Madame smiled. "Miss Valdecart," she said. "You seem to have gotten yourself into a considerable amount of trouble."

"Yes, Madame," said Josine. Her voice remained steady, and I was proud of her in her gently reared inexperience. Very

few young ladies of her background would do so well in the face of the most notorious brothel-keeper in the city, after an Underhill flight and soaking, attired in the borrowed bathrobe and underthings of a whore.

“Josine was going to tell us *what*, exactly, happened at that masquerade, that drew the attention of the Rust Lords to her,” I said. “But things keep interfering.”

Josine looked at Madame shamefacedly. “I had never been to a party like that, you see.”

“Gently reared,” said Madame, with a touch of sadness.

“Quite so, Madame, and not much out in the world. One hears of the Rust Lords mentioned, almost as bogeymen for children. One does not appreciate the social reality of being introduced to them at a party.”

“And were you introduced.”

“Not—per se,” said Josine, flushing further. “There was an ice sculpture. It was in the shape of a rabbit—”

“This was for the equinox?” Madame interrupted.

“Yes, the spring equinox. It was not so long ago, I suppose.” Josine played with the fringe of her borrowed robe, then collected herself. “The air was chill enough yet that the rabbit melted but slowly, a few drips from nose and ears was all. And then *they* came, and one of them pointed at the rabbit

and laughed, and it collapsed with a splash into a puddle of water that soaked the table and passersby.”

“And then?” Madame prompted, when Josine seemed to want to go no further.

“And I—I was—upset,” said Josine.

“You were angry,” said Madame.

“Madame, I was.”

“What happened when you got angry?”

“Other girls get angry and break things,” said Josine in a rush. “Hairbrushes or porcelain plates or glass vases. I get angry and things... fix themselves. And the sculpture fixed itself. There was once again an ice rabbit. It surged out of the puddle. From the look they got, I think they thought they might have angered an undine, who was now coming after them. But no, it was just me, they saw soon enough that it was just *someone*. And they had to find out who would dare cross them, and who had the strength.”

The rabbit had formed itself out of a puddle? I wondered if I could have gotten Miss Josine Valdecart angry about my brother’s lungrot. Surely that would have been worth more than an ice rabbit dripping away to nothing. A cousin bleeding out in the nighttime streets, a friend hunched with the bonetwist... and this girl’s power restored lapine idols. Not even false gods. False rabbits.

I am among them so much, the rich and the powerful, that sometimes I forget how angry they make me.

Or perhaps it's that I am one of them so much, these days.

I turned my eyes to Madame's face. She had been silently examining Josine. Josine, all honor to her, returned the favor.

"How did they find out it was you?"

"They took one of the servants," said Josine. "They had knives, rusty knives but sharp, and they snatched one of the pages as if out of the air, and they cut a line in his flesh, a killing line if I hadn't been there. If I hadn't intervened."

And my thought of my cousin had not been premature. She had done it, had stopped a rusty blade from spilling a young life into the night, whether it was on grimy cobblestones or marble tiles. I could be content that I had helped her swim. She was what she was, and not a little rag doll with powers.

"They will want you always," said Madame. "If you do not find a way to guard against them, they will pursue you. They love to destroy, and you make it possible for them to destroy again and again. If you are in their power, they can cut that page's throat again and again. You understand? They need not find something new to smash until they have wrung all the joy out of one toy, if you are with them. You must not let them take you."

"Lady, I know it."

“Do you?”

It was time for me to speak. “Madame, she was brave in the Underhill Ways. She cannot swim, but she let the selkies take her, and she tried to help them with her own upkeep, her own... upbearing. She has courage, Madame. She does her best.”

“As do you, faithful Lucy,” said Madame.

“I try.”

Sukey said, “Madame, we fear that they have caught her scent in the building. There was not much room for Lucy to draw her gate in the new water Underhill. We came in very near the rooms they use, and it was a near thing for Josine to stay hidden from them. We may not have much time.”

Madame drew herself up. “Am I mistress of this place, or is some other? For I tell you truly, it has no lord.”

“You are,” said Sukey, “but the Rust Lords have no respect for persons.”

“They have respect for powers,” said Madame. “We will get her through this safely.”

We all nodded; if Madame said it, it must be so—not because she was omnipotent, but because she had a sense of her own limitations, even when they were far beyond ours.

“One thing more,” I said. “Miss Valdecart—Josine—has a housekeeper with a message for you. She wants you to know

that the daughters of the ones who sewed for you last time are ready.”

Madame looked thoughtful. “Are they. That is welcome news indeed.”

“Madame, what are you—what did she mean?”

She smiled at me. “In good time, my flower. Now. Miss Valdecart. I want you to listen carefully. I can help you now and have that be the end of it,” said Madame. “If the Rust Lords come for you next week, it will not be my concern, but my price will be one you can pay over the next few months. That cost will be measured in silver.”

“Or?” Josine prompted.

“Or you may choose what these women before you have chosen,” said Madame. “Loyalty. I stand by my people, as they can attest. My powers, my skills, my connections, are theirs to draw upon. Lucy and Sukey knew that I would accept their debt to the selkies for your rescue. They considered whether it would be the best solution. But they did not have to consult me, and they did not fear my wrath for it. Because we trust each other.”

Even after all these years, I felt a warm glow on hearing her say it. Sukey reached over and squeezed my hand.

“I don’t know you,” said Josine. “But I have gotten to know these women a bit this afternoon. And if they trust you, I think I will.”

I did not dare to look at Sukey, for she would be sniveling, and I did not want to snivel myself. Instead I looked out in the hall, where there was a little fluttering sound.

There was a plover. I tipped my head to consider it. We did not customarily have plovers in the house; while we cater to a wide range of tastes and interests, birding is not, alas, on offer; not, at least, of the traditional sort. I have a few ideas what a gentleman who asked Sukey to assign him a girl who was a real birder might get, but they did not seem terribly relevant to the actual plover at hand.

“Madame,” I said softly, “we have a problem.” She turned to me, and I indicated the bird. “They’re moving the waters of the Underhill again.”

“That will not do,” she said, so quietly we all had to strain to hear her.

“What do they want?” said Sukey fearfully. “Why would they—they could beach selkies that way, or drown other fae. Surely they don’t want their cousins to organize against them.”

“They’re betting we don’t want anybody organized against us as well,” I said.



Everyone looked at me curiously. “Why would they?” asked Sukey.

I jerked my head towards Josine. “We’ve got her. And they want her. All this is to draw her out.”

“I should have gone to them immediately,” said Josine.

Madame favored her with one of the coldest looks I’ve seen in my time in the house. “If you thought that, you should never have entered my service.”

Josine bowed her head. “No, you’re right. I won’t surrender to them. I put myself in your hands; direct me, and I will fight.”

Madame smiled. I think she had missed her time as a general, all these years. I had no idea how much that time would come again.

\* \* \*

## 6. The Locks Without Keys

I was not sure leaving Madame’s house was the best idea, but the Rust Lords were still there. It would wreck the business if they remained, and Josine was having none of that. I think Madame was relieved that she did not have to present it as the first test of Josine’s professed loyalty, though of course it could also have been the first test of Madame’s.

We went down to the cellars, down where the river ran little channels under the building for receiving goods or, from

time to time, for customers who preferred even more discretion than a scarf or a domino or a spell could provide. It smelled dank down there, but Madame's stevedores and bouncers were as loyal as the rest of us, keeping out armies of mice as well as more human invaders. We had arranged for a boat—nothing so elegant as a gondola, I'm afraid; they were all in service—and were waiting for it to come back from the errand on which it had previously been sent. And they came.

There were four of them, and they wore rusty black cloaks with the dye coming off in streaks. Their faces, too, were streaked, with red-orange veins like leaves on their white surfaces. They might have been beautiful if they had not been so horrible.

The rust smell almost did not hit me in time, with the watery smell of the canal next to me. I whirled and shoved Sukey and Josine behind me. "Don't," I said. "She's one of ours. You will regret it."

"We spend remarkably little time on regrets," said one of them. His voice was like a shrieking hinge.

"Just come to us," said another. His voice was much deeper, something falling into a very dark pit. "Make no trouble for the others."

"She won't," I said when Josine didn't say anything.

The first one raised a hand, and behind us I heard our boat splintering in the water. The rower had the good sense to swim the other direction, and they didn't do anything I could hear to him as the splashes retreated towards the river proper.

The protective amulet around my neck crumbled to dust. From the gasp I heard behind me, I could tell that Sukey's had as well. They didn't waste time bouncing spells off to see what our amulets could handle, they went straight to the source.

So I did, too. With a few quick gestures and a yank of power from the river, I cut off their access to the Underhill. Which usually makes magic beings weak and angry, sometimes furious enough to try things that won't work, and then I have them.

The Rust Lords didn't blink. One of them smiled, or tried smiling; with the cracks of his face it was impossible to say that he'd succeeded. There was a creak in the stone path beneath us and a stabbing pain in my right arm. Though I knew I should not look down, I did.

My arm had shriveled. I was like an old woman who had had an apoplexy so many years past that the muscles in her bad arm were gone beyond redemption. In a moment it happened.

"We will have her," said the one with the voice like falling. "We will. You need only choose whether we will have you as well."

I gritted my teeth. “I’m afraid that’s the only way it happens.”

“Afraid,” said one who had not spoken before. “Good. You should be afraid.”

And I was, oh, I was. His voice was not like the others. It was an ordinary man’s, a light tenor, the sort of voice you would meet at a costume party. The sort of voice that could convince you that the cracked rust lines were only a grotesque mask, until it was too late. And I was afraid indeed, for the ones who had sent me to Madame’s alone and wounded, all those years ago, had sounded just like him.

But I knew more now than I did then. I cast an unbreakable binding on one of them. I could feel it clicking into success, and a gurgling howl came from his frozen throat. Sukey behind me whimpered and fell, and I could feel the rest of my body failing. I would not be able to get another. It would not be enough. I was withering, dying of old age. I tried to reach for the river’s soothing magic, and I could not scrabble together enough of a grasp on it.

Madame would not be pleased.

And then I felt myself cooled, straightened, and the Rust Lord with the light tenor voice laughed in pure malicious delight.

“I knew you would not be able to resist it,” he said. “Not selfless Miss Valdecart, properly brought up, so refined. You could not let another die for you, and certainly not in that way.”

I was too busy gasping air into my rejuvenated lungs to retort. Josine merely said, “No. I could not.”

“Take your place with us, then. We can do it again, and we will, unless you come.”

I dared a look back. Sukey too was gasping, flexing her smooth hands convulsively. Josine cocked her head to the side like a little plover.

“I would,” she said, “if I thought I would be your limit. But you, my lords, are as my dear mother has taught me of all men: you must limit yourselves.”

“That is the one thing we will not do,” said the screeching one. He raised his hand again, and I flinched. It shamed me. I darted a look at Josine and started to draw the threads together to freeze another of them eternally. Josine shook her head at me, barely perceptibly. I held the spell in abeyance.

“But you must,” Josine was saying, in tones that implied she was urging them to try one of the fairy cucumber sandwiches at a daring and risqué afternoon tea salon. “You have wanted to bring me into your company since you met me. I am your opposite number, and oh, you do enjoy what I can do, don’t you? More than the talents of the girls of this house?”

You just love being able to smash the same thing to bits over and over again.”

“Lady,” said the tenor, “we do.”

“But I do *not* love it, do you see? I do not love it in the least. And while you could crumble my associates and me, while you could turn us to dust in a thought, I do *not* think you can keep me alive against my will.”

I could not say anything. Sukey managed only to whisper Josine’s name.

“But I do not want to die,” she continued, still sounding as though she was discussing sandwiches. “No, I do not think that would suit me. And I do not think it would suit you. So we must find some better solution, do you not think, my lords?”

“How I wish you had been a little common bitch,” said the tenor.

Josine smiled. “So do I, for then I might know better how to put a knife in your eye when you were sleeping, and might have the bravery to do it. But I am not. I am me. And here is what I propose:

“You will have my services for one afternoon a month. One. It will last from high noon to sunset. You will not manipulate me to cause hurt to anything that feels, man nor fey nor beast. And in return, I will... do my trick for you.”

“One afternoon is not much.”

“Also,” Josine continued, as though the tenor had not spoken, “when Madame Lumiere rises against the lords of this city, your powers will be at her disposal. When the rich and the powerful need to come to rot and ruin, you will help them along the way.”

The tenor sounded interested. “Will such a thing come soon?”

“It will.”

“How do you know such things?”

I spoke then. “We know.”

“And you will permit us to... have our place in this?”

Josine and I looked at each other. She held a hand out to me, and I grasped it. Together we said, “We will.”

“Then it is done,” said the tenor. “One month from now at high noon, we will return for you.”

“To Madame’s front parlor,” said Josine. “I will be waiting.”

No one moved. After a moment, Sukey coughed and said, “Lucy. They will want releasing.”

Sheepishly, I pulled the spells back. The Rust Lords glared at me. They gathered themselves and stalked away, clichés of offended dignity, until we could see them no more along the river’s dark underground banks.

I looked Josine and Sukey over carefully. They appeared to be intact. “That was good thinking,” I said. “I don’t know how we would have saved you else, and we had promised. Madame had promised. It was a foolish mistake. I apologize.”

“They owed her more respect; I see that,” said Josine. “She is still Madame. I will keep learning from her. I have already started.”

“You have done our lady a service, and she will not forget it,” said Sukey. “You will find that loyalty to her runs both ways.”

“And to me,” I said, a bit gruffly.

Josine hugged me. I let her. Even with an unruined heart of steel, there are times when it is best to give people their heads on such things. “I was glad to do it,” she said, “with all you’ve done for me today.”

“There is the rest of the season to think of,” I said. “And we must tell Madame the new arrangements. Josine will be the one to tell.”

“I think you should,” said Josine. “You are used to her ways.”

“Oh, dear child,” sighed Sukey. “No one is used to Madame’s ways. You just grow used to being unused to them.”

Of course you know the rest, how we took down the glittering lords of the city and freed the Wild Hunt. You know



the chaos that ensued after, and the détente that only came when Madame retired. And you know, of course, what happened to Josine Valdecart, though she was Josine Surleau by then.

And now perhaps you do not think, as you may have done, that we were fools to bring the Rust Lords in, that there can have been no reason for it. There was reason. There was the revolution, true enough, but also there was one young woman. And it is in matters of one young woman where Madame's skills have always been at their best.

And Sukey's, and Josine's, and mine after her.

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**Beneath  
Ceaseless  
Skies**

<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

## THE ISTHMUS VARIATION

by Kris Millering

The message reached us in Tromili, where we had been making the rounds of the noble houses, playing at the summer parties. We were to go to the Impia's summer estate to perform the Slow Game at his night banquet.

I was new to the Slow Game, only recently having regained enough physical and mental stamina to play through an entire night. I had been destroyed three years earlier, long enough for the pain to begin to fade, long enough to cleave myself to the discipline of the tableau art with all of the passion I had left in me.

For this one performance, we had been promised a sum that might have purchased several small towns entire—and besides, there was no company of players that would dare refuse a summons such as this. The Impia created and controlled all of the war magics that kept our borders safe, repelled the invaders that all knew resided beyond them. All did as he bid. Even though we were destroyed men and women, we were not fools.

We were called to perform the Isthmus Variation, the variation that is a secret shared only among players who have sacrificed their lives to the Slow Game. The magister who attains the office of the Impia learns of this variation from whispers that players allow him to overhear, when the time is correct.

Until two days before the company arrived at the Impia's garden, all I knew was that the Isthmus Variation is a Slow Game with a blade in its sleeve, a performance without pity for the audience.

We are destroyed, we are players. We have no pity, either.

\* \* \*

"Kothin, hold still." Ila tapped the back of my head hard enough to sting. "Such an impatient young man. If I hadn't seen it myself, I would swear you had no temperament at all for performance." She was sweeping my hair up with wires for support and fixing it in place with wax. She paused, and I heard the light sound of a paint pot scraping open.

She stepped around to face me where I perched on the folding stool. I closed my eyes as I caught the scent of the paint we use on our hair, grease and chalk. Ila's hands were trembling as she applied it, the cool of it seeping through to my scalp. I knew what she feared, what the tension in her shoulders foretold. I had overheard the darkest secret at the

heart of the Isthmus Variation, as she and Unil had spoken of it in their wagon. Custom and respect kept my mouth closed, made me force it from my mind. I would not make this performance any more difficult for her by speaking of it.

Instead, I set my face in the smooth mask of the Tempter and opened my eyes as Ila tugged on my hair. "I can't hold still when I'm thinking," I said, "and I never stop thinking until the performance starts."

"And here I would swear you had no thoughts in your head at all." She pulled my hair again and I heard the soft snap of a clip. "There, you're done."

She patted my shoulder and moved on to minister to Unil. Her paint-stained hands were so delicate and so strong, and her unfashionably long dress showed off the curve of her lower back. That curve, and the one time I had glimpsed it uncovered, had haunted me for the last year.

Out of respect for her and Unil I had said nothing, showed nothing, tried to feel nothing. I had fallen into celibacy during my training. None of the other players had shown interest, and the only one I thought worth pursuing was married to the one man I most respected in the world.

I watched them out of the corner of my eye, as players do habitually. Unil played the Sufferer tonight and almost every night. His hair was cropped short, since he was of an age where

he was starting to go thin both in hair and in body. Ila painted his face with a pad of cloth, covering the lines and weathering with blankness. Her hand faltered, and Unil caught her wrist. He said something too low for me to catch, and I turned my face away from them as my belly tightened. I heard them speaking in murmurs, and the rustle as Ila put Unil's wig on for him. I could guess what words passed between them, and my mouth was dry with fear.

It was time for costumes. I went to get the robes that had been sewn specifically for this performance and the shapeless leather shoes I would be wearing. The mountain breeze pushed at my wax-set hair, its cool touch a great fortune for us and our comfort as the night went on.

The sky began to fade to lavender and all twenty of us presented ourselves at the gates of the garden. Beyond the garden stood the grand hulk of the Impia's summer-house, windows glowing. There were nineteen characters in tonight's performance, in addition to Ila, who was always the Shadow. She wore dark silks and would flow between tableaux, bringing news of the watchers and suggesting adjustments. There was always a tacit agreement between players and audience that the Shadow was backdrop or a sort of stagehand, invisible in her silks as she moved from darkness to darkness.

The tableau art, the lore of the players said, had origins in the art of statuary. As the Tempter, I would be making my way slowly through a series of poses, each of them a scene of tonight's variation played for only a few of the audience. The magic would be in the gossip that spread amongst the audience, how the central mystery of the performance would blossom as they spoke of what they had seen.

The Slow Game had already begun. All of our faces were painted, even Ila's, who was painted after the fashion of dark granite rather than our white marble. We held our mouths impassively, making masks of our faces. Relax the small muscles. Hold the eyes still.

Show nothing. Betray nothing.

\* \* \*

Final preparations for the outdoor party were under way. Young women hauled buckets of fresh coldlights past us to fill sconces and to float in the fountains and pools. A man herded a flock of white peacocks into the maze that surrounded the central garden, and the birds' mournful cries were muffled by the twists and turns of the maze.

As dark fell, lights in the hedge began to glow. Food was artfully arranged on long tables in the center of the garden, more food than I had ever seen in one place before. Vine-fruit spilled out of great bowls; what seemed like hundreds of squab

were spitted on golden swords. Men and women in taster's uniforms circulated about the tables. Their feet were bare, acknowledging their near-nobility.

My mouth filled with saliva and I turned away. Players in the Slow Game neither eat nor drink until the performance is over. We cannot afford to be distracted by the needs of our bodies, however mundane.

We took our positions in the maze as most of the servants departed the gardens. This was a place where the rich would come to be themselves among others of their kind, unfettered by the curious gazes and wagging tongues of their lessers.

Part of the magic of playing the Slow Game was to know when there were eyes on you, and to move swiftly only when there were none. As men and women began to arrive for the banquet, I took my mark atop a bench in the maze, my head down in the position of false penitence that was the Tempter's trademark pose.

A young woman came around the corner and made a breathy sound of pleased surprise. The creature she had with her, a thing all slender legs and great liquid eyes and brindled fur, bounced forward and squeaked, stopped only by the leash attached to its heavy golden collar. I deepened my breathing and watched her without turning my head. Her short dress caught and tugged at the eye, studded with jewels that flashed



in the light from the orbs hung in the hedge. Her feet were bare but for twined white ribbons. Utterly fashionable; we had seen very few women among the nobles of Tromili who were so richly attired. *She is nothing*, I told myself. *Part of an audience.*

“The Tempter,” she said. Her voice squeaked a little. She was younger than me.

I took a breath in; now for the reward. As I breathed out, I slowly raised my head, moving just quickly enough to catch her eye. I spread my hands a little, lifting them towards her, and gave her a smile full of wicked promises. She squeaked again and tugged on the leash of the creature that was staring at me, nostrils flared. They retreated.

My smile faltered as I was left briefly alone. I wondered if I should say something, call to the woman and her creature. Warn them of what was coming.

No. My tongue was bound. *Let the Slow Game play.*

\* \* \*

“What about Emmiu?”

The two men had been talking to each other in low voices since they had happened upon our tableau. “She is in place,” the man with the lighter voice replied. “Her parcel went unnoticed. When the Impia comes out, we will be ready.”

I and the Judge were in repose. The Judge sat on one end of the stone bench, and I lay with my head in his lap looking up at him. It was a scene that required some art to play. In this variation, the Judge and the Tempter have a complicated relationship. The Tempter is powerful, but the Judge is more so.

At its heart, the Slow Game is a very simple story: the Sufferer has been wronged somehow by the Accused, or so the Sufferer believes. They each call witnesses to their side, the Judge decides the fate of both of them, and the Scribe records the judgment.

I breathed in. A cloying scent of flowers was competing with the chalky musk of our painted skin. The Judge's chin trembled—Luca was so good as the Judge that he barely knew any of the other roles, but tonight he was not playing his best. I hoped he gained more control as the night advanced.

The true story the Slow Game tells is depicted in the scenes that are enacted as we players meet and move towards the central tableau where the Sufferer and the Accused wait. This scene was a pivotal one for the Tempter and the Judge. As the audience members met with each other, shared what they had seen and tried to decipher the overall meaning, this scene would be one of the keys. It happened so early in the Slow

Game that only these two audience members would have that key.

It is physically impossible to see more than a fraction of the scenes in any performance, and each audience member cannot tarry long at any one scene. The Slow Game moves ceaselessly, a great beast that never seems to shift and yet is never in the same place twice.

Luca's head bent down towards me. I turned my head as his hand rested on my throat, the blank mask of the Tempter slipping, opening my mouth and widening my eyes. I looked at the two men who watched us with terror on my face, my gloved hand opening towards them. A gesture of pleading. *Please. Help me.* Then we were still once more, frozen.

I could see now that one of the men was younger than the other. They wore loose trousers and tightly fitted shirts, and had cups in their hands. The older man took a half-step forward, his eyes widening. He stopped himself in mid-stride. I kept the fearful mask on, pleased. He would remember the look on my face, the secret terror in the heart of the Tempter.

The younger man put an awkward hand on the older one's shoulder and they turned away. Ila approached, darting from one shadow to the next. The men fell in behind her. True devotees of the Slow Game consider it at least bad taste and at

most cheating to follow the movements of the Shadow, but we make it very tempting to follow the black-clad player.

The eye is drawn to motion, after all.

\* \* \*

I met the Heretic in the maze, and we froze in tableau as footsteps approached from the intersection ahead. I was crouched at his white-booted feet; he was looking down at my upturned face with his hand upraised. A peacock stalked past us, nearly glowing in the dim light. Perfect.

“The Heretic!” one of the people who approached us said. “And who’s that at his feet?”

I could hear their feet moving on the grass; both were unshod. It was a mark of pride among nobles that they did not have to wear shoes. Their feet were unblemished, pampered daily by young serving-women who lavished attention on those appendages as if they were worth more than sapphires. Innocent as the feet of babes were noble feet. Looking up at the Heretic, I imagined their toes, the pale moons of their nails against their flawless skin.

“The Tempter—can’t you see the hair?” The woman sounded as if she were rolling her eyes. “Let’s see. The Tempter has angered the Heretic, and he lifts his arm to strike. I’ve never seen the Heretic and the Tempter meet. I can’t wait to tell Emmiu.”

“What did I say about Emmiu?” the man asked. Anger lowered his voice. “Stay away from her. She’s out of favor, and I don’t want you tangled up in whatever plot she’s up to.”

The woman’s breath hitched, and when she spoke again, her tone was conciliatory. “She was invited, just as we were. I’m so tired of politics, Juma. I really am.”

I shifted my weight onto my back foot smoothly and let my upper body follow. My body changed in that moment from an attitude of cowardice to one of invitation, and I let my face change from near-fright to a dreamy, half-lidded sensuality. Above me, the Heretic also shifted, lowering his arm, softening his shoulders. I saw him turn his head to look at our small audience. The scene had just gone from one of violence to one ripe with the promise of sensuality.

Both of them gasped. I imagined the woman pulling herself close to the man, molding her body in its jeweled shift to his, the curve of her back accentuated. They departed without another word.

They would carry the news back to the rest that the Heretic and the Tempter had met in the maze. The shape of the Isthmus Variation would begin to form in the minds of the entire audience, as would the possibility that this performance bent the outline of the Slow Game, that the helix of Sufferer

and Accused had been joined by a third thread that wrapped and tangled the other two.

The Heretic— one of our company named Kutum—turned his face back to me, and I saw just the ghost of a frown on his lips. I raised my eyebrows briefly and rose from my crouched position, cocking my head. “I loathe these people,” he said, keeping his voice low. He had been destroyed for over a decade, long enough for hatred to take root and blossom in his soul, choking out anything else that might grow there except the Slow Game.

“Tonight, I feel sorry for them.” I sweated under my robes, and my sides were unpleasantly damp. A movement attracted my attention. White flowers and whiter lights outlined a darkness next to the hedge.

Ila detached herself from the shadows and came to us. She had temporarily lost her audience escort. The central tableau must be in the process of shifting, drawing all eyes to it.

“Tempter, Imago, and Forger next, Kothin,” she said. “Left and then right at the next two intersections.” She knelt to adjust the damp hem of my robes with her black-gloved hands. I looked down at her silk-obscured form, and something inside of me wrenched. I must not flinch. Must not make a movement. Must not reveal the truth I had overheard only two days ago

and to which I was by no means reconciled in my heart. To lose Ila—

She raised her gaze and straightened, and I stifled the thought. The whites of her eyes nearly glowed in contrast with her dark irises and granite skin. “You’re doing well. People are starting to talk about the Tempter. Kutum, start working your way towards the center.” Her voice was low and pitched for our ears alone. It held an edge I had never heard in it before, even when she was at her most merciless in rehearsal.

I slipped off into the maze, freezing in ominous positions as guests came upon me, sidling toward the next scene. The key to understanding this Variation was to follow the Shadow as much as the players. The audience, in the next few hours, must transgress their tacit agreement to consider the Shadow merely backdrop or stagehand.

With one hand, we forbade; the Shadow turned her face away and scuttled between tableaux. With the other, we beckoned the audience.

*Watch but do not watch*, we said with every pose, every tableau. *Watch us, but also watch our Shadow.*

*Our hidden hand is moving. Beware.*

\* \* \*

“I can’t find Emmiu.” The woman who was complaining was behind the current group of guests who were viewing the

three-person tableau. “She was just behind me, and then she was gone.”

“Probably got bored,” a man’s voice said. “Probably went to get something to drink.”

“She *had* a drink. And she just vanished without saying anything.”

The Tempter spent a lot of time crouched at people’s feet. I was getting a good look at the creatures that a number of the guests had brought with them. The liquid-eyed quadrupeds with all the fur and silky long tails were popular, but my favorites were the small things that darted around us, luminous stripes on their sides rippling as they scampered and scuttled and watched us with bright-eyed interest.

They were short-legged and long-bodied and had an engaging way of tilting their heads during the rare moments when they were still. The one currently observing me had something shiny in its fanged mouth, likely a dropped piece of jewelry. It was almost too bad that none but the nobility were allowed to own the creatures the Impia created. I thought I might like one of the striped rodent-things.

My neck was beginning to ache, and my shoulders were trembling slightly. I breathed through it, willing my body to relax into the position as much as I could, willing skeleton and



sinew to support me with as little energy expenditure as possible.

The hedge I was staring at shifted, and a luminous, many-petaled flower opened.

I focused my eyes, snapped back into my body. The mind plays tricks during tableaux. The flower, a frilly white thing with toothed petals, had to have been open before we got here. I had just forgotten.

The small hairs on the back of my neck tried to rise, but instead prickled unpleasantly under my paint. Above me, the Imago breathed out. I tilted my face up and to the side, feeling the other player's hand come close to my hair.

I put the flowers out of my mind, and tried not to lick my lips where the paint had dried and cracked.

\* \* \*

The crime in the Isthmus Variation is murder.

Twenty players. Nineteen characters. Eighteen alive when the Slow Game began that evening. Our costumes were sun-bleached white, except for the robes that the Orphan wore. Those had been splashed liberally with fresh animal blood just after we laid Liio down in a dead end in the maze, a knife left by her side.

Over the evening the blood would dry and the night insects would gather, moths drawn to the salt. When I closed my eyes,

I could see her robes covered with fluttering white, red-brown showing in the spaces between their wings.

Our current tableau was one of several scenes of questioning that we would portray that night, and my Tempter was in fine form, reaching for the Wastrel's robe with one hand, casting the Imago away from me with the other. This was a scene of misdirection. The Imago and the Tempter fought in order to throw doubt on the Wastrel's testimony later.

We rested in the pose as the audience moved around us. We were close to the center now, having worked our way through the maze. After this scene, the Imago and I would part. Ila would flit between us and the crowd, drawing their eyes away, and when they turned back to see us we would be gone, thirty feet away from each other, once again frozen.

Ila was long in coming. When she finally arrived to release us, my arm was trembling fire as it reached for the Wastrel. It was all I could think about, my breathing and my arm.

The Shadow swept past us. As the crowd turned to follow her, my eyes were drawn to the hem of her robe. It straggled strangely on the ground, and the grass darkened a little in her wake. None of the guests seemed to notice, fortunately. Dew was beginning to form on the grass, and a little extra dampness would go unremarked. By the time any of them might notice,

they would all be too intoxicated to care, and it would be far too late for the outcome of this performance to change.

I smoothly shifted out of position and began to walk back into the maze as the Imago and the Wastrel moved towards where vines parted and the twinned fountains could be seen. I tried not to think about the darkness I left when I moved, the circle of scentless oil that my hem would transfer to the grass when I performed in tableau.

The back of my neck tingled, and I froze. The weight of a gaze landed full on my shoulders. I had one hand stretched out, the other trailing behind me, head tilted slightly as I studied one of the flowers of the hedge. This was one of the standard poses of the Tempter, who was of all the characters the most engaged with the beauty of the world.

I could not see the person whose gaze was on me. He was male, from the timbre of the breathing and the faint scent of cologne that came to me, muskier than these sweet flowers I stared at. He shifted in his place, but did not step away. I was a player. I was patient, more patient than any audience might ever be. I would outwait him.

Something within the hedge stirred. *Animal*, I thought. One of the rodent-things. A day-flying bird woken from its slumber by the lights and the noise. Do not stir from your nest, little bird. Sleep you must, this night when the lights dance.

Such are the thoughts that trouble players, when we are frozen in tableau.

The flowers moved. Slowly they closed, and slowly they opened, all in unison. The flowers in the hedge were abruptly thirty white eyes without pupil, all of them looking at me. Their petals were ragged against the foliage, hung all around with coldlight orbs that made the shadows harsh-edged.

The man had left—how long ago? How long had I stared at the hedge in horrified fascination? How long had it been staring back at me? Rumors came to mind, whispers of the Impia's magics, that he could alter plants as he did animals....

I moved on. I took care not to brush the hedge with my sleeve or my hand.

\* \* \*

The Orphan had been discovered at last; the murder had been revealed. The summer night gathered chill to its bosom, and we had been playing the Slow Game for six hours. I was in solitary tableau at the edge of the central area. Ahead of me, I knew that the Sufferer and the Accused were frozen in the same poses that they had been in since the beginning. I was not looking at them; the time had not yet come for that pose.

My Tempter this night was perfect. My spine told me that I was taxing the muscles on either side of it; my shoulders reported suffering from the great effort it took to remain

perfectly still with my arm outstretched or above my head. The pain sang in me and I used it, fed on it. The Tempter is beautiful and terrible, the face that one must not look at and yet cannot turn away from.

Even with my focus soft so that my gaze would not be felt, I could see small oddities in the crowd that moved around me, swaying like water-weeds in a current. Here was a scarf untied and rumpled; there, kohl was smeared, giving the eye it surrounded a deep-set and dazed look. Hands trembled and eyelashes shivered.

I could hear slurred voices swirling around me. I had almost fallen a few minutes ago when the same young woman who had happened upon me earlier in the evening had stumbled into me. I'd seen her several times. She mumbled apologies as she staggered away, and had gotten only a little distance from me before she collapsed.

Nobody bothered to check on her, and I could not break the pose to do it myself. She looked so vulnerable, lying there, with her curly hair escaped from its ribbon and tumbling over her face. Her little animal was nowhere to be seen. I ached, knowing her fate. She had arrived early, and now she would be the first of many departures.

I entertained thoughts of calling for help. I was a player, therefore by definition I had been destroyed. These people

would no more pay attention to my words than they would wear shoes. Being destroyed is a death where your heart keeps beating: name, occupation, status, property, all are stripped away. The rungs of nobility are greased with temptation, and it is so easy to fall when reaching for a higher station.

My face was turned towards the girl, and I had a clear view. She was far enough away that I could not hear any rustling, but I saw a tendril of vine snake over to her. Someone capable of motion would have recoiled from the vines, broken the pale green threads.

The tendril touched her hair, slipped underneath to caress her face. It grew and thickened and was joined by several of its fellows, draping themselves over her body. As the vines touched her, they began to bloom, those toothed white flowers opening. One tendril slid up under her dress, and I could see the shadow of it moving beneath the cloth.

Soon her body was hidden beneath a carpet of white flowers, unfurling like wings. Guests went by and did not even seem to notice the new mound of vines. My gut was twisting, though I knew that she was already dead. *These people are nothing*, I reminded myself. *We are never called to play the Isthmus Variation without reason.* The words were hollow in my mind. Unlike Kutum, I was still close enough to being one of these people to feel horror at their fates.

By the time it was my moment to give the reward and move into another tableau, the vines had retreated back to the hedge and the girl was gone. Only the silk ribbon that had bound her hair and now lay twisted in the grass bore testimony that she had ever been there at all.

\* \* \*

The fountains of bubbling drink were still flowing, but the long tables of food had been decimated. The tasters had joined the audience, their bare feet taking them drifting to watch us play. I crouched at the feet of the Sufferer, looking up into his face. White paint cracked and flaked at the corners of Unil's mouth and along his jaw. In another variation, some of us would have been circulating unobtrusively, ready to refresh makeup and adjust the folds of robes. In this variation, we were on our own.

Not that the audience was paying attention to us, or to anything. This was the final tableau. Usually I would be hearing excited muttering, exclamations of surprise or delight, people talking to each other about what they saw or thought they saw. Tonight, the audience was silent. They gathered around us, shuffling their feet. A little striped animal climbed partway up the Sufferer's robe, made a dreadful chittering sound, and tumbled back to the ground. Unil flinched slightly. Even he could not avoid occasionally breaking pose.

A sour smell stained the night air, worse when one of the guests was close to me. They exhaled it on their breath, a smell of sweet rot. It overwhelmed the usual human smells I often noticed when the audience was close. I missed those smells.

I shifted, muscles relaxing. The final scene must be played through. The Slow Game's climax, the final tableau, was a scene that moved slowly through several different configurations. I would end this scene with my hands on the Sufferer's shoulders, looking into his eyes.

I would rise, over the next quarter of an hour, as all around me the tableau shifted and changed. It would unfurl, blossom into meaning, the final pieces fitting themselves into place. In a normal night, those who had already figured it out would feel a pleasant sensation of accomplishment. Those who had not yet divined the meaning would feel a shock of recognition as the parts they had seen now fit themselves into the whole. It made all the pain worthwhile, to have the audience give that back; pure joy feeding itself into us.

Tonight, that joy was entirely missing. The perfume of night-blooming plants mixed with the sick scent that was emanating from the guests. I heard one near me rustle, moan under his breath, and then thump to the ground. More followed. The poison we had spread across the grass with the hems of our robes first caused intoxication, then lethargy. Now,



as the nobles stared at our final tableau in dull incomprehension, it was bringing them a painless death.

Though the breeze from the mountain had died, the hedges around the central area were rustling, restless. If I had allowed myself a moment of fear, I would have broken pose and run.

Ila's silk fluttered and her sweet quick feet were nearly soundless on the turf. I felt sickness churning in my gut as I listened, held pose, remembered coming upon her washing herself in front of the fire late one night. Remembered Ila's fingers intertwining with Unil's as they sat together at a meal, perfectly comfortable in their skins together. I loved that comfort between them far more than I desired to touch the perfect curve of Ila's back.

Something, maybe one of the silky quadrupeds, staggered against my leg. Its body was firm under the fur and warm where it settled down against my ankle and calf. Then it shivered, and ceased to breathe.

I stared up into Unil's face. He was looking out over the audience, and there were tears starting to trickle from his eyes, dissolving the white paint on his face, streaking his skin golden.

The Sufferer wept, holding perfectly still.

\* \* \*

We unfastened our robes and let them fall, stepping gingerly away from them. I grabbed the long stick that Kutum held out to me. “Good work tonight,” he said, and grinned. His paint cracked, spreading grotesquerie over his features.

The Impia was in Ila and Unil’s wagon, having come in person to grant us our reward. All of us were burning our robes. I saw the white shape of Liio, who had tonight played the Orphan, dance briefly with her bloodstained robe and then throw it on the flames.

“If you can call the Isthmus Variation *good*,” I said to Kutum. I picked up my robe with the stick and cast it onto the bonfire we’d built in the center of the clearing. I took my low boots off and chucked them after my robes and then stepped into a pair of sandals. I reached for the fresh pair of thin gloves that I’d set next to my sandals. “Ugh, that poison. And those *vines*. Nobody told me about the vines. My skin is going to be crawling forever.”

Kutum’s breath faltered. He turned away a bit, and the flickering light played over his features. I saw his mouth work silently, the paint on his face crazing. When he spoke again, his voice was low. “Try not to think about them too much. It’s not healthy to wonder about the vines, or what the Impia sees through his flowers.”

Around us, our fellow players moved through the firelight and darkness, speaking to each other and doing the work that must be done before we could leave tonight. I retreated to the wagon I shared with Kutum and Liio, trying not to think of Ila and Unil facing the Impia in their wagon, forced to speak to him with bare and empty hands. Even destroyed men and women have their pride, and they had theirs in bucketfuls. The final tableau of the Slow Game was done, but the Isthmus Variation had one last scene in store before it ended.

The Impia eventually emerged from the wagon where he had been conferring with our leaders. He was a tall man, clean-shaven, his mouth nearly womanish in its softness in contrast to the rest of him. Magister tattoos wound around his fingers and tangled on the backs of his hands, disappearing under his sleeves. Alone of all of the nobles we had seen tonight, he was wearing shoes. Had I not known who he was, I might have mistaken him for a river driver or cooper, some profession that required great physical strength and quick wits.

I did know, so I sank with the rest of the troupe to my knees. “A great service has been rendered tonight,” the Impia said. In those words, it was impossible to mistake him for anyone but the Impia. The words were nearly visible, so laden were they with shivering inflections. “You have the gratitude of my office.” He extended a hand to Ila, who placed her bare

hand in the tyrant's, visibly trembling. He closed his fingers around it and lifted it to his lips. He kissed her hand gently, and then released her.

He turned and left. None of us dared get to our feet until he was long gone.

"Finish burning the costumes," Ila said when we had begun to recover. "We have a long way to go tonight." Her face was closed, her lips held in a tight line. Unil put an arm around her shoulders. She was still shaking, and her eyes wandered from side to side in her head, as if she were drunk. She cradled to her chest the hand that the Impia had kissed.

We buried Ila in an unmarked grave the day after we performed the Isthmus Variation.

\* \* \*

She is still a bleeding hole at the heart of us, our Ila, our Shadow, our leader. Unil coughs constantly now. He will not survive to see us play again. When he dies, I will abandon the role of the Tempter and take on the Accused. One day, if I live long enough, I will become the Shadow.

The Impia is dead as well, killed by the poison Ila bore on her bare hand, the trust he had forced upon her betrayed. He died on the road back to his summer estate, before he had a chance to call his soldiers or his magics to ensure our silence.

Assassination, the broadsides called it. The enemies of the Impia reaching into the heart of his realm to eliminate him and all of the nobles who had attended his night banquet. None of the broadsides mentioned that there was a Slow Game performed in the garden that night.

We were a hundred miles away when we heard that news, heading into the mountains where we would spend the next year. The new Impia would take at least that long to establish control over the border magics and the people, to make a show of going to war against enemies too terrible to be named or described. The wagons groaned with supplies, our poor horses nearly foundering on the steep mountain roads. We will hide until it is safe once more to come down to the towns, to play the Slow Game once more.

Ila purchased our freedom with her life. Such is the role of the Shadow.

It will be a long time before the Isthmus Variation is performed again. I hope that I am dead and in the earth before another Impia overhears certain whispers between players, before he decides that the Isthmus Variation would be a beautiful weapon to rid himself of a large group of his nobles whom he has grown tired of or who plot against him.

We are a weapon—not against the enemies of the Empire but against those leaders who choose to wield us. We exist to be

the blade that turns in the Impia's hand should he be terrible enough to use us.

Our hidden hand is moving.

Beware.

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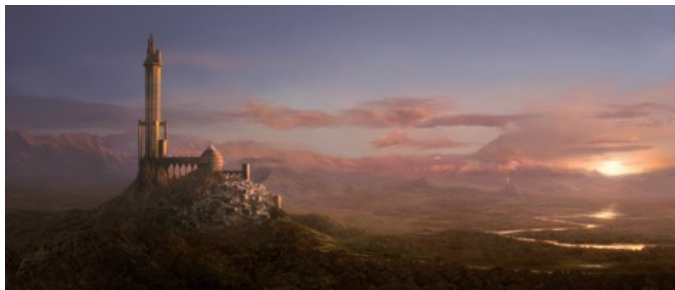
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## COVER ART

### “Spring Sunset,” by Andreas Rocha



Andreas Rocha lives in Lisbon, Portugal, with his wife. He studied architecture, but after college his main occupation veered from architecture towards digital painting, something he had done during college as a hobby. He has been working freelance for three years now, doing conceptual and finished illustrations, matte paintings, and 3D architectural visualizations. See more of his work, including a movie version of “Spring Sunset,” at [www.andreasrocha.com](http://www.andreasrocha.com).

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