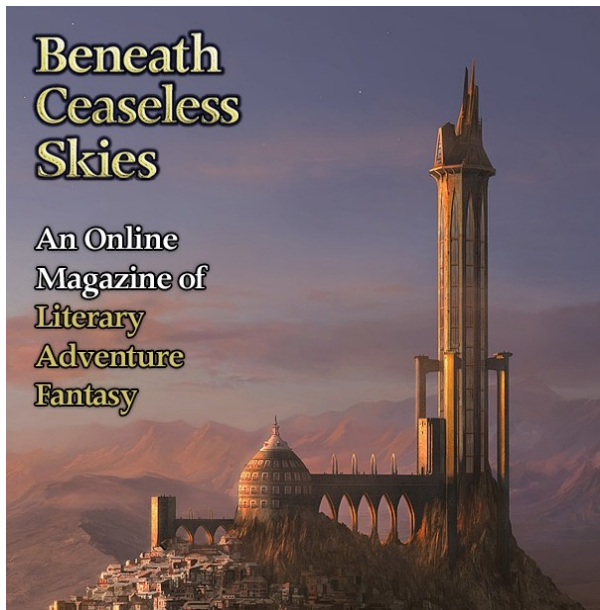


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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EIGHTH EYE

by Erin Cashier

Moira's only company is a fat black fly. He thumps against the window—she can hear him hit its pane, but not see—and she wishes him well. If she had a way out of things, she'd be taking it, too.

Nurses pad in and out of her room, inserting new glass syringes of morphine when the old run low. They rewrap her wounds and plug in fresh jars of saline that run through her body and out again through her injuries. She can't move—between scar tissue and her bindings, she is trapped, immobile. Can't even blink the eye she has left, and no telling what's happened to the other.

Her father was important enough that she earned preferential treatment, but he couldn't afford truly excellent care. Most of the serious doctors were in the military now, anyhow. The best they could do here was offer her high doses of low-class drugs. And so now, at the edge of the desert, in a hospital not fifty miles from where her home had been burnt down around her by an artillery shell, Moira waits to die.

The fly gave up on his attempts at escape, landing somewhere. Probably exhausted. She understood that, too.

Then—she felt. A touch. On maybe the last three nerve whole endings in her entire body. The only ones still that might feel pleasure, instead of pain, which is all the others ever felt, when her bindings were stripped off and replaced. A smooth coin-sized patch, right below her left eye, where her skin was still whole.

A tickle.

She looks down, and sees the fly there, landed. It crept closer to the salt of her tears.

Don't do this, fly. We have an arrangement. One of us is getting out of here, right?

Its face loomed. Whatever prior association she'd felt with it was gone. It had eyes dimpled like the buttons on soldier's uniforms, and forelegs that congratulated each other with fervor as it neared to drink.

Then it was gone. No more buzzing. No more friend-not-friend. Moira strains to see, wandering her eye around at the limits of its socket.

And there, sitting on the bed-side railing, is a green spider the size of her thumb, quietly trussing something furry and black. She hadn't even seen him snatch the fly. She'd have

thought she must have blinked, only she knew she couldn't anymore.

The spider looks back at her. Seven eyes sit on the gun-turret of its forehead, and it contemplates her with each glittering black dot. She counts its eyes, wondering what happened to the eighth, because all spiders have eight eyes, right? And it surveys her, its head tilting, seeing all of her just as trussed as the fly is, on the bed below itself.

Air-raid sirens begin screaming, again.

A nurse comes in. Her badge says, "A. Tropos, R.N." She looks down at Moira.

"Sorry girl. It'll be better this way. Wish things—" but the siren's yo-yoing volume rises to occupy the same space as her words. She reaches out and moves the drip's dial up. It buzzes a warning, which she turns off with a key. And then, after a grimace and a nod, which Moira tries to return but cannot, she leaves. Her good eye finds the spider again.

Guess it's just you and me now, spider.

The spider creeps closer, dragging its meal behind. It bobs and dances a bit—or maybe that's the extra painkiller, coursing through her porous veins.

Moira counts its eyes again. Seven. The spider's the only thing that has reality. It's realer than she is, right now. She's already on her way out—has been since the burns, really. She

tries to breathe, but the wrappings are so tight, and the weight on her chest is so heavy. Makes it hard.

The hospital shakes, as she hears propellers tear the unseen sky.

What happened to that other one, spider? Lose it somewhere? Game of marbles? A bet with a cat?

The spider sits back on its haunches, gesturing out with its smaller pedipalps. *Let me tell you*, it seems to say.

* * *

I have a story for you, girl. Hold my hand. Hold this too—yes, this. There's a little bit of all of them in it, see. And when I'm gone, it'll hold me, too.

No—don't cry. I ain't going yet. I still got a story to tell.

* * *

When the Devourer arose from the trapdoor of her home, where she hid during the long days of the sun, waiting for the peace of the night and cattle on which to prey, she once found a strange thing before her.

A soft child sat, wriggles and screams and crying out. It had been left there by someone, perhaps in offering, maybe to get rid of an extra mouth to feed.

Now the Devourer was a mother too. It had carried egg sacs across the desert upon its rose-furred back, and had seen many generations pass by, not only of her own daughters, but

of the soft-shells around it. This little soft one would hardly matter, inside her belly, or left without.

She angled her great head and looked down with glittering eyes. The soft child looked back—but here is the story, eh? Looked back, but with only one eye.

And that was why she was left outside, eh? No one wants a soft-girl with only one eye.

But Devourer? She got eyes to spare.

* * *

I can feel them now, inside me, coming up, coming out. Each of them's got a story. You got ears to listen, yet? Sure you do. It's cold, right? No better way to pass the time then with a story. Hush again. No questions. Just hear.

* * *

We hunt together. Me and her, her and me. She was all violence, and I was all cunning.

I clung to her back as we jumped from tree to tree, chasing down prey. Men chasing us with spears, but we laid down web-traps and ate delicious flesh each night. Sleepin' during the day, 'tween her front legs, a bed, soft, warm. Safe. Safest place in the world, really. I had one of her eyes, and she had one of mine.

Maybe this was how it changed. I wasn't the first, I was the tenth, or the twelfth. And she wasn't the same either—not anymore. She'd molted, and we'd changed, together.

Sure there was screaming, when she plucked out my eye and took it for her own. Tasted blood for days. But I got her eye in return, and with it, the true sight.

Made me into half a monster, it did—but my eye changed her, in reverse. Made her less a monster. Made her—made her more like us.

* * *

“Don't kill me!” he shouted, all fearlike.

They all shouted that, as we chased them down. Devourer and I don't listen. Killing them was too much fun.

“Please!”

And Devourer wheeled to a halt.

“What you waiting for?” I pounded on her back, on the place where all the legs joined up. And she trussed him up, but didn't bite him. Instead, we took him home.

* * *

No, no, don't cry. Still have a home. Just far away is all, right? Just keep listening. Swear it. Cough up the dust. There, there.

* * *

“Worship me,” she said, softly. “Worship Vol the Devourer and her eternal thread.” Her voice was as soft as the silk she wore, a thin shift, barely covering her body as she rode sidesaddle on a simple grey spider into the village.

Vol sat on the hill behind the village, eclipsing the setting sun, her bent legs sending out long and jagged shadows.

“Who are you?”

“Cotho, the messenger of the thread.” She slid off of her spider’s back, and stood, diaphanous, ethereal. Men bowed, and stayed bowing, as she passed. “I see with my eye, and with hers.” She lifted the band of silk that covered her goddess’s gift to her, the cold black sheen of the other eye that offered second sight.

“What happens if we do not worship?” a man asked, his bow slightly less low than the rest.

Cotho swallowed, a soft sound in the still dusk. “Then I hunger. And upon you, I will feed.”

* * *

You from a long line like me, see? We strong, strong women. Eyes one and all. Being a good girl, you is.

* * *

“I have a wife.”

Cotho had chosen him for her own from the town's elect. He had wide shoulders and a strong back. The type of man that sturdy women were made from.

"The armies of the spider queen cannot be denied. Plus, it is no shame to service so."

"And still," he said, letting his voice hang.

Cotho stood in the tent that her servants had created. She now wore nothing, not even the patch that covered Vol's eye. And his clothing had been removed long ago.

She could tell that he wanted her. And yet there was something that he wanted even more. Even more than Vol's favor? Even more than her flesh? She nested her fingers together in front of her chest.

"If you have a son, I will give him back to you. Does that suit your purpose?"

He shook his head. "No. If you have a son, take his eye. Make him like you."

Cotho considered him, first with her human eye, and then with Vol's.

"Agreed."

* * *

Fights were brewing. Tween us and them, y'see. We were stronger than they were, us, and Devourer, and some-a her children.

Then.

Strange men came from the coast. Had strong things, strong as skeletons—no, stronger. And fire, hot lashing fire, worse than venom.

And where we'd once been enemies, us wild-ones and the soft-men, we became forced friends.

* * *

Cotho screamed. Birthing was a horrible process. Three girls attended her, all of them trained as midwives, and all of them potential eyes of Vol.

When a spider molts, there is a moment, when if the shell parts incorrectly, the spider's liquid flesh can leak out, no matter how small the hole. When all the fluids are gone, the spider will die.

When a woman gives birth, she, too, has the chance for such a moment.

Cotho reached up to her one black eye, as the child exited and took up its own scream.

"You," she said, pointing to the third girl. "Take it. Now."

This girl ran up, held her hands out, and accepted the gift.

"Make the payment. Take the sight."

The girl looked at the knife she held in her hand to cut the cord. She flipped the blade to face herself and planted it into her left eye.

* * *

You see? You see now? This why I'm like this. Feel in there. Don't be scared. Soft as leather, eh? The space is smooth. Don't hurt a bit, after awhile.

* * *

The scouts reported to Keysis, first. Endless stories, through thousands of eyes, from windwisps up to racers, of new spiders walking across the ground. She had not traded eyes with them though, and so she could not see what it was that they saw. They told Vol, and Vol could only tell her unclearly.

"I will go," Anank volunteered, on the third of her restless nights.

She frowned at him. "I would not have you leave."

"You need someone who can think, harder. Someone who can truly see."

"We can wait. There is no rush. We have conquered nations already." But even as she said the words, she knew they were a lie. She was spinning her own web, designed to hold him safe. He waited, knowing that lies did not become her.

"Fine. Go."

Anank wasted no time, rising up from their bed. His racer dropped down from the ceiling to follow, frost blue fur bitten with green. Green as Anank's remaining eye.

She looked to the racer. “Make sure he comes back to me.” The racer made a jerking bow, before chasing its soft-one out the door.

* * *

They sent poisons. Strong ones. Inside metal—we knew what metal was now. We all seen it, often. We sent up spiderlings as scouts. Warn us when they come overhead, dropping down the metal.

On the move, all the time. Devourer and her friends, on us soft on their backs—we roamed, whole cities worth of people. Herded along cattle, goats, ate the wounded, left no meat behind. We knew how to survive. We learned how to hang on.

I was her eye in the people. And she was her eye in me. We was one, us against the fire things with wheels.

Devourer sent out more scouts. Asked for more friends. Not all them listened. But some did.

* * *

Keysis stood at the edge of their camp. She’d readied for war, when Anank had not come home. And spiderlings kept reporting movement on all fronts. She was loathe to attack without knowing what was coming, and yet—

A thin racer emerged, out of the underbrush. Blue, with a trace of green.

“I told you not to return without him.”

The racer crawled as it approached. It bowed low, near her feet, and then retreated quickly.

Near her left foot—one shriveled, green, eye.

* * *

Up till then, we'd been helping people die. It was tragic-like.

After that? We started killin'.

* * *

Strange gasses. Fine silk masks kept out the worst of it, but these things made Keysis's one soft-eye weep. This was the worst artillery shelling yet. She watched a warwidow teeter, its giant abdomen swaying as its legs lost purchase with the ground. She looked to the sky for any movement of the clouds.

Not even beloved Vol could make the wind change.

* * *

Took in more warwidows. Bellies dragging heavy, leaving furrows going behind. Sprayed out waves of venom. Et through their clothes. Watched 'em melt. Served 'em right!

Shot out bits of metal from their tubes. We got armor now though—skins of the dead, layered three deep, striped with webs. And shells, from spiders gone beyond. All of us look like spiders now. We telling them where to go, what to do. Learning, us.

And always Devourer and me. Not me, me, but a me.
Maybe a you. You see what I'm gettin' at?

* * *

Sometimes Keysis's right eye aches. It isn't the socket, once empty, that is now filled with Vol's. It's the eye that's in there. Spiders don't cry, but they do feel pain—Keysis has been through enough molts by now to know.

Pain comes with growth. That's how it is for a spider. Eat so much and your old shell won't fit.

She wonders if the things in metal ever grow.

* * *

Caught some of the wheels. Opened up and looked inside.
Guess what we saw? Us! Soft-shells!

I know. Thought they'd be full of guts, too.

Can't even eat them. Well, the soft-shells, yes, but the rest?
Useless.

* * *

Mobile scouts run ahead. Spiderlings report from the skies. Keysis paces inside her tent, as wave after wave of men and women come in, reporting what it is that their spiders have seen. She realizes that there's a chance to win—that they're wounded, now, and morale is low. She doesn't think they've had an enemy that ate their wounded before. And they know they can't hide inside metal for forever.

We've been pushing them back through sheer force of numbers for years. How much land is there to cover? The spiderlings have no way of telling us, it is not something they can measure. They see prey and not prey, movement, and stillness. Runners can only go out so far, and we cannot spare any strength.

* * *

Now, now, child. Stop your crying. I'll be right here till the end, see? Breath a little deeper. A little harder.

* * *

Her favorite scout runs up, under Keysis's hand, and her fingers fall between his eyes. His fur bristles against Keysis's palm, and she scratches along his carapace.

"Keysis, we've spotted blue ahead. Ocean. Metal lines the beach. Much more." He made the hand signals for types and numbers of their wheels, and Keysis nodded.

Will this be the place we can finish things? Can we shove them into the ocean? They'll never fight harder, than with their backs against the blue.

* * *

Wide swath of us. Fatter than Devourer could walk in a day. Coming down on the ocean, smash them up against its side. Let the blue swallow them down, right? But they had hid-

den homes floating in the water, more metal. More fire. More pain.

Lost three warwidows that day. But we pushed them off the beach entirely.

* * *

I know. This is the sort of war that has no end. Everyone thinks it does in the beginning, but it don't, it don't.

* * *

“Truce?”

Keysis's scouts have captured a soft-thing from one of the shells. He carries a box which holds his voice inside of it.

“Truce—” she sounds out the word. Her mouth works just like his does. He looks the same as Anank. Only he still has both his eyes.

She makes a gesture, so small that there's no way the soft-thing noticed. Three small warwidows descend from the ceiling, to land upon him.

* * *

Metal upon metal, rains down from the sky. No time to breathe. Can't see the sun during the day for the dust, or the moon at night from the fires. We run.

We lose.

* * *

“Vol,” Keysis begins, looking up at the Devourer. Her tent is being built in front of the shambles of what’s left. She walks forward and strokes the fur of Vol’s legs, touches the hard shine of Vol’s fang. Vol can see where she is from there, using the second sight. “Vol, I’m sorry.”

No response to this, at first. If there was, neither of Keysis’s eyes can see it.

A wind struck up over the hills. Grass and fur moved as one beneath it, and Vol reaches out with a pedipalp to gently stroke Keysis’s flowing hair.

Keysis took Vol’s pedipalp into her arms, and embraced it, feeling her tears spatter against Vol’s fur.

* * *

And that’s that, child. S’why I only have seven eyes. Why you only have one. Why we can talk like this, here, and now. Wheels came for her. Wheels are coming for you.

* * *

Moirra stares at the spider. The rumble of approach—planes, tanks, men—the hospital shakes with it. A blast shatters something above, and ceiling pieces come crashing down, below. More sky than she’s seen in weeks opens up in an instant. The sun blazes down, and smoke folds in.

When the dust settles, on her and over her, the spider's still there, waving its small legs grandly. She watches him conduct an orchestra of destruction around her.

You should leave now, spider. Someone's gotta make it out of here. It won't be me.

The gun-turret of eyes tilts from side to side, then looks to the parcel it holds. It takes a delicate fang, and slices the silk open. The fly, emerges, struggling. And Moira watches it buzz away into the light.

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Erin Cashier is a nurse at a burn ward in the Bay Area. She attended Clarion West in 2007, and her story "Cruciger" is in Writers of the Future XXIV. Her story "Near the Flame" is forthcoming in Shimmer Magazine. and "Cruciger" will appear soon on Escape Pod. She is the author of ["Hangman"](#) in Beneath Ceaseless Skies #10, as well as ["The Alchemist's Feather"](#) in BCS #25 and the [Best of BCS, Year One](#) anthology.

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THE BOOK OF AUTUMN

by Rachael Acks

The day I bought my freedom was as clear and sunny as the day I'd been sold. The small pile of coins, sitting at the center of Bertrand's enormous, age-blackened desk, still glowed faintly with the warmth of my hands in the sight of my newly cursed left eye. His hands, normally so eager to touch anything of mine, were folded away in the dark sleeves of his robe.

"It's too soon for you to leave," he said.

I could only smile at that. "I'm free. I'll do as I like."

"There's still much you have to learn. And now that you have your freedom, we can teach you more, and better."

I stared at him. A sheen of sweat formed across his pale forehead. "I'll take my chances."

He shuddered and tried to look away without turning his head, his normal, pale blue left eye's gaze fixed on the bookshelves behind my right shoulder. His own cursed eye, black and gem-green like a poisonous snake, stared fixedly at me. "You should reconsider."

His nervousness only made me stretch my lips in a broader smile. They thought of it as a game, these sweaty old men.

Tease the dim, pretty little poppet with bits of magic to keep her dazzled and quiet. They'd never realized, I think, how much I had actually understood until I'd raised my head from my work and pulled back my hair so they could see I'd received the curse of knowledge. Then they were frightened, and rightly so. They'd convinced themselves that we illiterate women had no capacity for their sort of magic, but I made the truth something they couldn't ignore.

"By your leave, Bertrand," I said, with the barest sketch of a bow. As a slave, that would have—and had—earned me a beating.

His eyes narrowed. "We cared for you, and this is how you repay us?"

"Only someone that has never known love would call that care," I said, and turned to go.

"Safir!" He sounded shocked and angry; his chair creaked as he levered himself to his feet.

I turned back, looking at his face gone red with outrage. I raised my hand, fingers spread, to cover the sight. "*Golden fall the leaves of autumn,*" I said. My voice sounded strange to my own ears, moving precisely over the hard-learned tones and the ritual words of the ancient story. "*Upon the wind they split and dance—*"

He sat as if his knees had simply given way; if his chair hadn't been there to catch him, he would have tumbled to the floor. A single, thin red line opened on his cheek, the cut so delicate that it barely bled.

"I know the Book of Changes and the Book of Autumn by heart," I said. "And thanks to you, well I know how to hate. There is nothing left that you can possibly teach me." I let my hand fall back to my side. What little magic I had summoned left my mouth tasting of metal and my nose filled with the scent of a misty morning. Bertrand made no further move or sound as I left.

My few possessions were already bundled up: simple clothing and a single book, a faithful copy of the Book of Autumn, worth its weight in diamonds. I'd been tempted, but only for a moment, to demand the robes of an initiate. I had a right to them. Good quality as they were, I didn't want such a vivid reminder of the last ten years, and I didn't want to attract such attention. Daring to wear such robes as a woman, and moreso a woman alone, would be an invitation to more fights than even I had the stomach for.

I'd entered the monastery by way of the side door, dragged into the kitchen to receive my first lesson in obedience. I left, head high on a stiff neck, through the front gates. No one tried to stop me as I flung them open, flooding the front hall with

blinding light. They had all felt what fate Bertrand had narrowly avoided.

The mountain air was cold and clear. The breeze against my face whispered a promise of freedom.

I never looked back.

* * *

I didn't know where my brother—my only family—was, or even if he still lived. I was six years old when I had seen him last, precocious and sounding my way through the epic cycle of Rezralond the warrior queen, a book nearly bigger than me. Esmerand dozed beside me, smelling of sweet grass and freshly-turned earth. The next morning, he was gone and had left me in the care of a family of merchants who had once been friends of our father. Two years later, after a bad harvest and a lost caravan, they sold me. Old loyalty did not produce food for hungry children, after all. That required money, and a clever, beautiful little girl fetched quite a price.

I never found out why Esmerand had left, or where he had gone, and no one saw fit to tell me. He'd simply abandoned me to what poor mercy existed in the world.

I walked alone for two days with the monastery at my back, rising with the sun, eating the hard bread I'd taken with me a bite at a time. It was early summer; there were springs to drink from and wild berries to pick. Still, it was a relief when I

came upon a small caravan. They were stopped for their noon meal, gathered around a small fire that they were using to boil water for tea.

I hadn't seen unfamiliar faces in a long time, and it left me feeling strangely shy. I combed a bit of my loose hair forward to hide my cursed left eye, ducking a little. It gave the appearance of suitable female modesty. "Good afternoon," I called.

The caravan leader was a tall, thin man, who had two long, rust-colored feathers tucked into his hatband. "Afternoon, young...", he tilted his head to the side, "lady." His people looked at me curiously: three young men, all with swords and bows nearby, a stocky woman in a blue skirt, and a child that looked to be a mix of the woman and the leader.

"Are you going to Tera Sal?" I asked, "Or perhaps near that way?"

"Near enough," he answered. "No one goes to Tera Sal any more, but the end of our road is in Tera Selvina."

I wanted to ask why, but thought it best to keep business before questions. "In that case, might I join you for a while? I'll work my passage... to a point." I spared the young men a cold glance, not wanting them to get any ideas.

"You any good with horses?"

"A bit." I'd done work in the stables as punishment for my more intractable moments. "What I don't know, I'll learn, and

happily. All I ask is company and a share of food. Nothing more.”

“You’ll clean and tend horses then. Maybe mend some clothes too if you’ve any skill with a needle.”

“A bit,” I said again.

“Then sit, and be welcome at my fire,” the man said. “My name’s Bashya. My wife, Pellé, and my daughter, Venia.” His wife gave me a cautious smile, while his daughter unabashedly stared. How the scrutiny of such a small child could make me so uncomfortable, I did not know.

I sat, between Bashya and one of the caravan guards. He had sandy hair and a scar across the bridge of his nose. He made no move to give me more room, but nodded and smiled pleasantly enough. “Tiko,” he said, tilting his tin cup toward his chest.

“And I’m Marlin,” the next man said, “And this is my brother, Kiefler. Nice to meet you.” Those two did look enough alike; brown hair, brown eyes, dark skin, as if some spirit had spun them both from honest mud and kissed the word of life onto their lips once they were done baking in the sun.

“Safir,” I said. No one else had spoken family names, so I wasn’t troubled to make one up.

Tiko held another tin cup to me. It was full of baked beans. Kiefler tossed a warm heel of bread into my lap to go with it. “Thank you,” I murmured.

“Where are you from?” Marlin asked. “What news do you bring?”

I stared into the cup. The monastery was not proscribed or all that feared; in fact, mentioning it might have gained me a bit of respect. Speaking of it would also have added another stone to the foundation it had already built on my heart. “West,” I said. “I’m afraid I have no news. I bought my freedom only a few days past.”

I had expected nods of sympathy or understanding; these were not wealthy people. What I got were looks of pity, quiet hisses of pain. Another bit of bread appeared, resting on my knee this time.

“No wonder you’re so thin,” Pellé murmured.

Bashya stood abruptly. “Marlin, get the horses up. We’ve sat long enough.” He pointed at me. “You concentrate on eating down that food. You can start working after the meal.” Then he continued snapping orders at the others.

They whirled around me in a well-orchestrated dance, putting up pots and pulling tethers. I chewed on the sweet bread, letting their merry talk wash over me and fighting to un-

derstand their words, the cheerful little arguments they had. It felt foreign, though we shared a language.

My cursed left eye, seeking out the threads of story belonging to this people, found them shot through with worry and secrets. That was familiar enough.

* * *

We traveled for weeks, and no more questions were asked. The others told stories of their travels, their families, their dreams. I listened to the simple poetry of their contentment and eagerly sealed it into my memory. It wasn't the powerful stuff of the ancient epics that were the building blocks of magic, but something that felt equally deep and important. I learned to cook, passably, and to mend tack. Each day brought us closer to my goal, my home, yet I felt less eager with each step taken.

We stopped one evening on a wide, green plateau dotted with wildflowers in tiny spangles of pink, blue, and purple. I stared at them as we set up the camp, feeling lost until I saw Venia running around the wagons, picking a flower here and there. I bent to pick flowers then, too, and Venia appeared at my side, laughing, and showed me how to weave the thin stems into a garland that she insisted I set in my hair.

I smiled at her as she danced around me, her own garland askew, and wondered what flowers bloomed at home, and what ones stood at my brother's feet.

It wasn't my turn to cook, so when the horses were watered and settled, I wandered away. The wind was fierce on the plateau, tearing petals away from my garland and rolling the clouds overhead. I sat on the soft grass, then lay down to watch the sky. The flowers fell from my hair, the scent, sweet and bruised, filling the air around me. I raised one hand to shield my eyes from the setting sun and watched the clouds pull through my fingers like a lady's hair, dyed in orange and red.

"Safir."

I looked to the side. "Do you need something, Bashya?"

He shook his head. The feathers in his hat streamed in the wind. "Only to speak, if you don't mind the company."

"Of course not." I swept my other hand along the ground. "Please, sit in my domain."

He chuckled, sitting cross-legged by my shoulder, his face pointed toward the sunset as if we were two old friends enjoying the same painting. "Safir, why do you wish to go to Tera Sal?"

Taking in his serious tone, I sat up, tucking my legs up under my skirts. "It's where I was from, before I was sold. It's the closest thing I have to a home now, I suppose."

“A home that would sell you.” He sounded bemused. “And then what will you do?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, turning my eyes back to the clouds. “It’s been ten years since I was given any decision to make.”

Again, that hiss of pain. “After ten years, what can there still be for you? Perhaps... you should stay with us. You work hard, and well.”

Part of me had hoped he would offer, and part of me had feared it. “I have a brother. I want to find him.” It was more than a want; it was a need. I needed to ask him why.

“But is he still in Tera Sal?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. He left when I was young.” I schooled my voice carefully to avoid the hurt and bitterness of those words.

“Then perhaps your search would be better pursued on the road.”

I looked back at Bashya; his face was grave, the lines around his mouth set deep. “What is in Tera Sal now, Bashya? Why does no one go there?”

“Some say bandits,” he said. “Some say monsters. An alchemist built his home in the mountains above the town, and the merchants stopped going there. It’s all fallen to ruin, last I heard.” He plucked a flower from the grass, turning it in his

fingers. "I say that any town that would sell its daughters is no place to be, at any rate."

I laughed. "All towns do, Bashya, daughters and sons. Slavery is better than starvation."

He shrugged. "We don't think so."

"And who is 'we?'"

He laughed, this time. "The Destani, Safir," he said. "Such a smart girl, and you never guessed?"

In Tera Sal, they called the Destani 'blood drinkers' and 'eaters of the dead.' In the monastery, they'd been far more sophisticated and just called them thieves. Considering my feelings about both places, I would make no such assumptions. When a woman reads, they say, her mind fills with unnatural ideas. I had read a great deal, and many strange books. "The Travelers." It came from my lips as a sigh.

Bashya laughed again, this time with surprise and pleasure. "Not the answer that I normally hear. Though I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, if you've been looking at the truth of things."

It made my stomach clench, hearing him refer so casually to the strange vision of my cursed eye, as if he somehow understood it. "It's more that histories are most enlightening in what they don't say. I know what you are."

“And we know what you are, too,” he said, tapping next to his own left eye with one finger. “Fablespinner. We’ve been waiting, all this time, for you to tell us a tale.”

“That’s not what I’m called, Bashya. And I don’t want to hurt anyone.” I squeezed my eyes tightly shut.

“The stories were never meant to hurt, Safir,” Bashya said, his voice sad. “Your people stole our arts, our magics, and did as they pleased with them. They crafted our love of words into a weapon.”

The Travelers were the ones who had begun the tales and made the stories, but to what end I had never known. All I knew was so full of blood and anger, I couldn’t imagine using them for any other sort of magic. “Love, Bashya? Somehow, I doubt that was ever involved.”

He shook his head. “Take a storyteller away from the light of the campfire, make the stories about power and death instead of laughter and life, and is it any wonder the words turn cold and cruel?” He must have seen the confusion in my expression; he clicked his tongue disapprovingly. “What did they do to you, child?”

“Don’t ask me that.”

Bashya sighed. His tone was gentle, but there was rage beneath it. “That’s answer enough.”

“I want my brother, Bashya. I want to go home. So please... just stop asking me. “

“You’ve set yourself a rough course, Safir. I just hope.... In two days, we’ll be as close to Tera Sal as we get. If you still wish, then, take your leave.” He inhaled deeply. “Smell that? Pellé’s made rabbit stew for us tonight. It’d be a shame to let it all waste in the bellies of the boys.”

“It would,” I agreed. I opened my eyes. The sky was streaked with deep red and purple. I stood, brushing the grass from my skirts.

“Venia adores you, you know,” Bashya said.

I shrugged. “Children like everyone.”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “That shows just how much you know of children.”

I let him pull me back to the fire, the warm food and conversation. I left my garland of flowers crushed in the grass.

* * *

Two days later, we stopped at a lonely crossing, where the road from Tera Sal met the trade road. There was nothing to be seen there but the empty dirt tracks, grass, and trees. The crossing was guarded by a simple wooden sign, its letters blurred with age, and a stone guard dog that pointed its nose north, ears up and alert. Someone had knocked its carved teeth out with a rock, and they lay scattered at its feet.

We paused there so that I could take my leave, and each of the Destani took the time to place a kiss on the guard dog's nose and ears.

It was Venia's turn—she clung to her mother's hand, shrieking as she was pulled toward the stone dog—when they attacked. Men, fifteen or twenty of them, pouring from behind the trees, knives glittering in their hands, grins showing black teeth.

Pellé snatched Venia up in her arms and sprinted back to the wagons. Bashya and the guards drew their swords. I stood frozen, my skirts flapping around my ankles.

A giant of a man, with a rusted war hammer dangling from his hands, stepped forward. He had a curling red beard and an eye patch over his left eye, the cheek below warped with scars. “The goods,” he said. “And the women. You keep your lives in exchange.”

I knew what those words meant. Women sold better.

Bashya edged forward, sword ready. He opened his mouth to reply, but the sound died in his throat as I touched his arm. I knew the end of that story, if he tried to stand and fight. “A moment,” I said, my voice for his ears alone.

“Safir....”

I walked past him, my head held high. “We like our payment fast!” the leader shouted, and his men laughed. I stopped in front of him and raised my hands, just out of his reach.

The wind halted, leaves falling to the ground.

The giant man’s eye went wide as he looked at me, truly looked at me. He hefted the hammer, but it was too late. It had been too late from the moment they stepped from the trees.

Voice soft, pictures solid in my mind, I did as I’d been taught, and flawlessly. *“Golden fall the leaves of autumn. Upon the wind they split and dance, through the battle, through the lives, turning once to Ashram’s knives....”*

The rest of my words were lost in the screams and the howling of the wind as it whipped up around me. Skin split, bones ground together, and fine sprays of blood decorated the hem of my skirts.

When it was over, I let my hands drop and looked back at Bashya. My left eye burned in my skull, its sight gone into the streaks and colors of magic. It was dizzying and agonizing, looking into a world that was not our own.

Pellé and Venia were nowhere to be seen. The guards still clutched their swords, faces gone pale and sickly; Tiko was bent over behind one of the wagons, retching. Bashya simply looked sad.

“Goodbye,” I said, nothing left to my voice but a hoarse whisper. “Thank you. For all that you’ve done.”

He stepped slowly back from me. “Be safe on the grand road. And... perhaps you will find a happy tale to tell instead. Some day.”

There was no answer I could give for that. I picked up my pack from where I’d dropped it on the ground and began to walk. When I was out of sight of the caravan, past a bend in the road, I fell to the side, into a clump of bushes. Thorns tore at my hair and clothes, scratching angry lines into my hands. And I wept, bloody tears from my left eye and clear ones from my right, as I fought the urge to vomit.

* * *

Two days later the scratches had faded to barely a memory as I walked through the outskirts of Tera Sal. The town was far too quiet in the tired afternoon light. Shutters were drawn, gates firmly closed. The street’s cobbles were cracked and missing in places. There were still living, breathing residents; I could sense them vaguely, afraid and waiting like prisoners behind their locked doors. None ventured outside; there wasn’t even a mangy dog to be seen.

I fought, then gave in to the urge to walk by the house of the merchant family that had sold me. What I would do there, I wasn’t certain. The house was a burnt, broken wreck. The stone

fence that had once surrounded it was strewn across its barren yard. Holes gaped in the sagging walls of the skeleton house.

Perhaps those were bones I spied, in the yard among the burnt boards and shattered stones. Perhaps not. I forced myself to walk away, before either of my eyes could confirm any sort of truth. The sun was already sinking behind the mountains, painting them black against a bloody sky. I turned to put those mountains at my left shoulder and let my feet lead me down a familiar road. Nothing was quite as I remembered it; buildings fallen down, roofs with sparse shingles, once neat fences with grass growing from between their stones.

Yet how different, how new were any of these things? It was impossible to tell. My memories of the road were the golden haze of early childhood, when everything was fresh and fascinating even if old and fallen to ruin.

The light of a full moon showed me the ruin that had been my true home so long ago. The fields had long gone wild, the orchard had been cut down, and the house had collapsed in on itself. I followed the thread of remembrance, imagining that I walked along a faint dirt track that no longer existed, and made my way down to the stream that had once fed our garden.

It was brutally cold when I dipped my hands in to it, but the water still tasted as sweet as memory. I drank until my

stomach threatened to cramp, then retreated to the trees that lined the stream's little pool.

I settled among the roots of a willow and let my eyes drift shut, searching for the thread of story that ran through this place, the thread of my own story. This was where I had started, after all.

So faint that I almost missed it, so unlike me, I found that thread wrapped in the branches of a crabapple tree nearby. Soft and warm, it had no business existing so near the corpse of a house in the skeleton of a town. Reluctantly, I reached for it, hoping to find some answer beyond a reminder of what I had lost.

* * *

The crabapple tree had been in full bloom that day, the petals golden in the afternoon sunlight. It smelled so sweet, between the flowers and the gentle stream, still full with spring rains from the mountains. I sat in the tree's branches and watched in idle fascination as the muscles rippled across my brother's sun-browned back. Though it wasn't warm, he was sweating, his hair dark and damp with it as he bent to his work.

The story-me kicked her dirty little feet, swinging her legs in the air. After one hundred days of mourning, eating cold funeral food and having to sit through long ceremonies where adults droned on and on, I was simply happy that it was all

over, that life was returning to something close to normal. Esmerand and I were back in our normal clothes rather than our scratchy wool mourning robes, and we'd had a real breakfast that morning, apples and eggs and a bit of bacon that he'd fried too crispy.

Esmerand straightened up, grimacing as he rubbed his lower back. He made a big show of looking around, peering at the bushes nearby, even checking the tufts of tall grass. "Little sister, where are you? Did you turn in to a bird and fly off?"

I managed to still my feet, trying to hold my breath.

"Or maybe a mouse, and next I see you, you'll be stealing my corn cakes!"

I let out a high little giggle then, and he turned to look up at me. Of course he'd known where I was; he'd helped me climb into the tree, to keep me away from the ditch he was working on. "There you are!" He held his arms out to me. "Jump, little mouse!"

Shrieking with delight, I dove off the tree branch and into my brother's arms. "I'm not a mouse!"

He grinned at me. "But you smell like one!" He poked my cheek gently with one finger. "And look at those whiskers."

"Esmerand!" I squirmed. "Yuck, you're sticky! Put me down!"

“You know, I don’t think I will,” he said. Instead, he swung me up onto his shoulders, getting another happy squeal in reward, and picked his shovel back up. “I’m going to take you out to the farthest field and toss you out into the grass, since that’s where mice ought to live.”

“No you won’t!”

“See if I don’t,” he said. He started the long walk back toward our house. Among the green and golden fields, it stood out like a beacon, painted a cheerful shade of bright blue. “What do you think for dinner tonight? We could have stew, if you’re good and help me with the vegetables, or we could just have more bread and cheese.”

“Stew,” I said. “And no turnips.”

“I like turnips.”

“That’s stupid. Cows eat turnips. You’re not a cow.”

He laughed. “Mice eat turnips too.”

“Liar. Turnips are too big for mice to eat.”

“A whole family could eat one. For weeks and weeks.”

I made a rude noise, swinging my heels lightly against his chest. “Is it going to be like Mum’s stew?”

There was a slight hesitation in his step, but that was all. “No, I think it’s going to be like my stew,” he said. “And I think that’s how it ought to be. Mum and Dad have gone away. In-

stead of trying to be like them, we should just be like ourselves.”

I considered the merits of this as best I could. “Does that mean you’re not going to read to me like Dad did?”

“Better.” He bounced me on his shoulders. “I’m going to teach you how to read to yourself.”

I felt a little thrill of fear at the idea. “That’s bad,” I whispered. “Dad said so.” I still remembered the look on his face when he’d caught me looking at his books, and the angry words he’d said.

“Maybe he did, but that doesn’t matter any more. Because you know what?”

“What?”

He swept one hand across the horizon. “This is ours now. All ours. It’s our kingdom. So you’re going to be the queen here, and I’ll be the king, and we get to decide what’s good and bad.”

I frowned. “I get to be queen?”

“Of everything you see.”

“Like the Rez—rez—rezzyind the warrior queen?”

Somehow, he managed not to laugh at my butchering of Queen Rezralond’s name. “Yes.”

“Then I don’t think you should be king. You can be my general, though.”

He did laugh then. "Oh, you're too kind, Your Majesty."

"And if you're a good general, you can have a horse, too."

"Well, I'll do my best, then...."

* * *

The wind tugging at my hair woke me, the chill helping me untangle myself from the thread of that warm afternoon. Just as difficult to grasp as that wind, I caught hold of another story-thread so familiar that it made my eyes sting with tears. Hardly daring to breathe, I lunged to my feet, lurching toward the tree that stood over the bones of my parents. So faint that I thought I must be imagining it, I caught sight of my brother's story, shining and silver to my cursed eye.

The thread of story didn't end at the tree, or in the ruins of the house. One side of it, dimmer and older, plunged far in to the distance, to be lost in the confusion of so many lives. The other was far fresher than my own sunny memories. In an arrow-straight line it pointed into the foothills that the town sagged against, showing where I might find the next chapter of my brother's life.

* * *

I set out immediately, walking as quickly as I was able, into the hills. There, I found a lonely but smooth path that lead in the right direction. I followed it for hours, while overhead deep night faded to false dawn, then into true dawn. My head

began to feel too heavy for my neck and sagging shoulders, but I feared that if I looked down for even a moment, I would lose sight of the thread and never find it again.

The sun was well in to the sky, stretching out my shadow in front of me, when the otherwise straight path took a sharp turn around an elderly pine and ended at set of stone steps. I looked up and up—granite blocks and wood, a house so big that it might have been a church—and just trying to grasp the height of it left me reeling. Exhaustion broke through me; legs shaking, I began to fall.

A large, warm hand caught my wrist, dragging me back up to my feet. The sound of a familiar voice reached me, like a rope thrown to a castaway in the storm. I found deep brown eyes, flecked with green, so like one of my own. He had changed, but only a little. A few tiny wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, the line of a scar on one cheek, and that was all. I had to tell myself that he hadn't shrunk; I was taller, fully grown. "Brother....," I began; my throat felt dry and filled with rust.

He touched my left cheek, his fingers rough against my skin. "Safir? Safir, what did you do?"

I flinched away, turning my face to hide my cursed eye. "What I had to." I tried to pry my wrist from his grasp, but he wouldn't let me go.

“I’m... I’m sorry. You look exhausted. I just... come on, let’s get you inside,” he said, then smiled. It was the same old smile, radiant like the sun, and I couldn’t help but smile in return. “There will be time enough for talking later. All the time in the world.”

“All the time in the world,” I repeated, and let him half-carry me up the steps and through the wide doorway. There he took my cloak and satchel, hanging them on the wall. His own cloak, black and far finer than mine, he kept on.

“Sleep first, or food?” he asked.

“Water,” I croaked.

“Of course. Come along.” He took me down the hallway to a small, surprisingly sunny kitchen with a well-worn wooden table and three chairs, none of them matching. I dropped into the nearest with a sigh of gratitude. He deposited a pitcher of water in front of me; I didn’t bother waiting for a cup. I drank so greedily from the side that water spilled around the corners of my mouth and down the front of my dress.

“Still messy, I see,” he observed.

I ignored him until I’d drunk my fill. “And do you still wear black because it hides stains?” I asked, setting the pitcher back down with a solid *thump*.

“You ought to be nicer if you want me to cook breakfast for you.”

“Then you ought to have raised me better,” I snapped, immediately regretting it. Esmerand still smiled, but I could still tell that the blow had landed. “I’m sorry. I’m over tired.”

He waved a hand, dismissing the apology, then proceeded to make breakfast like he had in the old days: thick slices of bacon, eggs scrambled in their salty grease, crisp apples. I tore into the food as soon as he set the plate in front of me; I was halfway done before I noticed that he wasn’t eating, just staring. “What.”

“I’m sorry.... Just... you’ve changed so much,” he said. “And *that*.” He wasn’t rude enough to point at my eye, but there was no question what he referred to. “They don’t teach girls. Hell, they don’t teach anyone unless they feel like it.”

“I know,” I answered sharply. “I did what I had to do, Esmerand. There’s no other answer than that.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t push.” He gave me a crooked smile. “But I’m proud of you, to have learned so much. Perhaps I can take some credit, for teaching you to read.”

I shook my head, though I did smile for a minute. “What a thing you did, Esmerand.” My breath caught in my throat. “What about you, then? Why here? And now? Where were you?”

He sighed, looking away, toward the tall windows of the room. Outside, the sky was bright and very blue. “I’m sorry I

left, little sister. So sorry. I didn't have any choices by then. You didn't know, because I didn't tell you, but... we had nothing left to sell. When Mum and Dad died, we already had debts, from the house and from their illness. I applied to the Order first, but they turned me down. After that, all I could do was look for work. As soon as I could, I came back, but you were already long gone. So I stayed. Even if they didn't accept me, I've studied what I can of the Order. I know the forms that tales take. I thought... even if I couldn't find you, one day you'd make your way back here. All I had to do was wait."

I laughed bitterly. Of course the Order had turned him down; Esmerand was neither pretty nor a solid work horse. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting long."

"I wanted to find you, Safir, I truly did. I wanted us to be together again."

"I did—do—too. Brother... the people I traveled with say that Tera Sal is cursed, or close to it, the home of some sort of alchemist. That's you, isn't it."

He smiled. "There's more than one route that leads to power. I just found a different one."

"Power. How hollow that sounds."

"Good thoughts and love didn't keep us fed," he snapped. He stopped, cleared his throat, then continued in a more gentle tone, "I've the talent for the magic. The same as you do, it

seems. I've always known it. All I lack is the knowledge. Since the Order wouldn't take me in, I've just had to make my own way. So far, I've learned to make gold, and that was enough to build this place."

Yet he hadn't crossed that crucial frontier, where stories changed from simple words to living weapons. His eyes were the same as they had always been; he couldn't possibly see the tales woven in to the world as I did. "But you're not done."

"Of course I'm not done. There's more to learn, I know that. So my research continues," he said. "I'm close, I think."

"You can make gold, Esmerand. Which is more than I can do. What more can you need?"

He laughed, shaking his head. "Gold's just a thing. It's not alive. It tells no tales. Maybe the Order's forgotten that." He finished the last bits of his breakfast and cleared our plates away. "I've started to think that maybe they did me a favor, refusing to take me on. They seem like so many dusty old men, shut up in their monasteries, just worrying about what wealth they can make, what pleasure they can afford. The words and the tales... those are life. I can't help but think maybe... just maybe, if you could change the stories, you could change the world." He didn't seem to notice when I shuddered. "You look worn half to death, Safir. How about you get some more rest?"

I didn't feel so much tired as uneasy; all this talk of power, of research turned my stomach in knots. "Maybe. It's been... a long journey." I combed my hair away from my face with my fingers. "Do you have a library?"

"Of course," he said. "Let me show it to you."

It was glorious, a large room filled to the bursting with shelves of books. Some I recognized from the monastery's library, but there were new ones as well, about alchemy and mathematics that had foreign lettering. "Esmerand, this is... stunning."

"Well, I've worked hard to collect these," he said. "Why don't you read for a while, and just relax. I've got some work that I need to do, but then I'll come get you for lunch." After a moment of hesitation, he pulled me into an embrace. I went stiff as instincts honed at the monastery told me I should fight it, then I made myself return the embrace. It felt unnatural. He released me, then gave me that same, stupid grin of his.

I nodded, and tried to give him a smile in return. "All right," I said. "It is good to see you."

He paused in the doorway. "I hate to ask, Safir, but... a few days ago, there were some bandits killed outside the village. That was you, wasn't it."

"Yes." Remembering it made me feel sick.

“It’s all right, sister. I wish I’d known they were there. I would have taken care of them myself. I’m sorry for that.” He ran his hand slowly up and down the door frame. “What words did you use? I’ve never seen its like.”

I covered my eyes with one hand. “Shattered sun,” I said. “At the last.”

“I see,” Esmerand said. “Don’t worry, Safir. It was what you had to do.” Then he was gone.

My smile faded away to nothing. The fluttering of his heart, heard for just a moment when he had pressed my ear to his chest, echoed in my mind. It was wrong.

* * *

For the next few days, that was our routine; meals together, then I shut myself in his library while he did his work. At night, we sat and played the old games we’d known in childhood: cards, rooks and crows, castle siege, all while studiously avoiding breathing a word of our experiences of the last ten years. He laughed and smiled as if nothing had changed, and I did my best to echo his expressions.

It was difficult to pretend, when I would notice him looking fixedly at my cursed eye, or when he asked me about the words I knew, or the stories. And his books, when I began to truly explore his collection, filled me with dread: the Book of

Autumn, the Book of Winter, the Book of Changes. All familiar, all treasured by the Order.

Worse, much worse, was a copy of the Book of Swords, its cover made of leather dyed to look like fresh blood. It contained stories of wars, plagues, massacres, madness; all the bloodiest tales that a life could play out. I had looked in it once in the monastery, one quiet night when I was young and just beginning to explore the place. It had given me nightmares.

“Why do you have this, Esmerand?” I asked, when he came to get me for lunch that afternoon. I held the book up with just the tips of my fingers, like it was poisonous spider. “Nothing good comes of this. You can’t use these, and you shouldn’t need such a thing.” I dropped the book on a chair, no longer wanting to even touch it.

Esmerand stood in the doorway, his face gone pale and still. “Don’t you remember? None of these were his, but Dad had a little library, when we were children. And he owned the Book of Swords as well. He kept it hidden in his room, but I found it.”

I shook my head, covering my eyes for a moment. I remembered so little of my parents, so little of anything from that long ago. I knew we had owned books, and I knew it was strange that my father would know how to read, and that he would teach my brother.

Esmerand picked up the book and put it carefully back into its place on the shelf. "I thought you knew, or at least realized. You look so much like Dad now when your hair gets untidy, with that eye." He smiled slightly. "Well, without the beard."

"I don't remember. But if it's true, how could I forget such a thing?"

"You were young, Safir. Don't be so hard on yourself. And it wasn't as if Mum or Dad spoke of it. I tried, you know, when I applied to the Order. I couldn't find out which monastery he'd come from. I don't even know why he chose to leave it all behind and let himself die like a peasant, from a summer fever." He sounded bewildered and hurt, as if our father had somehow betrayed us both.

I looked down at my hands. There were so many more questions that came with this revelation that I couldn't answer: why had Dad let himself die, let Mum die as well, when he could have fixed it all with a few words? Why had he taught Esmerand to read, if he'd despised his own power enough to leave the Order? And so on, more than I could contain in my head, more than I wanted to even think of.

As if he could hear my thoughts, Esmerand reached out to touch the spines of his books, running his fingers across them. "I think that's why he taught me my letters. He must have

known that he passed his strengths on to me. And he even told me, before you were born, that the stories were life, and death, and power.

“That’s why I taught you. I knew you wouldn’t grow up to be empty-headed and foolish. I thought, whatever he had given up, together we could reclaim.” He gave me a brief, bright smile, aching like those of the sunny days over a decade ago. “It will make more sense, once you’ve seen my progress. Shall I show you my work?”

I didn’t want to, because I could already grasp the shape of what I would see. The strange beat of his heart had told me that much. I wanted our pale lie of family life to continue, as if it would become real if I just tried to believe it hard enough. The truth that I had already heard and seen gave me no choice. “Yes,” I said.

Where the main hall would have been in a normal house was his laboratory, and that was where he took me. It was light and airy, with tall windows on every wall. And it was filled with cages. Things howled and whined and moaned, their shapes unrecognizable. At the front of each cage there was a bit of card.

The card on the nearest cage had ‘shattered sun’ written on it in green ink. The thing inside had been a fox, once, but its fur

had melted away and its limbs were twisted with magic and pain. Tears pricked at my eyes. “Why? How could you?”

“It’s how the Order learned, in the beginning.”

I thought of what Bashya had told me, about how the magic had once been different; I didn’t know if I believed it, but was surprised to find that I hoped it was true. “Then they were wrong to have done it.” Pairing stolen words with pain; they’d built an Order of it, a whole society made from stories of suffering.

“Wrong? This is what Father learned. And I suppose this is what you learned as well.” He stuck one finger through the bars of a cage, stroking the deformed creature within on the head. It shrank away from him with a wet, snuffling whimper.

“But don’t you see? He left it behind, Esmerand. He escaped. He married. He—”

“Oh, and look at all the good it did him! An early grave on a dirt farm, his children starving or sold. How easy for him, to have something that he could give up, and how easy for you. Yet here you stand, disparaging me for wanting just a sliver of that for myself.” He laughed bitterly. “You were always so brave, as a child. Now look at you.”

“I had no choice!” I took an unsteady step back, hands clutching at my stomach. “And then I left. I left, Esmerand. I

left just like Dad did. I know what they built and what they made. I don't want it!"

His face crumpled with grief and rage "Then you're wasting it. All I ever wanted, everything that's mine by right, and you're wasting it!"

"All I ever wanted was my brother."

He grabbed my sleeve. "Then listen to your brother, Safir, and do as I say!"

"You can't make me! There are other stories!" I lunged forward, shoving him with all my might. Surprised, he went sprawling, his cloak and skirts splaying out to reveal legs that were no longer altogether human, their skin warped and waxy.

That sight was all the confirmation I needed. I backed away from him until I ran into one of the tables, setting the deformed creatures caged on it shrieking and whimpering. I shook my head, squeezing my eyes tightly shut. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. But you don't have to walk this path, Esmerand."

Rustling and shuffling; the sounds of him regaining his feet. "And what would you suggest?" he asked, his tone mocking. "They won't teach me. *You* won't teach me. So I truly have no one left but myself."

"No, that's not what I meant." I thought of Bashya again, of the strange, almost frightening image he'd painted of a world unlike everything I had known. "The Destani, Esmerand. I

traveled with them, and... they told me there was a different way." I opened my eyes; it was easier to look at him now that his self-inflicted deformities were hidden. "We could find them, ask them. We could try to learn a new way, together."

He stared at me for a long moment, and for those few heartbeats I let myself hope. Then he laughed, short and sharp. "So you've not only abandoned everything you've learned, you found the most notorious liars in the world to pin your hopes on." Again, that awful laugh. "I really was wrong about you."

"They weren't lying," I said. "I'm not a foolish little girl any longer, brother. I can hear the sour sound a lie makes. If you'd just come with me, I know you'd see it. I know you'd understand." Perhaps if he left behind the books, the tormented animals, whatever had poisoned his mind would lose his grip. It was a mad idea, but it was also the only one that I had.

"I have too much to do to go on your wild sheep chase, Safir," he said. "Leave if you like. I'm won't stop you."

"I won't go without you."

"Then I suppose you won't be going anywhere. Go back to your books then. And stay out of my laboratory if you're not going to help me."

"No. I won't." I looked around, at the sad, twisted animals. For them, the damage was too great; death would be the only

mercy. "It isn't too late to seek out a different path. For both of us."

"You don't seem to be listening to what I've said."

"And you haven't been listening to me either. You said you wanted me to teach you. I won't—can't. But I can help you still. Come with me."

His only answer was to turn his back. He moved toward another set of cages, taking up one of the cards and considering it.

"I could make you come with me," I said, desperation welling up like acid from my belly.

He spared a glance over his shoulder. "I doubt that. I'm still your older brother."

"You've changed."

"I've grown up," he said. He turned back to the cage. "You apparently haven't. Though I think your fancies weren't half as wild when you were little."

The casual dismissal more than stung; it was as humiliating as if he'd slapped me. My desperation turned inward to anger; Esmerand was not only the god-like older brother who had abandoned me, but now he had shown himself to be every man wearing the robes of the Order who had treated me as an inconsequential plaything.

Anger summoned up the words I knew best, from the Book of Autumn that I'd so faithfully copied on to blank pages and in to my own blood. *"In the golden afternoon the cold wind wakes, prowling from the mountains, sweeping all before it and taking breath away. Across the battlefield, to the call of the trumpets, the leashed hound at the general's side...."*

I watched Esmerand turn, his eyes going wide before they were overtaken by the all too familiar glassy look that I'd seen in the mirror during my days in the monastery. Slowly, he dropped to his knees, though one hand still clutched at the table, as if he could pull himself back from the net I was weaving.

I paused for a moment, swallowing back the words. "You'll come with me, Esmerand. For your own good. You don't have a choice. I'll continue if I must."

He breathed heavily, finally letting go of the table, resting his hands on the ground. "Show me more, Safir. That's it. That's the power I want." He smiled, and it was a terrible sight.

I shrank away. "No! No, Esmerand. That's not what I meant. Come along. Please, Brother. Come along."

He shook his head to clear it, using the table to lever himself back to his feet. "Show me more!"

I couldn't convince him; I couldn't force him without becoming what I most despised. I had no choices left. I caught up a glass beaker from the table. "I'll tear this place to pieces." I

hadn't actually meant to smash the glass, but the trembling of my hands was so bad that I dropped it, and it shattered across the floor.

Esmerand stared at the mess, then snarled at me. "You'd better not do that again."

"Or what?" I demanded, my voice shaking as badly as my hands. "You'll stop me? I think I already proved that I'm stronger than you." Something between tears and laughter bubbled up in my chest. I swept my arm across the table; more glass tumbled to the floor.

Esmerand started toward me. I barked out three words from the Book of Summer; a wall of fire roared in to life between us. "Maybe you were right, Esmerand. Maybe we were meant for greater things than this. But I won't become them, and I won't let you become them either."

He tried to reach through the flames, perhaps thinking they were illusions or ordinary fire. I shouted a warning, but too late. He screamed and lurched back, clutching at his hand, its skin bubbling with blisters.

"Get out, you fool!" I shouted at him. "Leave!"

His face was sickly pale, shining with sweat, but he straightened to his full height. The flames reflected in his eyes. "I will have this."

“But not today.” My eyes stung; if there were tears, the heat dried them before they could fall. “Go!” I shouted another few words, driving the flames toward him. He was forced back, even as I could see him trying to memorize every detail of what I said, what I did.

I didn’t know what else to do; I drove him back again and again, sending the flames before me until he was forced out onto the threshold of his own house. The air was almost too hot to breathe, but still he lingered, as close to the fire as he dared. “Get out!” I screamed at him again.

“I was wrong,” he said. “You *have* changed. How fitting, that we’ve both managed to become the same thing.”

“You’re still wrong,” I said. “And I’ve made my choice.” I didn’t know if it was right or wrong, but I had made it. “I love you, Esmerand.”

So quietly, I almost couldn’t hear it over the hungry crackle of the flames, he said, “And I love you. Maybe some day, I’ll forgive you.”

I turned my back on him then; strands of my hair sizzled and curled in the heat. I focused down the hall, to where the half-ruined laboratory still stood, and began: “*The sun beat down on the land, burning all to dust but the lone wanderer, the Sun’s child, his sword clutched tight at his side....*”

I didn't stop until the room blazed with so much flame that I couldn't bear to look at it any longer, as if burning away the experiments and the books in the library upstairs would burn away the impurities in my brother's soul—and in my own.

I dismissed the fire behind me with the wave of a hand, and walked down the massive stone steps. All around the house, windows sizzled, popped, shattered in the heat. The inferno I had created in the laboratory roared like a living thing. Esmerand was nowhere to be seen. I did not look for him. I loved him, and hated him; he was my brother.

Perhaps with his laboratory gone, he would start anew. I tried to find a flicker of hope in my heart; there was none. I knew already that he would not find a different way—I had shown him what lay at the end of the path paved with swords, and he had reached through fire to grasp at it.

* * *

Months later, I found Bashya again, and Pellé, and little Venia, now not so little. I joined the caravan, only until I would reach my destination, though I never gave that place a name. That made Bashya smile.

Every place we went, I found a girl or woman, perhaps two, perhaps three, and I taught them the power of stories and how to read. I never told my own stories, but I taught them to tell their own. Esmerand had been right about one thing; as the

stories changed, so did the world. And on the darkest foundations, they told stories of hope, and I looked down the long road to the day when those tales would undo the pain of the world.

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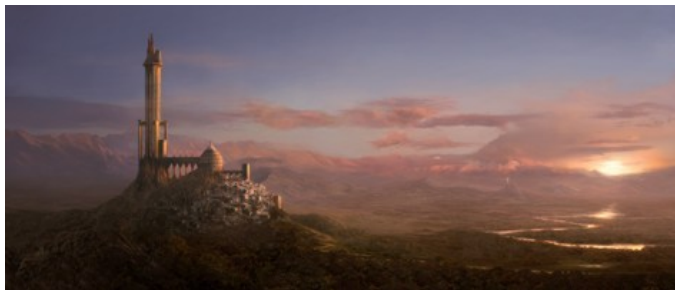
Rachael Acks is a graduate student at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She lives in Westminster with her long-suffering husband and two cute but evil cats. This is her maiden voyage into the land of professionally published fiction. Because she is under the impression that people care a great deal about her opinions, she also has a blog: <http://geogeek.blogspot.com>.

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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.

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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