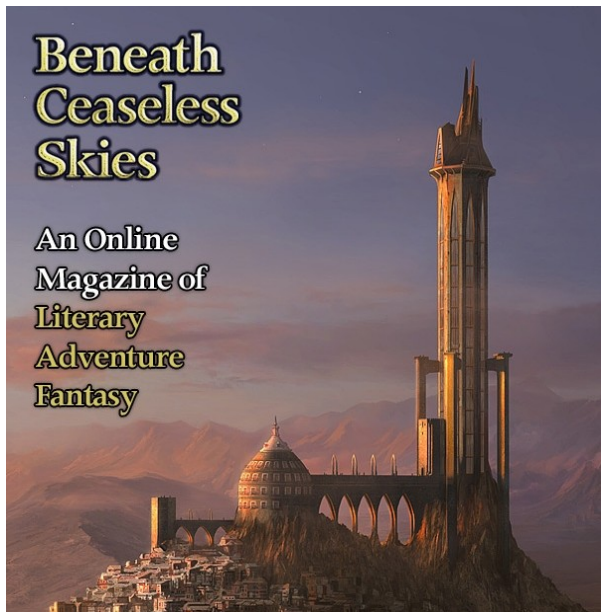


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TWO BY ZERO

by Garth Upshaw

I, Orlen D’Hamilton, manifested an almost perfect category-three dark aspect early Friday morning, two days after the fourth full moon, in the year 1637 of the Twin Saviors.

Musty shelves loaded with smoke-damaged tomes surrounded the tiny desk I’d chosen as my workspace. I kept an ear cocked for sounds of other people—as a mere student, my status here was precarious. This area of the library was off-limits to all but full professors.

Intermittent clanging and rattling from the hulking radiator in the corner did little to mitigate the harsh chill of the air. I rubbed my hands together for warmth and then scribed a line of numbers and symbols on a sheet of nubbly grey paper. If I embedded the summoning in a pseudo-Riemannian manifold, the energies could be contained in a non-degenerate subspace.

I knew I was close. The purity of the otherworld leaked through my mathematics like clear spring water through a wicker basket. I taped the latest matrix of equations to the wall

behind me, joining it to fifty-three other pages—all covered top to bottom with my meticulous handwriting.

A rumbling thunder started deep beneath my feet. The papers glowed with light. My breath caught in my throat. A horde of beetles poured from cracks where the wall met the floor. They covered the warped wood in an iridescent ocean of chitinous clicking. The room shook, and I stumbled forward, thrusting my left hand towards the wall to steady myself.

My arm plunged through the paper up to my elbow, and I only saved myself from falling by grabbing the desk with my other hand. The skin on my arm tingled with goosebumps as if I'd thrust the limb into fresh snow. I shook beetles from my legs. The equations sparked and buzzed, glowing with bright incandescence. A cloud of black particles coalesced in the center of the room.

Pride swelled in my chest. Scholars much older than I had lived their whole lives without such an achievement. Katherine's haughty demeanor, and her thinly hidden disdain for my humble origins, were sure to be shaken. She'd see that I had true potential. That I deserved an honorable place in her hierarchy. Dare I think it—an offer of marriage?

I righted myself, pulling my arm free of the wall with a slippery pop. My hand felt odd. Rubbery and loose, like the bones had turned to jelly. The dark black skin of my arm had

turned purplish at the elbow, and my fingers had fused into a tentacle, long and flexible as a section of rubber tire. My heart seemed to stutter and restart. I felt like I'd been hit by a cannonball. Warped. Deformed.

The cloud of particles packed itself tighter, seeming almost solid save for a roiling of constant internal motion. A gash appeared below two hollows that resembled empty eye sockets. "I live to serve," it said. Its voice sounded like mountains moving far below the surface of the earth. "Master."

"Fix my arm." I waved the tentacle at the instantiation.

A low rumble emanated from the cloud. "Affirmative. Sever and cauterize at the elbow." Half a dozen razor-sharp blades, black as obsidian, sprouted from the form. They glinted in the light.

"No!" I pulled my arm back and took stock. I'd make a sling, wrap the tentacle up. Maybe it would recover over time. Katherine despised anything less than perfection.

The papers on the wall crisped and charred. The light dimmed. I blinked spots away from my eyes. The instantiation remained, taking a stocky humanoid shape like a black statue that had sprouted in the center of the room.

I gathered the remaining papers and books, trying to keep a semblance of control. I needed breakfast. I had to think this through. "Uh, creature. How do I refer to you?"

“However you wish.” The statue bobbed its head.

I thought for a minute. “Tynach?” It meant ‘dark man.’

“Yes, master.” Tynach drew each syllable out like taffy.

The door rattled on its hinges. “Hide,” I whispered. In an instant, Tynach’s form turned gaseous. It poured through the air into the pocket of my robe. The weight pulled the fabric tight against my shoulder. I slipped my transformed arm out of the sleeve. The tentacle rested on my belly like a sleeping fish, slippery and warm.

“This area is off-limits.” A woman my age, dressed in the blue and green of a church enforcer, shone a flash into the corners. A billy club, tangle zapper, and pair of handcuffs hung from her belt.

“Serena?” My stomach did a double flip. “You’re a believer?”

Serena flicked her flash off and hung it at her waist. “It’s a job.” Her eyes scanned the room, taking in the shreds of burnt paper hanging from the wall, the haphazard pile of open books, and the sorry state of my student robe. “You haven’t graduated yet?”

A wave of embarrassment washed over me. We’d been students together half a decade ago. We’d been fresh, young, and dedicated to solving the world’s problems. Serena had gotten a respectable associate degree. I’d struggled with

obstinate professors, experiments that should have worked, objective mathematical truths—all the while trying to find the thing, the “it” that would propel me from obscurity to fame.

I ached to tell Serena about Tynach, but church enforcers were paid to apprehend unofficial investigators of restricted arts. I gabbled at her, mouth opening and closing like a landed fish. “No, uh, I’m still ABD—all but dissertation.”

“Is this part of your project?” Serena’s gesture seemed to include my gaunt limbs and hollow eyes. “Do you have a pass?” Her voice was kind but firm.

“Well, no.” I shivered. “Actually, this was my own idea.”

“Twins’ tits, Orlen.” Serena frowned. “I should run you in.”

Hope bloomed like a ray of sunshine in my heart. “But you’ll let me go?”

Serena’s eyes narrowed. “Get the fuck outta here. I’m only doing this ‘cause I had a crush on you—way back when.” She scraped the books into a stack and staggered to the nearest shelf. “And Orlen?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t come back. Next time, I’ll impale you on a transgressor’s hook myself.”

I nodded and mumbled a heartfelt thanks. Grabbing my pack with my good hand, I scurried out the door.

* * *

Six months previously, Katherine Maria Helstrum had accosted me outside the drawing room of her family's summer estate on Lake Ash. Two bishops and a member of the council carried the Helstrom moniker, and yet the family suffered from thin blood, palsy, and mania.

Katherine snapped her fingers and commanded me to follow. She belied the Helstrum curse. Her symmetrical face was free of blemish. Her figure was voluptuous and enticing. Her black and white dress, swaths of imported silk set with hundreds of tiny freshwater pearls, swirled as she turned and strode down the hall. The ostrich feathers topping her enormous headdress brushed the ceiling.

I followed, eager to obey. I was part of a university fundraising delegation. My advisor, Scholar Fabian, talked of nothing but how the continued largess of the Helstrum family was vital to the department budget. Fabian made it clear my stipend hung by a gossamer thread.

Katherine opened a thick wooden door. She gestured me inside with an imperious wave of her hand. The estate perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the lake, and extravagant floor-to-ceiling windows allowed the clear northern light to permeate the room. Gems sparkled on Katherine's fingers. The thick pile of the rug muffled our steps.

She locked the door behind us and examined my body from curly-haired head to worn student sandals. I felt like a newly captured specimen. Her sharp blue eyes glittered. "You are in good health?"

"Excuse me?" One mistake could ruin the whole trip. "I don't understand."

"You're not slow, are you?" Katherine's fingers tapped an impatient tattoo on a side table. "Diseases. Too many toes. Bad teeth. A history of family insanity?"

"No, nothing like that." I thrust my chest out. "Strong as houses."

"Fine." Katherine's mouth quirked upwards in a momentary smile. She set her hat on the table and shook her head. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders and down her back like a liquid wave of honey.

Katherine's hands found the button at the throat of her dress, and she unstrung the tiny loop that kept it fastened. I gazed at her milk-white skin and swallowed. Katherine laughed. Her fingers flew down the front of her dress like birds, shedding waves of fabric with every motion. She stepped out of the pile of material at her feet and stood naked before me.

"Lady, uh," I stammered. Katherine's nipples crinkled in the cool air. I swelled and grew hard. My pants were far too tight.

Katherine stepped forward and placed one slim finger on my lips. "Don't speak."

* * *

Katherine met me every day until Fabian's delegation left. When I returned to school, I couldn't work. I stared thoughtlessly past people, dreaming of Katherine's snow white skin, the thicket of blond hair at her groin, the way she ran her fingers along my lips.

After three weeks with no word, I felt like exploding with frustration. I wrote pages of abysmal poetry, pouring my soul into letters that I knew I'd never send. Katherine was married. A noble from across the channel whose skin was as black as mine. It'd been the talk of the broadsheets this time last year.

But I convinced myself our love had been real. My feelings had been too strong. My ebony skin balanced her ivory whiteness, exalting our mundane connection into a spiritual oneness. We were above mere animal attraction. She knew mathematics and dimensional theory. She would slide on top of me, squeezing till I thought I'd die, poking holes in my heart and my theories.

I checked my box at school so often that the secretary threatened to report me for obsession. At night, I grew rock hard dreaming of Katherine and woke with a pain that

throbbed from my groin to the base of my brain. I spurned self-release, relishing the agony as proof of my devotion.

I stopped eating and prowled the city searching for traces of Katherine. Servants of the light Twin glommed onto me, clearly sensing my pain. They plied me with pithy homilies and simpleminded advice. I met their smarmy smiles with silence and searched out obscure waterfront taverns where they wouldn't follow.

A rumor of Katherine's imminent arrival in the city caused me to spend the remains of my stipend on a new robe, cologne, and a dozen rare, variegated black and white roses—each bloom as big as a baby's head.

The rumor was wrong. The flowers dropped their petals overnight on my bedside table. I grew thin and distant. Students fell silent as I approached, and Fabian's attitude towards me jelled into sneering impatience.

* * *

I left the shelter of the library and ventured into a steady downpour that soaked my robe in seconds. Weak gaslights cast meager puddles on the cobblestones. I adjusted my pack and glanced sideways, scanning for guards. The street seemed empty.

I hurried home with my tentacle still hidden beneath my robe. Its scaly surface felt slick, but more disturbingly, I could

feel the skin of my stomach with the tentacle. I curled my new appendage, pressing and releasing the suckers against my flesh. A sick feeling of dread settled in my bones.

With my good hand, I fingered the dead weight of the fist-sized marble that Tynach had become. The sphere seemed warm, almost hot. It prickled with electric energy. I stopped dead in the middle of an intersection and turned my pocket inside out, holding the marble above my head. There was no need to walk. I was a sorcerer now.

“Become a horse!” I threw the marble at my feet. It dissolved, and in less time than it took me to draw a breath, reformed into a glistening, jet-black stallion.

The horse turned its long head to face me. “Mount.” Its teeth looked like rows of slate tiles. Its tongue was the color of coal.

I grabbed the rough mane with my good hand. The horse’s back was slick with rain and smelled of wet ashes. “Find Katherine!” I yelled.

Tynach cantered. Stone buildings squeezed together along the street. We passed warehouses, stores closed for the night, tenements with piles of rotting garbage uncollected in the alleyways.

Tynach’s hooves clattered on the cobblestones. I hung on with desperate strength. My legs ached for stirrups. My head

seemed hollow with longing. I pictured Katherine's face when I appeared astride this manifestation. She'd gasp and put a hand to her throat. Later, her mouth would engulf me. Her skin, slick with sweat, would press against mine.

Tynach skidded around a corner and broke into a full gallop. Blasphemer's Arch loomed out of the night ahead of us. We sped along the street. Rain pounded my back. Skewered corpses hung on hooks to the left and right.

I tore my gaze from the ragged ends of exposed bone and tattered bits of cloth. If I was caught— But I refused to carry that thought further. Tynach's pace slowed. The horse sidled close to the newest body. A black-skinned woman. Her shoes had been stolen, and my heart sank at the sight of her bare feet. Crows had been at her eyes and lips. Her ears hung in shreds.

"Giddy up." I clicked my tongue.

"What was her sin?" Tynach lipped the body's feet, knocking it catywampus.

"Who knows?" I stared around. Guards patrolled here, and would be interested in anyone disturbing the display of the Dark Twin's justice.

"I'm curious." Tynach's hooves seemed glued to the street.

I stared at the placard beneath the corpse. The gaslights sputtered. Water dripped down stone. "Homosexual acts."

Tynach walked to the next body. Its hooves slammed like boulders on the stones of the road. “And him?”

“Tax evasion.” I kicked Tynach’s sides. My tentacle thrashed underneath my robe.

Tynach nudged another shoulder. He grunted a question.

“Deviant thinking.” My mouth was dry as dust.

Tynach touched a pile of severed hands with a self-assured hoof. A sleek black rat scurried out the far side.

“Pickpockets.” My patience fled and I kicked and hit the horse with abandon. “Go. I order you.”

Tynach twisted its head to face me. Smooth neck muscles flexed and slid over each other like metal plates in a precision machine. “Master.” It seemed sardonic.

“That’s right.” I kicked harder. “My word is your command.”

Tynach leered at me. “The strictures are clear. The equations must be complete. Unsullied.” Its lips curled in a sneer.

“They were perfect! I checked five times.” My heart hammered in my chest. The tentacle twitched.

Black teeth grinned. “And yet, somehow, I’m not compelled. There at the end, when you slipped?” Tynach snorted. “You’re part man, part octopus.” Steam plumed from its nostrils.

The horse melted and shifted under me. I fell to the street, banging my knee in an oily puddle. Black particles swirled in the air and then vanished around the corner in a gravity-defying cloud. I felt like a pit had opened in the cobblestones. My stomach twisted.

Lantern light swung at the far intersection. “Who goes there?”

I pushed myself to my feet. My knee throbbed. I limped away from the guard as fast as possible. Failure weighed on my brain, darker than the sky above.

Rain whipped sideways. I could picture Katherine’s haughty face, mouth curled in disdain. The guard shouted another sharp query. I limped faster.

* * *

My cramped studio smelled of stale socks and unchecked mold. Water dripped from the thin boards that made the ceiling, filling a dozen unmatched buckets. I deposited the backpack on a relatively dry section of flooring and stripped off my sodden robes.

My skin looked curdled in the dawn light that filtered through the one tiny window. Goosebumps prickled my thighs and shoulders. I scrubbed my body with a handful of damp gray towel. Hunger gnawed at my belly. I wondered what I’d released on the city. I cursed my horrible luck.

I struggled into an old pair of leggings and a stained shirt. I held my left arm stiffly out from my body, as if the aquatic skin of the tentacle might be contagious. A dirty rag made a serviceable sling that hid the deformity.

I wrung the robe out, squeezing the rough cloth one-handed over a bucket. Oil had stained the fabric. I despaired of ever getting it clean enough for Fabian.

A knock sounded on the door. “Orlen?” The thumping came again. “Damn you. I know you’re in there.”

I’d been avoiding the landlord ever since the new moon, sneaking to the library early and returning late. I didn’t have rent. Ha. I didn’t have anything. I shrugged my backpack on and pried the window open. The wet wood groaned.

“Orlen! I’ll bring the enforcers. By the Twins, I will.”

I scootched onto the roof. The wood shingles were slick with rain. I took a deep breath and removed my hand from the sill. Steel-gray clouds sealed off the sky. The sun was merely a direction. The street seemed a long way down.

My tentacle slipped free from the makeshift sling. I stretched it towards the crest of the roof and slapped it onto the shingles. The suckers held. I pulled myself to the summit, heart pounding like a drum.

The city spread beneath me. Carefully ordered streets and symmetrical parks and plazas on the genteel slopes to the west

contrasted starkly with the neighborhood of twisted lanes, haphazard warehouses, bars, and fire-trap apartments where I lived.

I crawled to the summit and then threw a leg over the other side of the roof. Lurching upright, I staggered forward, pack hitting my back with every step. Distant shouting echoed from the buildings, and the tramp of booted feet marching in unison seemed to shake the city.

I leaped to the next building, jumping a gap wider than I was tall. An outside staircase sagged from the far corner. I scampered down. I relived the moment when I'd slipped and my arm had plunged through the wall. I could see Tynach's horsey mouth, teeth like doors. If only I'd kept my balance. If only I hadn't been so tired.

Early morning workers trickled into the streets. A garbage cart pulled by two swayback horses in blinders rattled by. The reek of rotting food lingered in the air. I stumbled after the cart, unclear what direction to travel but needing to move. Maybe when the university opened, I could sell a textbook and get a cup of coffee.

Shouting filled the streets ahead of me. A squad of guards quickstepped past, muskets at the ready. I turned the corner to Blasphemers' Arch and stopped dead in my tracks.

Jet-black hooks covered the carved stone blocks. Bodies hung from every hook. Some twitched and sobbed and scrabbled at the stone. Others dripped dark blood that looked black in the light. Most were already dead. The wind shifted and brought the raw-meat smell of a butchery to my nose.

I turned and retched in a doorway. My empty stomach twisted and clenched. Thin bile spilled onto the steps at my feet. More guards pushed down the street, herding civilians away from the Arch.

A thick-shouldered soldier grabbed my arm. “Stand back. Official business.”

I let myself be dragged away. “What happened?” I asked, but I felt sure I knew the answer.

The guard grunted. “A dark manifestation. Now get outta here.” He shoved me up the street and took position next to his squad mates, blocking access to the Arch.

A bone-chilling scream erupted from around the corner. The line of guards flinched but held their positions. My stomach twisted again, but I resisted throwing up. The crowd swirled around me.

A man stumbled into my back and knocked me to the wet ground. My injured knee hit a cobblestone. I gasped for breath. Boots clomped past, missing my head by less than a handspan.

I curled tighter. For a long moment, I wanted nothing more than to be trampled to death.

The crowd kicked and trod on me without mercy, but I found the determination to crawl to the side, discovered an eddy in the flow, and took a deep breath. I pushed myself to my feet. The brick walls felt ragged as unshaped rock under my palm. Shouts and the sounds of running feet battered my ears.

A shriek of pain, louder than the rest, startled me. An older white woman had been pushed to the ground. Her hat flew from her head and was lost. I imagined her bones cracking under the boots of the panicked crowd. Without thinking, I thrust my body into the press of people. I used my elbow and fist. I head-butted. I forged a path.

“Ma’am.” I grabbed the woman’s shoulder and dragged her to safety.

After a few minutes, the street cleared. The line of guards had stopped at the corner. They seemed agitated, looking right and left. They fingered their muskets like good-luck charms. The woman touched my cheek. Her lined face broke into a relieved smile. “Thank you, young man.” She patted her hair and slipped into the street.

I tried to gather my fleeting wits. I had been such a fool. A blind, prideful, arrogant fool. People were dying because of me. Because I wanted Katherine’s body.

I shuffled forward, head bowed. A rare glint of sunlight made the street sparkle like bright white diamonds had been scattered at my feet. I shouldered the pack. The library would be open. I could rework the magic. Restore the rightful order.

* * *

The library, however, was closed to the general public due to the emergency. I met the blank stares of a pair of guards and drew myself up. “I demand entry!”

The older guard, a man in his mid forties, narrowed his eyes at me. “Run along sonny. You’re not even a student.”

“I have Important Business.” I cursed under my breath. “My robes were dirty.”

“Go on,” the other guard spoke. “You heard the man.” He slapped a nightstick into his palm with a heavy, meaty sound.

I backed down. The library was a huge building. Maybe another entrance wouldn’t be guarded. I jogged around the corner, feeling the gaze of the guards on my back as if a target had been painted there.

Serena stood with another guard at the side entrance. Her eyes widened when she saw me, but she didn’t say anything.

I approached and gave a slight bow. “Ma’am.” I addressed Serena. “I have an important message for Scholar Fabian.”

Serena glared at me. “Do you—”

I cut her off. “I must see him in person.”

The other guard grunted from his perch on the side railing. “You escort him. I’ll hold down the fort here.” He spit a stream of brown tobacco juice into the bushes.

Serena grabbed my upper arm. “Understood.” She yanked me into the echoing gloom of the library. “This better be good,” she hissed.

“It’s all my fault.” I poured out the whole story to Serena, gabbling in sentence fragments and interrupting myself with remembered details.

Serena’s eyes narrowed with each new revelation. She shook me the way a dog would shake a rat. “I should—I—arrrrghh.”

“I can fix it.” I felt a swell of confidence. “I still have the equations.” I scabbled in my pack and removed a sodden mass of half-burned papers.

“I’m going to turn you in.”

“Give me a chance.” I fell to my knees. “You’ll hang right next to me when they learn the whole story.”

“Twin’s balls!” Serena jerked me to my feet. “You bastard. I ought to—” She whipped her billy club sideways into my head.

“Ouch!” My left arm slipped. I slapped the tentacle to my temple.

Serena recoiled. “Abomination.”

My head rang with pain. I probed the tender lump with the sensitive cilia at the tip of my tentacle. "I made a mistake. But I can fix it."

"Some mistake." Serena's gaze bored into my eyes. "How many people have died? How many families are mourning a new transgressor?"

Guilt surged inside me. "I know."

"Real justice would have you on the hook." She spat at my feet. "And you have the nerve to threaten me."

She was right. I'd fucked up. My own stupid pride.

"You're absolutely correct." I hung my head. "I can fix it faster than anyone else. If you turn me in now, it'd take days for someone to replicate my work. Days of more people killed. More transgressors."

Serena grabbed my shoulders and shook me again. "I *should* turn you in. Right now. Let a Scholar decide what to do."

I caught my breath. "There's not much time." I stood tall. Hope beat a staccato rhythm in my chest.

Serena narrowed her eyes. "All right. But one more spanner in the works, Orlen, and I swear I'll drag you to a tribunal so fast your head will spin."

I nodded and led Serena through the musty shelves of the great library. Whenever we heard voices, we waited, hiding and

spying our way clear. We ducked through the last passageway. I eased open the door to my room.

The space seemed smaller than I remembered. The books on their shelves looked old and decrepit. Mold stained one wall. The smell of smoke tickled the back of my throat.

I arranged my work on the desk and asked Serena to gather as many blank pages from the shelved books as she could find. She tore the paper from the spines with a determined abandon, stacking sheet after sheet next to me.

I scribbled madly, checking my equations in books spread open on every surface. I'd take the inverse of the summoning field and close the singularities with Penrose tessellations. My tentacle brushed Serena. She snarled. I tucked the offending appendage under my shirt.

After what seemed like an age, I planted my feet and taped the last sheet of paper to the wall. I was determined to keep my balance this time. Bright white light speared through the pages, throwing the room into stark relief. Serena caught my good hand and squeezed.

The light pulsed and flashed. Snow fell from the ceiling, great white flakes that landed on my skin with sharp prickles. A glorious, winged figure erupted from the center of the room.

The closest bookshelf toppled sideways with a crash, nearly hitting Serena. Books scattered pell-mell across the floor.

A woman made of light, dressed in folds and swaths of brilliance, smiled at us. "Thank you. My brother has been busy." She touched my shoulder. "You may breathe."

Air whooshed out of me. I nodded and started to talk, but the woman lifted her arms and stretched towards the ceiling. She swelled and grew. Great waves of light pulsed out of her body. My eyes stung. I let go of Serena to shield my face.

The woman crouched, shoulders pressed into the plaster above her. A bookshelf scraped sideways against the floor. She stood, and in one smooth motion, slipped through the mundane material of the ceiling. I blinked in the relative darkness.

Serena laughed. Her eyes sparkled with transparent joy. "Did you see—"

I nodded. "She was gorgeous."

"Let's go to the roof. I want to watch her." Serena grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the door. Her earlier anger with me seemed forgotten.

We raced through the stacks towards a stairway Serena knew. Sliding around a corner, we nearly smacked head-on

into a guard. He stood, transfixed in our path, staring at a row of sunflowers that had sprouted from the floor.

“She’s so beautiful.” The guard seemed stunned, like he’d been clubbed in the back of the head.

“Come on, Orlen.” Serena plastered a smile on her face. We sidled past the guard. Other checkpoints were deserted, and I could hear off-key singing down the Scholars’ hallway.

The cramped stairway twisted up and up, winding around a central tower like an ivy vine. Tiny windows of wavy glass allowed thin light to illuminate our progress. I huffed and panted, my breath burning in my chest. Serena drew ahead, and soon I could no longer see her, just hear her boots on the treads.

The light surged. I blinked spots from my eyes. A collective wave of sound from outside rattled through the building. At the top of the stairs, I threw the door open.

Serena stood on the flat roof of a tower no larger than my studio apartment. Wind pulled at her hair. “Orlen.” Her voice carried the crack of authority. “She’s at the docks.”

I joined Serena at the railing, careful not to look straight down. A line of green maple trees, bursting with out-of-season leaves, ran from the library to the docks. Their branches thrust skyward even as I watched. Brilliant yellow and orange flowers dotted the roofs along the path.

People wandered half-clothed in the streets, talking with dogs or scattering petals on their neighbors. One couple made love in an alleyway. An abandoned oxcart full of radishes had jack-knifed in a side street and the poor animals lowed and stamped in their yokes.

“Orlen.” A dark voice sounded from the stairs.

I spun around. “Tynach.”

Tynach’s black visage split open in a terrible smile. He kept his hands behind his back and stepped onto the tower roof. “I have something for you.”

Serena stepped forward. “What are you up to?” Her voice cracked, but I admired her spirit.

Tynach cocked his head. “Serena Blackomb.” He seemed to consult an internal store of knowledge. “Four counts of shoplifting. You liked to play with matches, too. No one ever solved the mystery of the burned barn, did they?” The planes and angles of Tynach’s face seemed to swallow the light.

Serena swallowed. “No one got hurt.”

Tynach’s smile expanded. “True, true. There’ll be time to weigh the balance later. I have a present for Orlen now.” He drew his arms forward. “I found her. Master.” Clutched in Tynach’s unbreakable grip, Katherine glared at me.

“Katherine?” My heart clogged my throat.

A fist-sized clump of hair at the apex of Katherine's skull was missing. Filth streaked her gown. A purple bruise marred her cheek. She drew herself upright and pushed her swollen belly towards me. "You." Her voice dripped contempt.

I felt like the stones beneath my feet had turned to thin air. "Katherine?" I tottered forward and then retreated. "You're preg—going to have a—"

"An adulteress," Tynach rumbled. "I have special hooks for those."

My resolve hardened. "No." In an instant, I realized that I didn't want Katherine any more. She'd used me, clearly never seeing me as more than a convenient means to an end. A young black buck. Even so, she didn't deserve a hook. No one did.

"What under the Twin's gaze is going on here?" Fabian strode onto the roof, drawing his eyebrows together and glaring at me over the beak of his nose.

The sky pulsed and flashed. Snow fell from the clouds. A horde of black beetles erupted from every crevice and seethed across the floor.

The woman made of light settled to the stone in front of Tynach. Glowing wings folded themselves into her back. "Thank you, Orlen. It is time."

I started to say something, but the woman lifted her arm and reached towards Tynach. He smiled, too. A grim smile, but understanding. Their hands touched.

The two forms melded and became one, flickering through shapes and colors faster than I could comprehend. The new being expanded and grew larger and yet more insubstantial at the same time. In a moment, it had disappeared.

I sagged to the roof, sitting on the wet surface, not caring how the water soaked my clothes. “We did it.”

Fabian’s pinched expression took on a glimmer of respect. “That was a class three manifestation that you canceled out, boy.”

Serena punched my shoulder. “What were you thinking?” She sounded fierce, but her relieved smile took the sting out of her words.

Katherine sputtered in the corner and then burst into tears. Fabian bowed his head towards her. “Mrs. Helstrom. Allow me to escort you home?” He extended a gaunt elbow but turned to speak to me. “We’ll talk later. There may be promise for you, after all.”

After they left, I stood. I thought about the wrecked shelves below, the torn books, the scattered papers. I started down the stairs. On the main floor, a librarian sobbed and

clutched at a trampled book. Serena followed me through the stacks.

Back in the room, I stared at the destruction I had caused. “I should clean this mess.” I tipped the shelves upright one-handed and started stacking books. The heavy tomes slipped solidly into place. The snow had evaporated without leaving a trace, and the air smelled as clean as a summer morning.

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THE SWALLOW AND THE SEA

by E. Catherine Tobler

‘Twas Abigail Goodwin who saw beyond the pirate of me, to the man, and loved me for that and disregarded the ill I’d done; so ‘twas me who saw beyond the folly of her and promised to carry her dead body to the swirling depths of Scylla.

Abigail meant to kill herself that night, and if the leap from the rain-slick stone tower of her home didn’t do it well enough, surely the cold depth of the sea would. I watched her pace at the top of that tower, back and forth before one weak torch, and took another pull on the wine bottle. My vision blurred under the blowing rain; the wine took it a step further.

I dropped the bottle to the bottom of the dinghy and wished for Abigail to be finished, for this terrible night to end. Let her muster the strength and do it soon—though now her heart still beat. If I meant to betray the promise I’d made her, the time was now.

The only movement I made was back to the wine bottle. The wine was cheap, but it warmed me. Around the dinghy, the sea bounced and flecked me with cold spit; somewhere in that

cold splatter, I found a measure of calm. I looked back up to see the flutter of Abigail's gown against the storm. She looked like a pale wing as she plunged with a speed that made my heart skip.

She vanished without a sound, under the dark choppy waters. I dropped the wine bottle and grasped the oars, pulling as hard as I could with wet hands. When I reached the point where I'd lost sight of her, I jumped overboard into the black sea. I'd promised.

Like a great creature, Abigail floated in the murky water, pale skin almost iridescent in the dark. Her gown enveloped her, massive blooms of linen, silk, whatever it was ladies wore these days. I struggled to get a hold of any part of it. I came up with a foot, with a shoe that slipped off in my fingers. I gave it up to the seafloor and lunged for her foot again.

I swam down Abigail's inverted body, and when at last I held her around her nipped waist—ah, she'd worn her corset to the last!—swam upward. My lungs burned and bubbles of escaping breath blinded me until at last we broke through the surface. The hardening rain pelted us.

"Ah, Abigail, curses on you." I cradled her against me and prayed that she would lift her head, that her brown eyes would look once more into mine, but she floated limp in my grasp, her

dark blonde hair trailing like weeds around in the water. “More the fool I, for saying yes.”

I swam us back to the longboat, hauling Abigail’s sodden body aboard after my own. I lay panting and closed my eyes to the rain, allowing it and the motion of the dinghy to carry me to another place, a green meadow where Abigail had kissed me for the first time. Some part of her had tasted of ocean water even then.

“I trust only you,” she had said, and held my hands as she told me the truth of her life. She was not human and could no longer live as such.

“You feel human enough.” I said it then and now both as I eased her cold body off mine; Abigail curled into the bottom of the boat, with the wine bottle, the oars, and the slop of the storm. She had hit her head on something, for blood darkened her temple. Her hands were folded against her chest, like long, pale gloves that had lost their buttons. I traced the line of her hand around her wrist, loosened a strand of black seaweed, and touched her palm where I would have sworn to heaven that I felt a pulse.

“Danziger!”

I jerked my hand back at the sound of a hoarse cry from the tower. Through the stinging rain, I saw a figure, but not clearly; still, it was Lewis Goodwin’s voice—Abigail’s brother

cursing me as I fumbled for the oars and made away with his sister.

Lewis wouldn't have time to reach his ship and muster the crew, but still I rowed as though the devil were on my back. Rain and sweat mingled to make the oars slick in my hands. I looked down at Abigail's still face, cursing her even as I wished to kiss her. I fancied that her eyes opened, so blinked and looked away into the storm. Its wrath was more calming than Abigail's stillness.

The *Swallow* was anchored off the point, mostly empty as the rest of the crew was in port, whoring and spending the gold they'd been paid. Poor Hilary would be below decks, reaching for a leg he'd never feel again except in memory. Doc would be there with him, but otherwise, I prayed my path clear.

I wrapped and tied a sodden length of rope around Abigail's waist and crawled my way up the rope ladder with the loose end in my hand. My boots slipped against the *Swallow*, rain and wind combining to force me over the rail and to the deck with a sob. The rope snapped out of my hands, too short, and I snatched its end before it flew over the rail.

Inch by inch I hauled Abigail upward. From below decks Hilary shrieked every so often. Why couldn't Doc give him more rum and shut him up? Sadly, I grew accustomed to the

shrieks, and by the time I'd hauled Abigail over the rail no longer heard them.

I sat there for a long moment, hoping that perhaps the storm would keep the crew in port overnight. Where was I to put Abigail? How did I mean to keep her hidden until we reached the strait where Scylla lurked?

Reaching the strait had once been my worry, but no more. Even if Arthur the trader wouldn't buy the egg-sized opal Captain Dodd had lifted from Lady Wellington (and we knew Arthur would, for rarely could he resist something shiny), Dodd's arrogance would take us to the strait. He wanted to say that he'd challenged Scylla—and won.

"I trust only you."

I looked down at Abigail, who looked up at me. Her eyes were wet from her time in the water, from the rain that doused us, perhaps from tears. Could a dead woman cry? My breath caught in my throat as Abigail raised a hand and wiped the blood off her temple. She wiped her hand clean on her bodice, then she touched my cheek.

At the touch of her fingertips, I recoiled. I dropped her and stumbled across the deck to the nearest mast, as wide as three men bound together. I felt no safer behind its bulk. Abigail frowned at me.

"Jakob." She reached for me.

Could a dead woman speak? I fumbled for the cross around my neck and held it up to ward her off. Rather than come closer, Abigail pressed herself to the rail. Water pooled around her skirts.

“Only you can get me there,” she said through her wet, blue lips. “Only you, Jakob.”

Dead or not, she remained my Abigail, and I’d made a promise to get her to Scylla. I nodded but did not move. My Abigail, my promise. I knew these things but could not make myself move until I heard the arrival of another dinghy—a dinghy filled with drunken men.

“Jakob,” Abigail whispered. “Take me below, to your trunk.”

I grasped Abigail’s hands in mine—hers seeming so warm when compared to my own, steady and sure whereas I felt loose like a falling sail. I bundled the rope which wound round Abigail’s waist and ran with her—oh, she ran, on her pale and bluing feet, twisted with seaweed, with but one shoe, below decks with me into the stench of those small, close spaces.

I had a small trunk, but it was large enough to hold Abigail. I fumbled with the latches, with the broken and rusted lock—what a time to regret breaking that in a fit of anger these long months ago—and watched as Abigail climbed of her own accord into the small space. She tossed out my clothing and

climbed in, and I tossed my clothes back in atop her. Hidden beneath my blue shirt and faded trousers, my dead Abigail smiled up at me. She reached for the latch to close the trunk just as the first of the crew came back below.

They smelled like the taverns and whorehouses where they'd spent their money, sodden with liquor and perfume, and these things they trailed to their hammocks, to lie in them a while longer. They brought with them a yapping dog the color of Abigail's gown, its face seeming splashed with black ink. It immediately set to sniffing every crevice it could find and yapping at shadows.

I lowered myself to sit on the trunk as Paddy O'Neill came closer and gestured with a meaty hand at the dog. The scent of rum curled through the air along with the hand, a new tattoo of a duck rippling on his forearm.

"e's a temple dog, aye? Made to roust the demons and tear 'em a-ssunder."

I didn't want the dog rousting my demon and nudged its wet black nose away from my trunk. The dog didn't like the taste of my boot and growled at me. "New ink?"

"Ah!" Paddy slapped the tattoo, reddening the skin a little more. "The talents of lovely mistress Lorelai—at least one of them, aye?"

Paddy slapped my shoulder then fell back into his hammock, where he rocked and soon began to snore, as he did nightly. Often the snores were accompanied by remembrances of a sweet girl he'd left back in Ireland and the sour things he loved to do to her. I wanted to stuff Abigail's ears with linen so she wouldn't hear.

Instead, I closed the latch as well as it could be closed and fell back into my own fabric. I lay awake the night through, imagining that I heard Abigail singing. Distant and pleasing, like a shooting star across the night sky, her voice guided me toward a shore I still could not see.

Dawn found me on deck with a handful of other early risers. Finch and I made neat stitches through sailcloth, a continuing effort to complete another sail so that we might have a replacement for the one the winds currently shredded.

Finch was young, seven maybe eight, and had been sold into the captain's service by his parents. He couldn't remember a life lived on land. Couldn't remember his real name, for that. His hands were as worn as any man's here, callused and scraped; his skin no longer burned but had acquired the deep color of a man at sea.

I could remember my parents—my father himself a sailor, my mother always in the crook of his sun-bronzed arm. They'd

raised me to the sea, and I wondered if it was worse to have that memory or have none as Finch did.

We raced with our needles, quick and neat, but Finch always bested me—until today. His stitches were slow, his eyes focused on something else. I followed his gaze across the deck, to the horizon over the rail, and saw it. A ship. It looked like a jagged black rip in the sunrise.

“How long’s it been there?” I asked in a whisper.

Finch watched the ship and stitched. He shrugged his thin shoulders. “Don’t know. Looks English.”

I couldn’t see a flag from this distance, but Finch didn’t need even that much to go on. He never used a spyglass; he liked using his sharp eyes to view the world from the crow’s nest. Being up there made me want to throw up.

Of course the ship would be English. I stabbed my needle through the sailcloth and stood, squinting to get a better look. It still looked like a black line against the orange horizon.

“Moving fast,” Finch said. “Could have letters against us.”

Lewis Goodwin could have letters of marque, I thought. He’d had the night to see them signed and sealed. If Lewis suspected I had Abigail—dead or alive—he would stop at nothing to get her back. Though I loved Abigail, her family loathed me.

“Did ye see her then?”

“Just a wisp of a dress, movin’ in the night.”

I turned from the sight of Lewis’s ship to the group of men who passed behind me.

“There’s a lass on board,” Gerald whispered to me, as if sharing a dreadful secret. “Dead, but walking.”

“Dead?” I asked.

“Lass?” Finch asked, his voice rising.

“Aye, she has a pale gown, her skin like the drowned sea.” Gerald winked at me, as if I would know what he meant.

“All hands!”

Captain Dodd barked orders from the quarterdeck. As they always did for him, the crew flew into motion and by Dodd’s command turned the *Swallow* upwind. With all her sails loosed, she caught the rising dawn wind and cut through the swells. This alarmed the few seabirds that had taken their leisure upon one of the masts. The same mast I’d clung to when Abigail had spoken to me.

Had she? Was she now wandering the ship, allowing the crew glimpses of herself? I couldn’t allow myself the time to truly think on it, alive as the deck was with men eager to escape English capture.

“Why’s they comin’ now?” Gerald wondered aloud as the *Swallow* stretched the length of sea between us and Lewis—if it were Lewis. Who else could it be?

“Ain’t no cause!” Finch cried and threw his small fist into the air. “Ain’t no—” He broke off as he caught sight of the strand of pearls Jasper Kay had hung around his neck. “Ye crimp those seeds from an English lady, man?”

“I think she were Dutch,” Jasper said, which drew a roar from the men gathered round us.

I didn’t care what she was; if that ship was English, the odds were firm that it was Lewis Goodwin who captained her. The *Rosemary* was a fine vessel; if the *Swallow* faltered once, she would soon be overcome.

But the *Swallow* was ever swift and fled eastward, closer to the whirlpool that I would throw Abigail into. How I would manage that was beyond me; it was one step at a time, and all the deck stretched before me was slick with Abigail’s blood.

No one missed me when I stepped away, below decks to check on Abigail. Paddy’s rat of a dog sat near the trunk and I shooed it away. With a yap, the beast settled a few steps away, his beady eyes following my every motion.

I eased the lid of the trunk open. The stench of the deepest ocean rolled out, dank, muddy, black. I peered in at Abigail who lay just as I’d placed her the night before, under my crumpled clothes. Her blood had darkened in her veins, leaving charcoal tracings beneath her white skin. Over this, the blood from her temple wound had dried in blackened streams across

her face, down her throat. These lines crisscrossed like guides on a map, but I couldn't make sense of the directions.

I held my breath as I reached a hand in and touched Abigail's cheek. She was chilled and did not stir. I exhaled and slid my fingers down her arm, discovering something slim and pale in her hand. I thought it was an eel, but as I took hold of it found it hard. I pulled it free. 'Twas the bit of scrimshaw whale rib I'd gifted her with before my leaving. She kept it in her busk, liking to say that it was my touch kept her spine straight.

The little dog ran to my side and snatched the bone from my hand. The foul beast skittered away with it, and I chased him, under and over hammocks, around other trunks and casks of rum and water. When I had him backed into a corner, he growled and spit around the bone and refused to give way when I'd grasped the other end. He shook the bone hard but I held firm.

"Little demon dog," Abigail said.

The dog shrieked and released the bone. He fled between my legs and vanished into still-swaying hammocks. I turned, but didn't see Abigail anywhere.

The story on the whale rib was given to me by my mother. It was the story of a woman who never felt herself part of this world, called by monsters she could not see but could feel in the bloody marrow of her bones. When the wind blew, they

tugged upon her sleeves; when she swallowed, she could taste them—brackish. When she slept, they would curl beside her, and sometimes snore.

My mother said it was her own story, then softly laughed and said the monster in her bed was Father, and that I should never mind. But I watched her move through her days and felt something distinctly not human about her.

When pirates slaughtered her and my father, her blood was red, her bones white; human enough, until the pirates threw them from the deck. The water came alive at the taste of blood; it boiled and threw the ship on its side. I would have drowned in those waters but for the tentacle that slithered around me and tossed me up on land. A thin strip of sand served as my home for three days, a hairbrush and a doll without a face my only companions until other pirates found me and took me in.

“You think I’ve claimed her story for my own, don’t you? You doubt me,” Abigail said.

Her hand covered mine, covered the whale rib until I could only see the tangle of our fingers. I wanted to look at her, but didn’t dare.

“I’ve never felt right, Jakob, never, until you came along.” Abigail’s fingers slid between mine. “Don’t you feel it inside *you*? The reach of your mother even now? The sea, Jakob.”

I tried to pull my hand free, but Abigail wouldn't let me go. She wound herself round me and it seemed she had tentacles then rather than arms and legs. Any man on board this ship would welcome her consumption, but I was filled with the need to run, to jump overboard and give myself to the sea. At the touch of Abigail's saltwater mouth, I felt relief.

"You were born with the sea inside you," she whispered against my mouth, her fingers like anemone tentacles as they pulled the sea from me. It was warmth and water between she and me; I swallowed her and she swallowed me, and in this way we passed from Atlantic waters into Mediterranean.

The *Rosemary* chased us across the day and on through the night. She made up some distance between us, but still the *Swallow* kept her lead. Scylla lay somewhere between Sicily and Calabria, so said our maps; we followed them as though they were gospel.

And still the men talked of seeing a woman walking the decks. They said she invaded their dreams, wriggling down into their hammocks the way water could trickle into a collar. I could taste that water; the slip of Abigail's mouth against mine. Did these men know that taste? How dare they.

I sat up nights, waiting for Abigail to emerge on her small blue feet, but always found myself asleep come dawn, having missed her wandering. When I was able, I opened my trunk to

look down on her and found her as I had left her. She remained wet; seemed sleeping.

Paddy's small dog continued to nose around the trunk, scratching and whining and worrying at one corner with his teeth. He'd done a good job on the wood, leaving deep bite marks as he sought what it contained. Seawater pooled around the trunk now, the dog leaving wet footprints as he scampered out of my hands.

I grasped him by the scruff of his neck and hauled him against my chest, surprised by the fight in his compact body, surprised by the weight. He growled and strained against my hold, teeth snapping at my hands. He caught one of my fingers, blood bright against his chops.

I ran with the dog to the upper deck and swung him out over the rail, meaning to drop him into the sea. 'Twas Finch who caught me and pulled me back.

"What're ye thinking?" he cried. He ripped the dog out of my hands and dropped him to the deck, where he struggled to find his feet before scampering into the shadow of a rum cask.

I sank to the deck and buried my face in my trembling, bleeding hands. What *was* I thinking? I had always liked dogs, had lived with one for a time, but this one threatened the secret of Abigail. No one could know. I glanced at the few crew about

the deck; they didn't mind me or my misery—they were too wrapped within their own.

“This about the lass in yer trunk?” Finch asked.

I stared at him and said nothing. His dirt-brown eyes met mine easily. We'd known each other for years, this boy and I, and I saw no malice. But I did see wheels turning; this boy was no boy; he'd been raised by pirates. If he knew about Abigail, he meant to use that to his advantage.

Finch sat beside me and exhaled. “She walks ‘round at night, leaving her wet footsteps all over. Slipped in my hammock to make herself warm-like and let me have a taste of her. Thought it was all a dream, except I never dream, and the others started talking about her too, aye?”

“Finch—”

“Gets even stranger, then.” Finch thought for a moment, his small teeth chewing at his thumbnail. “A man comes to me, a man not of this crew, tells me he's after the lass and he'll pay me whatever I ask if I help him. And then just like the lass, he's gone. They come and go like the wind, Jakob.” He spat his thumbnail onto the deck. He laughed, a dark coarse sound that no one so young should make, but whatever boy had been inside Finch's body was long gone. “Pay me whatever I ask.”

My heart raced in my chest. “What did you ask him then?” From below decks, I heard Hilary cry out again; I pictured him

reaching for his leg, his leg that had rotted and was thrown to the sharks. Wouldn't he ever stop screaming, reaching?

Finch shook his head. "As I figure, it's none of my business, save for lasses cursing the ships, ye know. It ain't right, her being on board like that. Even if she is dead. Makes it worse, her being dead, don't it?"

Abigail being dead made everything worse. The skies were darker, no matter the sun standing in them; the nights endless and plagued with demons.

"I just want her off this ship, and if ye take her or he does, doesn't much matter. Could be Davy Jones for all I care."

"I made a promise," I said.

Would Finch understand that? We men of the sea often went back on our words, no matter how well we meant them when first spoken. We tried to stay true to those we crewed with, but we often failed—as I'd failed, by bringing the *Swallow* toward her doom, even as I brought Abigail closer to — To what?

"Aye." Finch looked across the deck, then back to me. "Ye mean to throw her into Scylla?"

I looked at the boy sharply. "What do you—"

"It's a legend, aye? A dead lass thrown into Scylla's mouth, given new life." Finch spat another fingernail onto the deck,

then scrubbed his hand across his trouser leg. “But it’s the wrong kind of life. She won’t be yers after that.”

I shook my head and raked my hair out of my eyes. “It’s not that. I don’t want her back.”

But didn’t I? To feel the warmth of her hand again; to know her kiss. If I could have these things again, what wouldn’t I give? But these things had never been rightfully hers—hadn’t she told me such, when she claimed she was not human? No flesh, no bone, not as any land-living beast knew it. Her warmth and kiss were illusions.

“*He* wants her back,” Finch said.

I shifted on the deck, got to my feet and began to pace. He who? Was this man of Finch’s all a dream? Or was Lewis among the crew? Had he somehow come aboard? My eyes searched the men who spotted the deck, counting those who came up from below as the captain called for them. The air had filled with salt and spit, and in the distance I felt rather than heard Scylla.

From my side, Finch asked, “Do ye think the captain will risk the *Swallow* in the end? Only t’sell a shiny stone?”

I smiled at Finch through my tears. “It’s not just the stone. He wants to test the *Swallow* against Scylla. Imagine the tales he’ll tell.”

We'd all seen the captain, nipperkin in hand, bewitching a tavern audience with stories of the sea. This one would bring him glory and coin both. What captain wouldn't want to say he went up against Scylla, and won? Winning was the trick.

"Imagine the tale after this," said a new, rough voice.

Finch and I spun as one, to look upon Lewis Goodwin who sat on the deck, leaning against the rum cask the dog had hidden beside. There was no sign of that dog now, but Lewis had a smudge of blood against his mouth, as if he'd bitten my fingers.

"Aye, that's the rich man," Finch said.

"Or maybe not a man at all," I said, for if Abigail weren't human, whyever would her brother be such?

Lewis laughed at that and charged me. He drew a knife and pressed it to my throat before I could slip away. He didn't feel at all human beneath his officer's jacket, if it were a jacket at all. What matter fashioned him? Was he like Abigail, water and salt formed into whatever they fancied? His hands, if they were hands, spread a chill across my skin. Under his touch, small rivers of ice crisscrossed my neck, frozen seawater cracking against my skin, running down into my shirt.

The deckside crew hollered, Finch loudest of all, but Lewis only laughed again.

“Now, scream again all of you and I’ll slice him through. He’s plenty of blood to spill.”

The cool knife bit into my skin even now. I raised a hand to warn Finch back, feeling the ice creep its way up my cheek, around my eye. So cold. Could Lewis encase me in ice?

“Where’s Abigail?” Lewis gave me a shake and the knife went a little deeper. “What have you done with her?”

“I’m here, Lewis.”

‘Twas Abigail who answered her brother, standing some way across the deck. It sounded like the entire crew took a collective breath at the sight of her. Water streamed from her now ill-fitting gown. It seemed as though she was coming apart, becoming water as she crossed to us. She flooded the deck. As Lewis was ice, Abigail was water, her skin and gown running with it. Through corset and skirt, it drenched her. So, too, the deck and anyone close enough.

Lewis avoided that flood. He stepped backward and kept me with him, as though he were afraid of the water. Afraid of Abigail. I blinked, and frost fell from my lashes.

“Come with me, Abigail,” Lewis said and let me go. Instantly, I felt the ice begin to melt away, seawater now beading on my skin.

Lewis overcame his fear enough to approach Abigail, but he did not touch her. In his eyes, I discovered a familiar ache; he wanted Abigail as much as I did but could not have her.

“Lewis, don’t touch me,” Abigail said.

But rather than step away from the water that cascaded from her skirts, Lewis now stepped forward. He lunged for Abigail, and everywhere his hands caught her, Abigail’s water turned to ice. The wet layers of her skirts began to solidify, the pale fabric freezing to the deck. The ice crept up her fingers, her arms, froze the dark blonde curls of her hair in midair. The ice traced every bit of Abigail that Lewis longed for but could never truly claim.

I looked for something I might strike him with, anything to get him away from her. *Mine, not his!*, my mind cried, and even though I had only my hands with which to hit him, I moved forward. Still, every step closer sent ice crackling over my shoes, and it was Finch who pulled me back, saving me from the cold.

With a shriek that seemed like a knife in my own heart, Abigail twisted away from Lewis. Ice sheeted off her like a broken glacier, spinning over the deck. Lewis collapsed to the deck, reaching for her but never touching her again.

“Abigail, please!”

Lewis's bark was nearly lost as the ship rocked. The deck listed to port and a terrible sound now rose to engulf us—the roar of living water, a hungry beast that would devour us all. The crew seemed torn between staring at Abigail and Lewis and rushing to save the *Swallow* from Scylla.

“She’s dead, aye?” I heard Finch say to Lewis. “Ye can’t do for her now.”

“He never could have,” I said and touched Finch’s shoulder before I left him and crept toward Abigail. She clung to the ship’s rail in her tattered skirts. Water streamed from ice-made cuts, not blood. She hovered on the edge of something else, something I too felt in my gut. It was the call of home, the reach of a hand we hadn’t known in years.

Ahead in the waters, Scylla churned, fountains of water coiling from her depths. Under the moon’s glow, she was beautiful, a great spinning wheel that could crush the ship whole. I heard her voice, calling us, a low murmur in my bones, bones that Scylla seemed ready to carve new stories into. I squeezed Abigail’s hand and felt the rush of water between our palms.

“Get her away,” Finch said to me. “Get that demon off this ship.”

Demon, woman, I didn't think it made much difference to him. I clasped Abigail by the arm and ran for the dinghy. The entire deck seemed crooked as Abigail and I stumbled.

"Finch—" I looked back at him. He had drawn his pistol and aimed it at my head.

"I'll get the dink down," he said.

His voice was as cool as Lewis' touch had been, remote and older than his apparent years. I had never seen Finch with a weapon drawn, but had no doubt he would use it well. He wouldn't miss, not with those sharp eyes of his.

"No!" Lewis cried, still reaching for us. His fingers were coated in ice. "Danziger—you can't!"

But it was Lewis who couldn't. As water had flowed from Abigail, now ice flowed from Lewis, his constructed body giving way to his natural form. Ice ran in a thin layer from his fingers, up his arms and around his torso. He turned away from us before the ice fully devoured him and leapt from the *Swallow's* rail, into the raging sea.

Abigail and I climbed into the dinghy, and Finch lowered us into the uneven water. The little dinghy stood no chance against the stormy sea. It pitched violently and I toppled overboard, into the head-seas before the *Swallow*.

At my touch, the sea quieted. It was like kissing Abigail; I felt great relief as the water closed around me. It was warm and salty all at once, and I floated as if I might float forever.

“Feel her, Jakob!” Abigail called above the storm. “You’ve calmed her.”

It was torture to leave the water, but I doubted my ability to swim the distance to Scylla and hauled myself back into the dink. I blinked water out of my eyes and reached for the oars.

Every stroke that took us from the safety of the *Swallow* took us closer to Scylla. The sea grew choppy again and rain began to pelt us. Abigail didn’t seem to care. She grabbed one of the oars from me and took on half the work, her hands growing dark under the strain. What skin she’d made around herself had shredded, and I saw now that it wasn’t blood that ran in her veins but water. Blackened water dripped from the oar handle by the time we reached Scylla’s edge.

There, it seemed as though Scylla had the dinghy on a line. She smoothly pulled us in. We traveled round and round, and I caught sight of the *Swallow* farther out, struggling to escape Scylla’s grasp. She was listing again, though her sails were fully rounded in the now-howling wind. The *Rosemary* had perished, shattered timbers tossed in the whitecaps.

Abigail put a hand to the water as did I, but her touch didn't calm the sea the way mine had earlier. Rather, Scylla reached up for us and grabbed, pulling us down and under.

If he's a reasonable man, every sailor on the sea fears drowning. The sea is a beast, something eternally wild. Caught in its grasp now, there was no breathing, only hoping the end would be swift, hoping Abigail would find what she sought.

But that same relief came over me. I couldn't breathe, and that was all right, for the water filled what air once had. It crept into my body and sustained me. It seemed the same with Abigail. The water filled her, washed the blackened waters from her, stripped her gown away, made her whole. Before my eyes, Abigail became what Scylla could not contain.

The human shape of her fell away. Arms and shoulders dissolved in a rush of salted water; belly and hips fell apart in a gurgle of foam. Abigail became the sea, the thing Scylla had always pushed against and could now no longer resist.

The very ocean parted, an enormous, wet mouth, which pulled Scylla inside until Scylla was the sea, and the sea was Abigail, and Abigail was all.

When Abigail reached for me I recoiled. I pulled out of her undertow and felt myself without a body; whatever I had been on land and ship, I was no longer. I was water and formless until I refused to be devoured. I became the thing that *Abigail*

could not contain, and before I could swallow her—for I felt the longing within me to do so—I ripped myself away.

I flung myself out of her reach, spiraling across the strait, pushing the *Swallow* far past my reach or Abigail's. The ship seemed so small within my grasp; how easy to crush it! Timbers snapped at my touch, flew into the air, stabbed my watery belly. I swallowed them down and settled with a liquid sigh, resting on the far side of the strait.

I sensed rather than saw Abigail in the water. I could feel the pull of her, even as I couldn't move toward her. I tried to reach for her, stretching my watery arms her direction, but could not bring her closer. We were trapped, she and I, with the strait between us.

In this way we floated, letting loose of our mortal consciousness, becoming something other than what we had been. I reached for her and she for me, and if in the currents a ship or two were caught, we were helpless to apologize.

When the *Swallow* returned from Arthur the trader, 'twas Finch who threw trinkets over the rail, to appease our monstrous appetites.

It was a carved whale bone that we finally connected over, a sliver of a rib, with an old story engraved, each line darkened with India ink. Abigail's cool waters rushed across my warmth, and the whale rib spun, suspended in the sea. We rushed to

claim the rib and the water surged upward, loosing a gentle wave which pushed the *Swallow* back into the open ocean.

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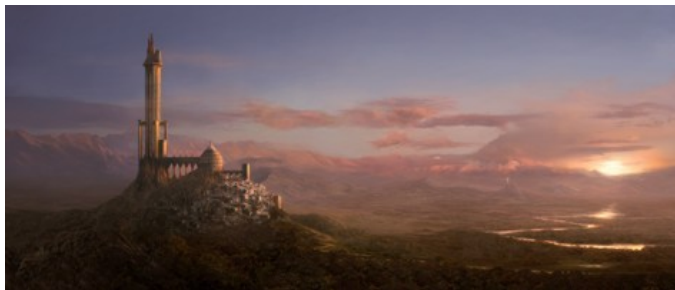
E. Catherine Tobler lives and writes in Colorado—strange how that works out. Among others, her fiction has appeared in Sci Fiction, Fantasy Magazine, Realms of Fantasy, Talebones, and Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet. One cat, one Schwinn, and miles to go! For more, visit www.ecatherine.com.

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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.

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