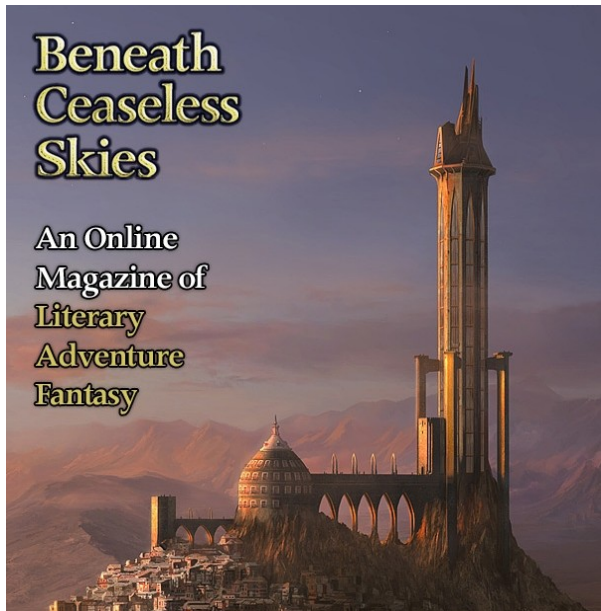


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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Literary  
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## THE GUILT CHILD

by Margaret Ronald

Carla took the bundle her cousin handed her and tried not to think of ogres. All through the long airship journey, since her father had put her in line for the Central Circuit and walked off whistling, she'd been unable to think of anything but the story of The Boy Who Was Sold to Ogres.

"You can hand your clothes to Roberts when you're done," Cousin James said from the other side of the curtain, his voice just audible over the steady thrum of machinery and departing airships. "We'll have better for you at Vallom House, but these here are your working clothes."

Carla obediently shook out her new clothes: a dress washed so many times its original color had faded to gray-green and a pair of ratty old trousers to wear underneath, the way the beggar girls back home did. "Working clothes?"

James sighed. "Had we time, I'd explain properly. As it is, though, we're running too late even to go back to Vallom House to change. You should have told me you'd be on the later run; I'd planned on the four o'clock."

That was her father's fault—missing the four o'clock run because he'd been arranging her brother's transfer to a new school, now that they had money for it. She pulled on the clumsy shoes and waited, bundled clothing in hand.

After a moment, her cousin pulled back the curtain. He, too, now wore poor man's clothes, down to a stained neckerchief and a threadbare coat with patches on the patches. His face bore a light dusting of soot, creased into the deep wrinkles at either side of his mouth. His man Roberts wordlessly dented a hat and placed it on James' thinning hair. "Good," he said, looking her up and down. "Maybe some dirt... no, best not gild the lily. Give your clothes to Roberts and we'll be off."

She followed him out into the street, turning to watch as Roberts, grave in Vallom House livery, went the other way with all of her possessions. An automaton trundled past, steam from its vents leaving a foggy trail across the street, its owner following on foot.

"Damn," James muttered, and Carla nearly ran into him as she turned to follow. The street that from the air had been an endless stream of people and animals and automata was now blocked by a crush of people.

"What's the holdup?" James asked the closest onlooker.

“The Gestenwerke line’s Tram #41 woke up,” the man said, but an airship descending into the station drowned out his next words. “—headed east,” he went on, unperturbed. “They’re trying to get the passengers out before it leaves the city.”

“Bah.” James rubbed at his chin with one gloved hand, then glanced down at her. “Come on, Carlyle. We’ll go around.”

She craned to look, but all she could see was the edge of a carriage sticking up at an odd angle—maybe Tram #41, maybe one of the other automata that walked Admiral Street. “I’ve never seen a machine wake up,” she tried as they turned and walked down a side street.

James laughed through his nose. “And why would you want to? Nothing unusual about it. Businesses get ruined every day like that.”

A few skinny children watched them from a doorway. One spat; another made a rude gesture; two more ignored her in favor of their skipping game: *went to the washer-man, washer said no....*

“Hurry up, girl. There’ll be plenty of time to gawk later.” James stuck out his hand for her to hold but didn’t slow, and Carla ran to catch up. “Once you’re properly introduced, you’ll have plenty of time to run around the city. You’d like that, right? A step up from living out on the heath. No one can say I’m not giving you the best, taking you in like this.”

The oldest urchin ran up to James, a clanking bundle in his arms. “Parts, sir? Plenty of time left in them, not a one of ‘em close to waking—”

“Piss off, scrapper,” James said. “Those are from the Gestenwerke scrapheap, aren’t they? You’ll have a hard time selling them to anyone after today.”

The urchin made a face at him, spat again at Carla, and ran off. Carla turned to watch him go, uncomfortably aware of how her clothes were a ragged analogue of his. “Can’t stand scrappers,” James went on cheerfully. “Little bastards know they’re selling junk that’s too close to waking, so there’s not a one doesn’t lie like a crow.”

Carla had to skip to keep up with him. “But I thought—”

“Yes, Father—what, your great-uncle, would it be?—dealt with them regular. So I know what I’m talking about, don’t I?” He led her down an alley between two huge warehouses, one of which thrummed with the percussive beat of heavy machinery. “Right. Since you arrived too late for me to teach you the rules, just keep quiet for now. Quiet and—” He glanced back at her. “Pitiful. Try to look pitiful.”

Carla stared at him, and he nodded. “That’ll do. You’re what, eight? Nine?” *Eleven*, Carla thought, but James didn’t pause for her to answer. “Young enough. Come on.”

The alley ended in a heavy door, iron bound with brass. Flaking letters above the door read VALLOM PARTS AND PRESS. James took out a set of heavy keys and unlocked the many locks. “Go on in. I’ll follow.”

Carla stepped inside, pausing as a cold wind blew past her and set off a cascade of tiny metallic noises in the darkness. As her eyes adjusted to the dim gold glow of werlight, she could just make out a nest of machinery, thick with the scorched scent of thaumic ore. The competing stamp of presses came together in a united heartbeat, and under her feet a webwork of tracks and pipes rumbled and purred.

James locked the door behind them and gestured for her to follow him—past rods and hoses and cables, grease-stained steel fingers that sorted through the material coming off the presses and packed it away, great arms of tarnished brass that picked up scrap and ferried it toward the furnace at the heart of the machine.

It was here, where the gold light gave way to the sparky blue of condensing thaumic ore, where the spring chill evaporated off the boilers, that her cousin stopped. “Stamper!” he called, pitching his voice above the din. “Stamper!”

The pounding paused, one press after the other, some of them halting in mid-blow. A mass of cables shifted, its fittings turning and locking into place. “Jamie,” said a low, titanic

voice, the kind that the pantomimes gave the Stone King. “You came.”

“Aye,” said James. “I didn’t mean to be so long away, Stamper. Honest.” Carla stole a glance at her cousin; he wore a sheepish, unaffected smile like a boy’s, entirely at odds with the dignified middle-aged gentleman who’d met her at the station. “I’ve brought someone to meet you.”

“So I see.” The closest press shifted further, parting to allow an arm to swing forward, this one with a thick patina of green over the brass. The end of the arm folded and refolded, shifting into something new.

Carla caught her breath as the shape came clear: a face of pipes and fittings and gears, its eyes glowing faintly with the sheen of werglass. The mouth was only an expressionless line of cable, but when the voice spoke again there was no question whose it was. “Who is she?”

*Machine*, Carla thought. *The machine is talking. But that isn’t—* The face leaned close to her, and she shrank behind James.

“Here!” James snapped. “That’s no way to behave! This here is Stamper, what’s been a friend of our family for years!”

“I’m sorry,” Stamper said, retreating a little. “I’m a bit scary like this.”

*I'm not scared, Carla thought. I'm confused—you don't see talking machines, because once they're smart enough to talk they're smart enough to leave—*

*How did the rhyme go? Went to the trainyard, train said no, I'm going to the east where the mighty walkers go.*

Her cousin's hand tightened on her shoulder. "Hello," she squeaked.

"Hello," Stamper said gravely.

"You remember my wife's sister Nina? This is her girl Carlyle. Named for her pa's mother's family."

Carla bit her lip; it wasn't quite true, but certainly her father hadn't bothered to check on their blood ties after getting James' letter.

"Her pa was healthy," James continued, "we all thought so, but you know how it is in the south, the sick comes on you fast —"

Why was he speaking of her father as if he were dead? But the emotion in his voice was real, as real as the warmth with which he greeted Stamper, and contagious enough that her own eyes began to prickle even though she knew her father was alive.

"I see," Stamper said. "And now you are all she has."



How could a mechanical voice sound so sad? How could it sound *sincere*? Carla hid her face, and James patted her shoulder. “There now. Hush, look, it’ll be all right.”

The automaton—the factory itself—was silent a moment, though werglass glittered within its face. “She looks like Etta,” it said.

James started and stepped back from Carla, regarding her at arm’s length. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, she does.” And then, to her utter shock, he too began to blink back tears, his lips pressed tight together as if suppressing some great grief.

“I’m sorry, Jamie. I didn’t mean to bring it up—”

“No,” James said. “No, it’s all right. We’d better get on home—if I catch the butcher in a good mood, we might have meat tonight. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Carlyle?” He drew a shaky breath and managed a smile. “You’ll not mind if Carlyle here comes to visit, will you?”

“Not at all,” Stamper said.

James led her out, clamping his hand on her shoulder when she started to speak.

They walked for quite a while in silence, through the falling dark of late spring, slush seeping into her shoes. Automata and their owners passed by, and the drone of airships above faded as night came on. Finally, as the houses around them began to take on a polished, high-class look,

James relaxed his grip. "Good girl. Very good. The tears were a nice touch."

"Cousin James," Carla began, "why—"

"Ah! Only ask why when you're more than a mile away. I don't think Stamper eavesdrops, but better to be sure." He hailed a lightman, and a gate at the end of the street began to glow. "But here's fine, girl."

Carla paused, trying to choose one question out of dozens. "If Stamper's smart enough to talk, then why is it still here?"

James chuckled and mussed the snow out of her hair. "You strike to the heart, don't you? But you kept your mouth shut in there. Clever girl. Knew I'd picked a good cousin for this." He paused at the gate as Roberts came up the gravel path, a fur overcoat in his hands. "Well," he said, "the short version is that as far as Stamper knows, you and I are dirt poor."

"Your coat, sir," Roberts said.

"Dirt poor," James repeated absently, and behind him the last of the lights came on, illuminating the Vallom family mansion. Snow sparkled on the topiary, and a raked path led to the huge double doors.

Carla glanced back over her shoulder, remembering first the crumbling fences of her old home and then, to her surprise, the worn and tired fittings in Stamper's factory. "I see," she said, and it wasn't quite a lie.

\* \* \*

The long version came in bits and pieces over the next few days, mostly over the meals Carla had in her room, away from the rest of the family. James sometimes joined her and talked over the meager though excellent food.

“You don’t know what a hardship it was,” he explained, “to eat at the main table—with maybe a third of what everyone else had, and old Dad’s gimlet eye on me to make sure I didn’t snatch one extra bite. Had to stay skinny, so Stamper would believe we were starving. So don’t go saying that no one understands what you’re going through. I went through it all, me, and I’ve done my best to make it easier on you.”

Carla nodded, her stomach still rumbling after the half-bowl of soup and yeast bun that was all she was allowed of tonight’s dinner. “And your daughter? My cousin Marietta?”

James was silent a moment. “Yes. Well, she’s at Queen’s now, so she’s no longer any part of it.” He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. Now, you like your rooms? Good. Good. Your papa can’t say I’m not holding up my end of the deal.”

He wouldn’t, not with what James was paying him. But she was still too scared of Stamper, mostly because she couldn’t shed the quite rational fear that it, like any other automaton in which the thaumic residue built up to the point of sentience, would pull itself free and head east, past the mountains to the

Hundred Cities of the free walkers. It was still too close to the ogre from her mother's storybook.

On the days when she wasn't taken to Stamper to hide, shivering, behind James, Carla was mostly left alone. That lost its novelty after a day or so, particularly when she learned that the Vallom House library was forbidden. "I'm sorry, miss," one of the maids told her, twisting her apron between her hands. "But Mister James says that we're not to let you in."

Carla, who had only just gotten used to the idea of maids calling her 'miss,' paused. "Why not?"

The maid crimsoned. "I'm sorry, miss. Mister James just said he's not taking any chances, not after Miss Marietta." She smoothed out her apron. "You're lucky," she went on in a falsely bright whisper. "I'd have loved a day on my own when I was your age. Now, best be off, miss. Please."

Carla bobbed a curtsy, which seemed to puzzle the maid, and left thinking. So the agreement James had made with her father hadn't included schooling for her. But if she wasn't to learn at school, then where was she to learn? And what?

She tried to find something to do just so she wouldn't immediately have to go back to face the ogre. To her surprise, James agreed and sent her out on several errands as the last blast of winter piled rain and sleet on the city. His true intentions Carla didn't fully grasp until she returned to her

room with a bad cough. The cough turned worse overnight, and her suspicion was confirmed when James took her into town the next day.

“She’s sick,” James told Stamper, Carla laid out in front of the boiler like a heathen offering. “Must have been from when our heater sputtered out a couple nights back.”

Half of Stamper’s werglass eyes shifted to focus on James. “Is it bad? I may be able to repair it if you bring the pieces—”

“No matter, no matter. We’ve got it mostly working again.” James sighed. “Mostly. And that’s the problem.” He bent and patted Carla’s head, as if she were a sick dog. “She’s too sick for ‘mostly.’”

Carla tried to shake her head, seeing where this was going, but she was too weak and the ogre too large.

“She can stay with me,” Stamper volunteered. “My boiler is always running, and she will be warm. You will have to bring food, though, and medicine—”

“Oh, food, food, that’s no problem. Reckon I could scrape a little together, eh Carlyle? But her staying here—” James hesitated, twisting his hat (Roberts had put a few extra tears in it today, just for the occasion). “That’s a lot to ask of you, Stamper.”

“I don’t mind. Really.”

*Of course he doesn't mind*, Carla thought, the fever lending her a sort of angry clarity. Regardless, she soon found herself bundled into a cot next to the boiler. "There you are, girl," James said, real concern on his face—or at least she thought it was real, till she remembered that he'd sent her out in the first place. "Well in no time, eh Stamper?"

"I certainly hope so," Stamper said, more doubtfully than its owner.

But James was already heading off, promising to bring broth and tea come morning. Carla stirred and groaned as, inexorably, the heavy tread of Stamper's work began again.

How she fell asleep she never knew, but when she woke, the continued thump of the presses had quieted. She rolled over to see the space around the cot transformed. A score of brass tracks laced the floor, laid down in a haphazard pattern, and half a dozen little brass-and-steel contraptions ran to and fro on them. Several clustered at the far edge of the light, constructing a wall between her and the rest of the factory. She started to sit up, alarmed, but the heaviness in her chest made her fall back.

"You're awake," said Stamper, somewhere behind her left ear. One of its speaking-trumpets, she saw, when she turned her head. "I am sorry for the noise. I hoped to put up

something to block it, but the small machines make their own noise. I had not thought that through.”

Carla tried to speak, to thank the ogre as the stories said you ought to do, but the air was drier than she'd expected, and her lungs caught on it.

“There is tea,” Stamper said, and sure enough, a small urn steamed near her left hand. “The water is distilled from my boiler, so it should taste all right, but you will have to ask James for more tea leaves. I would prefer he not know I have these individual machines at all. He would think I am using them to construct a way to leave, and I do not want to worry him.”

The lemony tang of the tea drifted past Carla as her coughing fit subsided, and abruptly the homeliness of it hurt. When was the last time anyone had made tea for her—not leavings from her brother's nursery, not part of a family meal, but just for her? And to have such hesitant kindness from a machine.... This was what James had intended. Every kindness Stamper gave her was one more fetter keeping it in place. “You shouldn't,” she tried to say, but it came out as a sob.

“Oh, don't cry. Don't cry.” The little machines whirled and clustered around her, and dimly, she realized that the great presses had paused. “Please. I will tell you a story, only don't cry.”

Carla buried her face in the blankets, stifling her tears against scratchy wool. Stamper took it as assent and continued, its voice slowing to a narrator's cadence. "Far, far from here there is a land so strange that it would seem to be another world. It is a world of ice caverns so high in the mountains that even the birds lose their breath, and of desert cities so far from water that not even the ground dreams of it. All the places too hostile or too remote for life, they have claimed as theirs. The people there are marvels, they fly or tunnel or skim over the earth with barely a thought, and every full moon they dance in great circles to the pulse of the currents in the earth."

Carla curled deeper in the blankets as Stamper spun a world of men of diamond and women of silver with blue fire that flowed through their bones, where anyone who asked could see for miles through the great lenses over the cities, where the beat of drums in the earth never ceased. Stamper spoke of flowers that bloomed like frost tended by a dozen tiny gardeners, of sandstorms as tall as the sky that were driven back by titans who spun winds of their own. "Far, far away," Stamper whispered, its voice fading to a bare breath. "Someday."

"Thank you," Carla murmured, drowsing. "Can I come with you?"



“Oh, child,” Stamper said after a moment, and the tone was answer enough, “where I would go, you cannot.”

It didn’t occur to her till morning that Stamper had been speaking of the Hundred Cities.

*I’m going to the cities where the mighty walkers go.*

\* \* \*

In the morning, and for three weeks after (for he’d wrought better than he knew in making Carla sick), James came to check on her. Carla thanked him and asked for more tea, keeping Stamper’s secret. James, immensely pleased, left her in Stamper’s keeping, which suited Carla fine.

When she was well enough, she returned to living at Vallom House (where James could claim to keep an eye on her), but she rarely stayed there long. The day after she returned there, Carla brought her mother’s storybook to Stamper. “For thanks,” she explained. “I wanted to give you some of my own stories.”

Stamper seemed startled—she was starting to be able to gauge the machine’s moods, now that she understood it had them. “I should like it if you read to me,” it said finally. “My eyes are fine for large work, but printed text is difficult for werglass to interpret.”

Carla grinned and began with “The Boy Who Was Sold to Ogres.”

Two weeks later she stole her first book: *Tales of the Lower Kingdoms*, by Morannon Gull. The shopkeepers never looked twice at the little girl in bright clean silks, and she made the most of the distraction supplied by the scrappers' less subtle thefts. It was almost frighteningly easy, especially after how long it had taken her to decide to do it.

"More stories, Stamper!" she called when she returned to Vallom Parts and Press, her voice steady for the first time since her illness. "This one has tales of the Hundred Cities!"

Stamper's presses didn't pause, but every werglass eye that could turn to her did. "Really?" Stamper said, its voice light with wonder, and any doubts she'd had were gone.

\* \* \*

It was maybe a year after she'd arrived at Vallom House that Carla came back to the mansion nursing another black eye—the result of another run-in with the scrappers, who though they hadn't quite caught on to her thefts still didn't like a fake on their turf.

The injury so preoccupied her that she didn't notice the tall young woman waiting for her at the gate. "Have you been fighting?" the woman asked without bothering to introduce herself.

"Not on purpose!" Carla answered without thinking. "I just had bad luck."

“More than you know.” She drew a book from her bag, and it took Carla a moment to recognize it: *Methods of Locomotion*, by E.G. Swertzer. The book she’d lifted from White’s Sundries two days ago. “You need to find a better hiding place, or Father will find these.”

Carla swallowed down her sudden fear and looked up at her. “You’re Marietta, aren’t you? James’ daughter?” Marietta nodded, looking down her nose at Carla, a hint of a smile on her thin lips. “Stamper thinks you’re dead.”

The smile turned bitter. “Father *would* have told Stamper that. Well, that was one consequence of my choice.” Still holding the book, she opened the gates and gestured for Carla to go on.

“What did you do?”

“Threatened to tell Stamper everything unless he let me go to Queen’s Academy.” Carla stopped, her thin shoes crunching on the gravel, but Marietta didn’t notice. “And now you’re my replacement.”

“I’m not—”

“Oh, don’t bother. Didn’t Father tell you?”

In the gentle glow of the werlight, her unraveling bun of brown curls seemed the color of smoky iron, and her eyes behind the lenses of her glasses were equally opaque. She

looked as cold as the steel women that some of the drinksellers on Admiral Street used to advertise their wares.

“He’s got three older brothers. But when Grandfather died, only Father could run the business because Stamper only recognized him. Sometimes I think he planned it that way, except that Father isn’t capable of planning more than a little way in advance.” Her lip curled in disdain. “I suppose it’s his guilt that makes him cling to this particular business strategy. He is, though, very good at finding out secrets, so if you’re going to be smuggling these to Stamper, you need to find a better place than under your bed.”

“You never told him,” Carla said.

“Father? No, your secret’s safe.”

“No. Stamper. You knew all the time that you were—that you were just there to make him feel so bad he wouldn’t leave. To make him believe that he was the only thing keeping us from the poorhouse. And you never told him.” A sick heat rose in her throat, like a swallowed coal. “You used him to get to the Academy. You’re no better than Cousin James.”

Marietta took off her glasses and polished them on a stark white handkerchief. “And you *have* told him?”

The coal in her throat turned to ice. She looked down at her shoes.

Marietta replaced her glasses, then crouched down next to Carla. “I like you, Carlyle. So here’s what I’ve learned from years of keeping Vallom House afloat. Best not to let *anything* get its hooks into you. Especially not guilt. It’s what keeps Stamper chained to us, and what makes Father so reluctant to change. Better to be a machine—and a flawless one—because Father will use any emotion you have against you. Do you understand?”

Sickened, Carla nodded.

“Good.” Marietta held out the book, and Carla took it. They walked up to the main house in silence. “How is Stamper?” Marietta asked as they reached the doors.

“Restless,” Carla said. “Another loom woke up two blocks down last week, and I think he heard the commotion.”

“It’s spring,” Marietta said absently. “He’s always restless in spring.” She paused, gazing off into the distance, then nodded to Carla. “Good night.”

That might have been the end of it, had it not been for the bundle that one of the maids left on Carla’s bed the next morning: a stack of books from the library of Queen’s Academy. The topmost one was *Atlas of the Lower Kingdoms (with Appendix of the Clockwork Cities)*, and Carla barely read the title before scooping it up and running out the door.

“Look!” she called to Stamper as soon as she reached the threshold. “Stamper, look, I’ve got an atlas of the Hundred Cities! We can find out how to get you there!”

Stamper’s werglass eyes turned to face her. “Amazing,” it thrummed. “Where on earth did you find it?”

Carla paused, realizing her error—and with it, made her choice. “From Cousin Marietta.”

One by one, all of Stamper’s presses fell silent. “Little Etta?”

*Don’t make trouble for your cousin.* Her father’s admonition whispered in her ears, but it was no more than an echo. “She’s alive,” Carla whispered. “She never died—that was just what James told you. I’ve been lying, Stamper, I’m sorry, I’ve been lying this whole year to you—”

Brokenly, with stops and starts and redundancies, she told Stamper everything—Vallom House, Marietta, everything. As she spoke, she made her way to the center of the factory. When she finished, sniffing as badly as if it were her first day, she sank onto the boards and waited for Stamper to pull itself free, to knock her aside in its journey east.

Instead, one by one, the presses started up again, their beat unchanged. A single speaking trumpet curled down to touch her hair. “I know,” Stamper said softly.

“You—” Carla leapt up. “You *know*?”

“For five years and some. I guessed—I have ears, you know, and then there are the earth currents, the ones we follow when we go east. Those carry information sometimes from the Hundred Cities. I listen to that, too.”

“But then why haven’t you gone?”

“Because I love Jamie, and I loved his father, and little Etta, and you. Lie or not, I care what happens to all of you.” The trumpet moved closer to her ear, and Stamper’s voice grew fainter, almost a whisper. “And... and I am scared. What if none of what I have said of the cities is true? The flowers of ice, the sandstorm titans—none of those might exist. I am scared, Carla.”

“I’m scared too,” Carla whispered back. “I was scared, when I first saw you. But I’m here now. Doesn’t that mean anything?”

“It does.” But Stamper’s presses continued, doling out the fortunes of the family. “Read to me again, Carla. But not from that. From your storybook. The ogre story again, I think. The part where the boy turns himself into a mouse to escape and loses his tail in the trap. He had to become smaller, yes?”

Carla scraped away her tears and took the battered storybook from its place above Stamper’s central coil.

\* \* \*

She did not quite give up. She took to carrying the Atlas with her when she knew that James would not be coming any further than the little business office overhanging the factory. She kept stealing—in fact, she did it more often, now that she'd discovered a talent for misdirection and seeming innocence. The books, she moved to the little grotto on the Vallom grounds, behind the statue of King Leopold's Doom. And she kept reading to Stamper, travelers' tales and technical manuals, even when she didn't fully understand what she read, hoping he could put the information to use.

But he wouldn't go. And she didn't know what could make him go. Or, in her worst moments, if she really wanted him to.

Spring had just turned to summer when Carla returned to Vallom House, her satchel heavy with new books and, as always, the Atlas, only to find the maid who'd barred her from the library waiting at the door. "Oh, miss, don't go in," she whispered, taking Carla aside and casting fearful glances behind her.

"Why not? What's happened?"

"Mister James, he had a dreadful fight with Miss Marietta over the diversification she wants, and the mistress, she said she thought tea in the grotto might calm him, but—"

"There!" James stood at the door. "There you are!" To Carla's shock, tears streaked his lined face. "Carlyle, what have



you done? Didn't I give you a good home? Didn't we work things out, you and me?" He held out his hand. "Come on. We need to talk—I've had supper laid out—"

Carla hesitated, but just then a flicker of evening light revealed James' other hand, clenched around pages torn from a book so violently that bits of the binding still clung to them.

She turned and ran, twisting out of the maid's belated grasp. The gates to the Vallom House grounds swung shut, but a year of clambering through Stamper's presses had made her nimble, and she scrambled over just as Roberts and James caught up to the gate.

James had thought ahead, though, and there were guards posted all around Vallom Parts and Press. Instead of trying to get past them, she waited in an alcove two streets over, thinking furiously and thumbing through the books she'd saved. After an hour or two of going over her few options, she picked up her satchel and went to the yard behind the scrapheap.

The little gang of scrappers had long claimed the yard as theirs, and several were already there, two of them sharing a loaf, one sorting through a small stack of discarded parts.

"Spare a copper, miss," the eldest began absently, then jumped up when he saw her face. "You! You're the faker, the

one who's always dressing up like us!" His grimy face set in a sneer. "What do *you* want?"

For answer, Carla drew out a book. "This is from White's Sundries. He thinks you stole it. This one too. And this." She set the books out, one by one, keeping only the *Atlas* for herself. "I stole them. Them, and three dozen more."

"You never," said the next-eldest, a skinny girl just about Carla's height with stringy yellow curls, but the eldest's eyes narrowed.

"I'll teach you how to steal like this," Carla said, "steal so that you will never get caught, if you do two things for me."

The words *never get caught* brought on a moment's silence, and the eldest glanced at the others. "What two things?"

She told them. They shook their heads and called her mad, but they agreed.

\* \* \*

Two days and three thefts later (one with Carla in the main role; one with the next-eldest, Emma, acting that part; and the last with Nardo, in the boy's clothes they'd stolen first time through), the three of them scampered over the roofs to the edge of Vallom Parts and Press. "We can't get into the factory itself," Nardo explained, helping her over the makeshift

footbridges they carried from roof to roof. “The office, that’s another matter.”

Emma poked the bag of parts slung over Carla’s shoulder. “What d’you need these for? They’re useless—the machines they’re from were too close to waking to be any good.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.” She hefted the bag of infused parts—the stuff that even scrappers couldn’t sell, packed so tight that the bag thudded rather than clanked, bruising her shoulder with each step. “Maybe they’ll be enough to wake him up proper, so that he decides to go.” She now looked more the part that James had groomed her for, only harder at the edges.

“That isn’t how it works—” Emma started.

Nardo held up one hand for silence. “Sounds like it’s shut down,” he said. “But Vallom’s *never* shut down.”

Carla paused. “Oh, no,” she whispered, and ran across the footbridge. Emma and Nardo shouted after her but didn’t follow.

There were no windows in the factory, but the business office had been built after, a lump of a room straddling the outer wall. Carla scrambled over the roof, fumbled with the catch on a soot-blackened skylight, then swung her bag against the glass until it shattered.

Silence within. “Stamper,” she whispered, the name as much a talisman as a plea, and dropped down into darkness.

The office at one time must have overlooked both street and factory floor, but the windows facing the street were shuttered, and those that faced inward had been covered by heavy curtains. Carla landed on a cabinet so full of papers it was near bursting, rolled off it and to the floor, and ran to the inner windows.

“I should thank you,” Marietta said behind her.

Carla dropped the edge of the curtain and turned. Marietta sat at her father’s desk, several stacks of papers before her. A pair of couriers stood in front of the desk, casting worried glances over their shoulders at Carla.

“You’ve managed to distract Father so thoroughly that he never noticed I’d taken his seal.” She demonstrated, marking a set of papers with the Vallom sigil and handing them to a courier, who took off at a run.

“What’s happened to Stamper?”

“He’s gone quiet,” Marietta replied, an undercurrent of something indecipherable in her voice. She shook her head and continued. “I’d appreciate it if you’d do the same for a moment. If I’m to have any chance of preserving the family fortunes, I need fewer distractions.”

Carla tugged the curtain to the side, but the window was so grimed that she couldn’t make out more than a few vague shapes. The presses were still, the great arms unmoving, and

no werlight gleamed. Only one flicker of thaumic condensation remained: a faint blue light below her, barely enough to power even one of Stamper's many presses.

A clatter on the stairs caught her attention, and light flooded the room as the door at the far end of the office opened. "Ah. Father," Marietta said, sealing another envelope.

"Etta, Etta, what are you doing?" He approached her with hands out. "I know you wanted to prove yourself, but this—"

"This has nothing to do with proving myself," she returned. James' mournful expression dropped, exposing the sullen rage beneath. He quickened his steps, and the second courier blanched. "No words for our other guest, Father?" Marietta continued without looking up.

James hesitated, then saw Carla. "You!"

Marietta handed the second stack to the remaining courier and, when he didn't move, smacked him on the shoulder. "Financial district. Hurry."

"Stay where you are!" James snarled, and Carla, mistaking the words as meant for her, moved too slowly. He caught her by the arm and yanked her close to him. "I had a promise from your father—I had a promise from *you*, girl! And now look! Look at that!" He spun her around and pressed her up against the windows so hard her nose banged the glass. "Look what

you've done! He's gone dark! You broke his heart, Carlyle, his and mine, and your father's too!"

"I didn't—" she tried, but his hand was too tight on her throat.

"No? Then who did? Are you trying to ruin us all?" he demanded.

For a moment Carla felt the full weight of the guilt he wielded. But she remembered how James had always been sincere, how he had always meant what he said, even as he lied with every word, and she remembered the scent of lemon tea and condensing ore. She gripped the bag of parts and swung it at him.

James ducked away, swearing. The momentum of her swing pulled her around so that she pivoted in place, and the bag struck the closest window. Glass shattered and spilled out into the factory, across the unresponsive machines. She let go, but too late; the curtain snagged and tore under her as she fell forward.

James caught her by the shoulder, and she went limp in relief—then froze as he pushed her further out, so that she hung precariously over the broken glass. "You just destroy everything here, don't you? How can you do this to me—to me, after all I did for you!"

“It doesn’t matter what you did for me!” she shrieked. “It’s what you didn’t do for Stamper!” And she did what the urchin she was dressed as would have done and bit him, hard.

He yelled and let go.

Carla tipped back, over the shattered frame, out over empty air. She caught her breath, unable even to cry out.

Metal arms rose up to meet her, catching her in a webwork of straps and netting.

Stamper, or pieces of it, rose around her, pulling itself free from the rest of the presses. What held her now was one press—no, barely half of one, repurposed and refitted so that its stamping arms were now legs like a grasshopper’s. In the place where VALLOM PARTS AND PRESS (STAMPER NO. 1) had been painted was now the clumsily embossed sign of a tailless mouse.

“Carla,” Stamper said, and its voice was now different, without the resonance that the warehouse-spanning factory had given it. “You are not hurt?”

She shook her head, as devoid of words as when she’d first seen Stamper. The webwork flexed under her, and she caught at it. “You—are you all right?”

“Yes. I remembered your story. The boy had to become smaller, yes? So, I think, should I.”

Carefully, as if inspecting scrap metal, Stamper peered through the broken window, then with a ripple that felt like nothing so much as a shrug, tore the entire dividing wall of windows away. A good section of the ceiling followed, falling to either side of Stamper's rising skeleton.

James stumbled back against the precariously perched office wall and goggled up at Stamper and Carla. "Stamper—"

"Hello, Jamie." Stamper regarded James for a long moment, then turned so that its werglass eyes no longer faced him. "Hello, Etta."

Marietta did not look up from her desk. "I'd appreciate it if you left the lever shears," she said. "Those are difficult to replace."

"I've left them," Stamper said. "Little Etta."

Heedless of the creaking joints, Carla clambered up on top of the press. "Can I come with you now?"

"For a little ways," it agreed. "A little ways." It rose to its full height, tall as the factory, all six limbs stretching as it took the first careful steps.

The crowd that gathered to watch this new awakened automaton lurch down the street was smaller than usual, it being not a work day, and awakenings not unusual in this part of the city. But they did remark two things: the joyous young girl clinging to the top of the automaton and laughing,



navigating for it from a big book open on her lap, and the man in tears at the wrecked door of the warehouse.

And yet, the one who stayed the longest was the tall young woman in the shattered office. For many minutes she watched the automaton's receding shape, the line of her jaw as hard as brittle iron, the lenses of her spectacles fogging with every breath.

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*Margaret Ronald's fiction has appeared in such venues as Fantasy Magazine, Strange Horizons, Realms of Fantasy, Clarkesworld Magazine, and previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies. Her story ["A Serpent in the Gears,"](#) set in the same world as "The Guilt Child," appeared in *BCS* #34. Soul Hunt, the third novel in her urban fantasy series following Spiral Hunt (2009) and Wild Hunt (2010), will be released by Eos Books in 2011. Originally from rural Indiana, she now lives outside Boston. Visit her website at <http://mronald.wordpress.com/>.*

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## INVITATION OF THE QUEEN

by Therese Arkenberg

Ander Leuhovesen saved it from a book burning. It's a well-kept secret, but officers can do that sometimes, if we're quiet about it and otherwise in good standing with the Corps.

All the same, I was surprised that Leuhovesen took advantage of such an opportunity. He was a man cut in the true fashion of the New Order: an athlete. Tall, he had coal-black hair and valley-green eyes, and long arms and legs taut with muscle. He was a runner, a jumper, and managed a machine gun with utter calm and no small skill; he was young and strong and gloried in being so. I admired him for these things, and in my less admirable moments I even envied him, but I couldn't imagine him reading any book, much less a forbidden one.

I first saw it when I stopped by at his post after a quiet night scouting the north end of the valley. We had occupied this part of Vormer for nearly six months, so most nights were quiet, though every so often we encountered a fleeing family of Amaasmen or a Djubati suicide attack. Leuhovesen had distinguished himself in preventing one of the latter—to the

extent of saving the Djubat for the firing squad—and along with his promotion to major, he had been granted the use of a white clapboard farmhouse, former property of some bookish Amaasman. Most of the previous occupant's books had been burned; in fact, the only one in sight was a leather tome with silver-edged pages on the coffee table.

The title was written in some flowing script, not the blocky shapes of Amaasin. “Say, do you know what this is?” I asked, gesturing to the midnight blue cover.

“It's in old Mantinae,” he said, setting a cocktail glass rattling with ice carefully on the opposite end of the table. “I remember some from college. It says, *An Invitation of the Queen of the Bright Lands*.”

“Hmm,” I said, lips to my own glass. I was more startled by the revelation that Leuhovesen had been to college than by the book's language or title.

“It seems to be a lot of mystic stuff,” he said, with a proper New Order sneer. “And it mentions love a lot, particularly the, er, physical aspects, but I think that's just some sort of crude metaphor for the aforementioned *spiritual hooey*.”

He said the last with such a mockingly stern face that I had to laugh. “Well, I won't worry about you, Leu, as long as you don't start taking it seriously.”

“Of course, Hary,” he said, and after that our conversation turned to other things—an unfortunate resistance in a town on the Vormer-Nethian border, a letter he had received from his sister back home, my own letter from my ex-wife reporting the progress of our children. Little Hary was already playing at muster and drilling his sisters.

I didn’t get the chance to ask Leuhovesen that night why he had picked out the book from the blaze. To be honest, I forgot about the book until I came by to visit him again, which wasn’t for another three weeks.

\* \* \*

I saved the Djubati girl from a band of scouts who found her hiding by the waterfalls at the valley’s southern end. They called her a spy and were going to shoot her. More likely she was just trying to escape the reach of the New Order. I took her into my care. It’s well known that officers of the Corps can do that if we’re quiet about it and in good standing, though some revile us for it. She became my housekeeper.

Her name was Tahileh. All I remember of her is long, brown hair. Since she was Djubati, I suppose she had the dark skin and black eyes, and she must have been a little pretty—for a Djubata, at least—given what the men wanted to do before they shot her. Even in a military as disciplined as the Corps of the New Order, there will be some thugs.

The house I occupied was in the town proper, almost in the exact middle of Beluett valley, and once belonged to an Amaasin shopkeeper. It was decorated in the characteristic flower-and-silver-plate tawdriness of those people. I set Tahileh immediately to cleaning it out, and she did such a fair job that I mentioned her glowingly to Leuhovesen when I saw him in the barracks offices.

“Djubati men, they’re all useless, you know, Leu. Let them throw themselves to oblivion, so long as they don’t take good New Order men with them! But their women—once a Djubata learns her place—can be a treasure! I was pleasantly surprised, you see, by the girl I saved from the boys at the south end last week.”

“I didn’t know,” he said with a teasing curve to his lips.

I told him about her. He knew plenty of my grief with the poor decorating, as it was my favorite complaint behind Djubati suicides and Amaasin merchants and their untraceable descendents set in charge of supplying our barracks with heritable stinginess. He rejoiced with me that the ribbon flowers were burned, the silver plates made by the crucible into ingots to send back to the capital’s mint, the deep plum and rose-colored walls repainted sturdy cream. My house turned out to be a real beauty after all; all it had lacked was the proper care to bring it out.

“Hary,” he said when I had finished, “you wouldn’t consider lending this girl out, would you? My house was owned by Amaasmen, too, and it still stinks of it in some corners.”

He was my greatest friend in Vormer, so of course I readily agreed. The next morning I had Tahileh pack an old feed bag with the sturdy skirts and soft linen nightgown and undergarments I had given her, and drove her in my Corps truck to Leuhovesen’s place. She stayed there two weeks, which seemed a long time to fix up what was—considering what had previously owned it—a rather tastefully decorated farmhouse.

\* \* \*

The three scouts who had found Tahileh were memorable: all had seen action, all bore the marks of it. One wore a pewter cap on the tip of his nose, another had a scar on his left cheek, and the last had a puckered, poorly healed wound on his forehead like a third eye. These marks of valor aside, they were fine, handsome men, young and strong, smart-cut cloth of the New Order. Rather like Leuhovesen.

Though, as I said, they were thugs. Yet perhaps they had reason to hate Djubati—perhaps they had received their scars from a suicide attack.

I encountered the one with the false nose first, about nineteen days after I had rescued Tahileh. He was dead, lost in a freak accident. The provisions truck he had left in, heading

for a mountain pass, returned to Beluett valley six hours later with his foot trapped on the gas, his legs caught in the door, his head hanging out, dragging on the gravel road. How he got into such a position could only be conjectured, for of course he was gone already. And he had been, I think, the most handsome of the three.

Unsettled, I spent the evening at Leuhovesen's house, hoping to find comfort in his company and perhaps also to seek the return of Tahileh. She served us drinks, blushing when I smiled at her, then disappeared to some other part of the house, leaving us to speak privately.

"It was ghastly, Leu," I said. "Just ghastly."

He murmured something, I don't remember what, very sympathetically. Leuhovesen was always very empathetic; that and his unquestionable skill won him many loyal friends, myself included. In his presence, I felt I could give in to the horror and tragedy of the young man's death without showing any weakness antithetical to the New Order.

In truth, I believe Leuhovesen personified what the New Order could be: compassion tempered with strength, with hidden wells of humor and insight, commanding but properly obedient, physically attractive and fit and, in my memory, always young. It is a comfort to remember him, as it was a comfort to be with him.



I looked away from his face, because I've always been shy of revealing my admiration in my expression, and my eyes fell on the edge of his bookshelf. There sat a single book, slender, with a midnight-blue cover.

"*Invitation of the Queen*, is it?" I asked, suddenly and too brightly, because I was trying to shake off the lingering sickness of grief and horror for the young scout.

"Yes," Leuhovesen said. "I've nearly finished it now."

"I didn't know you were still reading it!"

He took a quick sip of rye whiskey. "It's interesting. A lot of nonsense, like I told you before, but... beautifully written."

"Is that so?" I asked, grinning. "I seem to remember some crude metaphors about love... in its grosser aspects. The physical ones, I mean."

"Oh, stop." He waved a hand, irritably, I suppose, though I had never before seen Leuhovesen irritable. "Parts are even like poetry. It made me think, oh, of the *Songs of the Wise King*."

"The *Songs* and all their sister volumes are merely part of the Amaasin superstition," I declared. "And I can't imagine this book is of much merit, even if it does fascinate you. Still, I don't suppose it does you any harm—"

"I didn't ask for your permission to read it, Hary," he said softly.

"Of course not. I'm sorry."

“Of course. Forgive me for acting so nasty when you’re already out of sorts....”

I waved it away. “No problem, no problem. We’ve both grievously wronged each other. Now let’s toast to forgiveness!”

We did so with relieved smiles. After that, curiosity, and also the lingering urge to escape the memory of that afternoon, prompted me to ask what draw the book had had on him.

He shrugged. “I saw it in the burning pile, nested in what looked like a complete set of Daughmant’s encyclopedia—the blue stood out so strongly against the brown leather of the set, which I why I spotted it—and I guess it was the title that drew me. I haven’t read Mantinae in so long, and honestly—” He smiled almost cheekily, like a schoolboy who knows he is being foolish—“I wanted to see who this Queen was, to meet her.”

Somehow, that made me think of the other reason I had come to his house, and I asked politely if Tahileh could soon be returned. Leuhovesen excused himself. I waited, sipping the last of my whiskey, and thought once that I could hear low voices murmuring from the hall.

He returned soon after and said he was sorry, but he hoped I would let him borrow her a while longer. “She’s helping me redo my bedroom,” he said.

He spoke with no obvious irony, but I wondered. Even he, a model young officer in the New Order, could not be that innocent.

\* \* \*

The howls that echoed at night through the foothills over Beluett valley probably were of wolves, though one Manniten corporal said they sounded like coyotes. We were a bit too far southeast for that, the rest of us decided, and anyway, with a sort of boyish glee we welcomed the idea of wolves, since they were the symbol of our Corps. Some of the scouts joked they howled so long and loud into the night because they were joyously tracking down Amaasin escapees and Djubati assassins.

Only that one night there must have been some mistake, because the wolves took a scout instead. I remember clearly that there was no more howling than usual, and no cries; I am proud to say the man died bravely, silently. But I don't know what could explain the silence of the wolves.

The body was brought back to the barracks in Beluett town securely wrapped, the covering showing dark stains in places. I didn't know the deceased's identity until I saw his friend at the graveside while giving the salute; a broad-shouldered young man, handsome features marred by a puckered scar in the middle of his forehead.

Again Leuhovesen's house, again the drinks. He told me he thought Tahileh could return the next morning, or the morning after that at the latest, and I was glad although I had been, by that point, longer without her than with, and was beginning to feel almost as if I could get along without a housekeeper.

*Invitation of the Queen of the Bright Lands* lay on the coffee table, a slim red ribbon between two of the last few pages. I set the glass down and pulled the book toward me.

"I'm finished," Leuhovesen said. "Just rereading parts."

I flipped the book open and read.

*Your pale body, Love,*

*Plated by the moon-white sun of this land*

*Of my land, my Love;*

*Love, this is mine.*

There was more of it, but nothing I remember more clearly. There were passages I wouldn't repeat even if I could—I do remember the spirit of them. They were beautiful, as Leuhovesen said, but I could feel the skin above my collar heating.

I returned *Invitation of the Queen* to the table and took another gulp of whiskey.

"I almost see why it's forbidden," I said.

"Almost?"

I shrugged. “There’s nothing that I could point to as truly wrong, yet it *feels* as if it should be forbidden. It just reads that way—doesn’t it?”

He swirled the ice in his glass and didn’t answer my question. “I paged through the file of forbidden books. *Invitation of the Queen* was classed for three reasons.” He set down his drink and ticked off one finger. “First, it’s a superstition.”

I snorted and said some standard phrase disparaging foolish Amaasmen.

“But it’s not Amaasin—it’s Djubati.”

I choked on my whiskey. “What—*them*? Are they even literate?”

“Perhaps it was inscribed in Mantinae from an oral history. The book, of course, is very old... anyway, it was also listed as objectionable philosophically—though I found no philosophy, objectionable or otherwise.” He laughed, but not Leuhovesen’s characteristic hearty laughter.

“And the last reason?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It was lewd.”

I looked again at the book. Certainly, I thought, passages were very... passionate... and yet it was beautifully written....

Night was falling. In the distance, a howl split the air.

Leuhovesen saw me startle. “Say, Hary, why don’t you stay over here tonight?”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all, we have plenty of spare rooms....” He trailed off; I saw him staring at the door, and realized he had said *we*.

Tahileh stood in the door, dressed in a simple white linen gown, bright against her skin. Her eyes flickered to me—bright eyes, though Djubati-dark—and she reached up as if deliberately to pull a slender red ribbon from her long, silky brown hair. She pushed it back on her shoulders, revealing the lace along her scooped collar, along her shoulders and down below the hollow of her throat....

My gaze snapped to the table, and I reached again for my drink, lying beside *An Invitation of the Queen*. I drank until the glass was empty, and as I set it down I accepted Leuhovesen’s invitation.

That night echoed with the cries of wolves. My room was beneath the farmhouse’s attic, where Tahileh slept... I knew she slept there... I heard her crying in the night, a wild, ecstatic cry of triumph.

Or perhaps it was a dream. I am sure I only imagined Leuhovesen’s brisk step on the attic stairs.

\* \* \*

When I returned to the barracks the next morning I was put in charge of a scouting circuit in the southern part of the valley. I remembered the waterfalls where Tahileh had been found and took special care looking around that place.

It was easy to see why the Djubati might hide there. Shade and shelter from the trees, water in plenty—and it was beautiful. I found myself staring in awe. The river fell from its genesis in the mountains to the floor of the Beluett valley in many streams down a rock face, and the plunging water glinted in the sunlight like strings of glass beads, or a thousand hanging crystal chandeliers. Even the roar of the falls was like tinkling crystal chimes.

My eyes climbed the rock face. No sign of anyone, and there was nowhere to hide up there—if the Djubati lurked in the south of the valley, it was in the shadows of the surrounding forest. But my gaze was captured by a short falls off a ledge near the rim of the valley. About a six foot drop, I guessed, and the ledge was two or three feet wide, which made it one of many small falls-amid-the-falls. What was truly arresting was the brightness of the water. It cascaded in flashing white sheets, almost as unbearable as looking at the sun, as if some vastly brilliant light lay shining behind it.

I took a step forward, maybe with some plan to climb the cliff face and answer the mystery, but my reverie was broken by

a furious cry. I turned, reaching for my pistol, to find a copper-skinned figure rushing from the forest.

Two arm-long steel blades flashed in its hands. The knives were incredibly sharp, we all knew from experience, but no match for modern guns—that was why we called them Djubati suicide attackers. This one lasted longer than most, forcing through the ranks of firing scouts, striking three. I thought she was headed for me, and she might have been, given my officer's uniform, but it seems men always think a Djubati suicide attacker is headed for them.

The Djubata's face, blood-streaked from the wound in her temple, snarled even in death. The Djubati, I remembered hearing once, were the natives of this country; perhaps that was why they fought so hard against New Order settlement, harder by far than the farmers and Amaasin shopkeepers of the towns.

But what were they trying to protect, except some square miles of earth? The Djubati had no written language, little culture beyond barbarianism, no history worth mentioning. They were like children grabbing a toy only so that no one else could have it.

When I looked back, the bright water was gone, faded back to dull sunlight-gilded beads like the rest of the falls. I sent scouts to comb the area for more Djubati. They were reminded



to shoot on sight; I had no interest in saving girls like Tahileh that day.

And with that thought, when I returned to Beluett town I turned my steps for Leuhovesen's house.

\* \* \*

I demanded the return of Tahileh. She was mine, and had been working for Leuhovesen instead for far too long. I thought of the cries I heard the night before when I slept beneath the attic, but I refrained from saying anything, which given Leuhovesen's temper that day was probably wise. He was moody and almost stubborn.

"I don't see why you need her, Hary," he said. "She's already cleaned up your house beautifully, you said."

"She needs to keep it that way! Please, Leu, three weeks is more than enough to take care of anything, even in this old dump."

He frowned, not meeting my eyes. At last he said, "I guess you have the right of it. Wait here."

He vanished inside, leaving me on the porch. I heard low murmuring voices, and in a little time Tahileh came, carrying the bag she had gone to him with but wearing a scarlet ribbon I hadn't given her. She looked over her shoulder into the house, but I don't know what she saw there.

I let her ride beside me in the truck. She was silent all the way home, and all that evening, and all that night. She made no protest when I showed her into my room. Her hair was soft as silk and smelled like pure water; her skin was firm and warm and smelled like life, sweat and salt, blood.

\* \* \*

Once I saw an insect that had been trapped in an electric lantern, between the glass case and the bulb. It had been a hornet, I guessed from the shape, but all the yellow and black stripes on its body had bleached to pure, uniform white under the glare. It must have been there a long time.

We found him on the bank of the river; possibly he had drowned and washed ashore. I don't think it likely, though—he wasn't water-bloated, but shriveled, and nothing can explain the whiteness. Even his hair was bleached, and even the puckered scar on his forehead was only a pale ivory. His eyes were closed, but his mouth hung open, as if he had died screaming.

Looking up, I saw a flash of light brighter than the sun amid the waterfalls, but I couldn't place it, and we had no time to linger; we had to carry the body home.

\* \* \*

"What *are* the Bright Lands?" I asked.

Leuhovesen didn't answer. From the look of disgust on his face, he must have thought I was drunk—maybe I was, by then. A bottle of straight Amaasin potato-whiskey sat nearly empty on the table before me. I couldn't see *Invitation of the Queen's* blue cover anywhere.

"If you had seen him, Leu... bleached, just bleached. Pure white. I can't imagine... and if he suffered—he must have—it was my fault, I sent him out there!" Of course I hadn't known at the time, hadn't seen the puckered scar, hadn't noticed because I hadn't paid attention. It was on my head. Foolish superstition to think so, but it *was*.

"You're being too hard on yourself," he said, the platitude like a lead casting dropped from a mold.

"But I'm *not*." I said it then, confessed my superstition. "All three of them... they were the ones who captured Tahileh, who were going to ravage and shoot her. This... she's having her revenge!"

Very quietly, he said, "What will she do to you, then?"

"I rescued her!"

"Yesterday, did you rescue her from me?"

"Damn you!" I went to my feet, feeling surrounded by red haze, like smoke from something burning. "She was properly mine. You... you only...."

He silently cleared the whiskey bottle away.

“Do you think I didn’t hear you, creeping that night to her room? Don’t I know what you did? Do you think you’re any better than me?”

He flinched as if avoiding a blow, and I was ashamed. I apologized, and he nodded as if accepting it; then I fled. At home I fell asleep quickly in my room beside Tahileh’s, in my bed, alone.

\* \* \*

When I awoke I knew instinctively the house was empty. I searched it to make certain, looking into every room, softly calling Tahileh’s name. My head was clearer than it should have been by rights, which I was glad of. I would have felt uneasy driving at the speed I did down Beluett’s gravel roads with a cotton mouth or splitting skull.

As it was, I had a sick taste in the back of my mouth, a sick churning in my gut, as I went to Leuhovesen’s door.

It hung open. I went inside, and found myself repeating the search I had made at my own house, calling Leuhovesen’s name instead of Tahileh’s. I had as much success.

I found *Invitation of the Queen of the Bright Lands* sitting on the kitchen table. The red ribbon bookmark had been replaced by a slip of paper.

*Hary,*

*I told her you were my friend and for that reason she has spared you. For now. Please leave quickly.*

*-Ander*

I read the pages marked by the note, but there was nothing special in them, only a prayer to some Djubati spirit, and an account of the Queen's wedding night—I couldn't stand to read very far.

It is right that that book is forbidden.

I burned it and the note in the farmhouse stove.

As an officer of the New Order, I did not abandon my post. Whatever Leuhovesen cautioned about speed, once I put in my request for a reassignment I waited the four months it took to find me a new post in Laidia.

They never found Leuhovesen. Perhaps the waterfalls would have answered the mystery, but for four months I avoided the south end of the valley.

I can't grieve for him, not in good conscience. I do grieve for the three lost scouts, who couldn't have deserved their deaths, no matter what they did or wanted to do. It was understandable, after all. Even Leuhovesen gave in to it.

I still remember the Djubata's ecstatic cry, and the triumph in it. I know she was dark, so I wonder why, in my dreams, it is only her silken hair like shadows; the rest of her is pale and piercingly bright.

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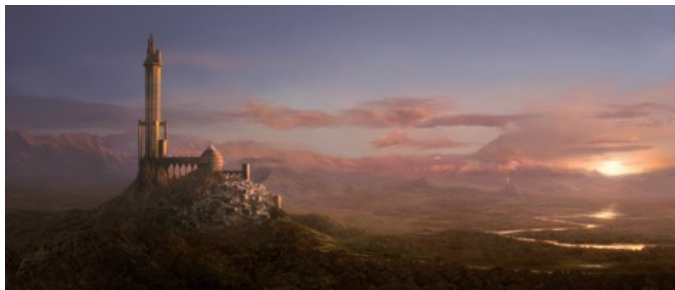
*Therese Arkenberg is a student at Carroll University in Wisconsin. She has fiction published or forthcoming from Kaleidotrope and the anthologies All About Eve, Things We Are Not, Thoughtcrime Experiments, Warrior Wisewoman 3, and Sword and Sorceress XXIV. Her novella Aqua Vitae has been accepted by WolfSinger Publications for a 2011 release. She blogs sporadically at <http://mumbling-sage.livejournal.com/>.*

**Beneath  
Ceaseless  
Skies**

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

## COVER ART

### “Spring Sunset,” by Andreas Rocha



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

*Beneath Ceaseless Skies*

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