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DYING ON THE ELEPHANT ROAD

by Steve Rasnic Tem

Sometimes a moment's mistake tells the whole story. In Abraham's case, it was love for a woman which sent him foolishly leaping in front of a panicked herd of elephants, waving his hands, shouting, trying to divert them from trampling his beloved, who'd already had the good sense to get herself to safety.

Abraham's own good sense, unfortunately, had always arrived late. His last thought, before the herd pounded him into gooey mortar for the stony trail, was simply, *oh Lord, what have I done?*

* * *

His next few thoughts were less focused, hampered by the fact that bits of his brain were widely scattered and confused by a vision of the tattered little man hovering over him with a small jar, one bent twig of a finger dripping ointment.

"Try not to wince overly much, would you?" the fellow admonished. "It makes it difficult to put things back together straight."

Abe recognized him—a ragged beggar who squatted beside the elephant road all day. Not a very successful beggar, since he never asked for anything, simply stared at the merchants and other travelers with large, red-haloed eyes. Never said thank you, either, when anyone threw him a coin. Was he taking advantage of Abe's unfortunate accident by robbing him? Abe tried to squirm away but felt, oddly, as if he had nothing to squirm. He felt his facial muscles shudder.

“No twitching, either, if you don't mind,” the beggar said. “Or is having your chin under one ear a look that appeals to you?”

Abe had no idea what he was talking about, but tried to remain still. The ointment *was* soothing, with a bit of tingle. Between applications the beggar picked things up off the road. Abe couldn't quite see. His head was tilted back as if he were looking out of a hole in the pavement. But somehow the ointment seemed to be lifting his body a little higher each time.

Then he noticed that the beggar's fingers, both of his hands, his wrists, parts of the arms were stained. Disgusting. But beggars were occupationally filthy. He couldn't stand to see the beggar putting those stained hands into the ointment and then touching his body.

Abe tried to speak but could not. It wasn't that he was hoarse, or momentarily inarticulate. He didn't seem to have the necessary mechanism.

His eyes must have betrayed his distress, because the beggar said, "Wait a moment. We are not quite there yet." And then the beggar reached forth those blood- and gore-encrusted appendages and put them all over the lower half of Abe's face. Abe discovered that he could now turn his head, and when he did he was assaulted by the sight of his ruined left arm, no hand visible, and as he looked down he realized his head was attached to nothing more than a mat of blood, torn tissue, and bone fragments.

"Oh my Lord!" he cried. "My hateful, miserable Lord!"

"Please don't do that," the beggar said, pursing his lips. "This is rather delicate repair work, as you might appreciate."

"Ointment! You're going to fix me with makeup!"

"Well, that is hardly accurate. Besides, far more than your face is in need of restoration."

Abe might have argued the point, but he lost consciousness instead.

* * *

Abe awakened under a tree off the side of the elephant road. He seemed to be sitting, his back supported by the trunk. He looked down, and that appeared to be his torso and legs

beneath him—at least they were of the proper size and proportion, but wrapped in clothing not his own. He raised his hands and examined them. They looked like broken pottery clumsily glued back together.

“The lines will fade over time, although there may be some residual scarring. No doubt you yourself will always see the scars, even after they’ve disappeared.” The old twist of a man busied himself as he talked, putting things in glass jars, stoppering and labeling them. The contents were red, pink, white, yellow, unidentifiable yet vaguely familiar.

“Please don’t tell me that that’s me in those jars,” Abe said hoarsely.

“Well, obviously not all of you. A little bone, a little blood, inconsequential bits of organ, a finger-sized strip of brain. Nothing essential, I assure you.” He paused, apparently puzzling over how to word a particular label, then looked directly at Abe. “I might have asked your permission, perhaps, but people in your condition are seldom able to give the question due deliberation.”

“You aren’t a beggar, are you?”

The not-a-beggar laughed. “Philoneous, a wizard. Last name missing, or stolen—I’m still trying to work that little conundrum out. Pardon these poor threads, but they make one anonymous, a good thing, I think, even in the best of times.”

“And yet I’ve seen you accept coins, scraps of food from the passersby.”

“I never return gifts of money, do you? And I don’t always eat the food. In any case, these pieces of you are payment for services rendered. There are always bits left over when you put something together, have you noticed? And I assure you, I know what to do with those bits. I will get far more out of them than you ever could.”

“I think I’d like to go home now,” Abe said weakly.

“I am sure you would. But first I need you to perform a small task for me. A minor favor, but it is the final payment I require for this major miracle I have performed for you.” The wizard’s smile wasn’t very wizardly. To Abe it looked like the lopsided grin of a fool.

“I’m afraid I’m not at my best,” Abe replied.

“Of course not—not everyone made pavement is able to talk about it afterward. Here, come walk with me. The exercise will help you feel better, and I can inform you of your task.”

Abe did not want a task to do. In fact, Abe wanted nothing. A thorough trampling had relieved him of all desire—he wondered if Philoneous might have collected his desire into one of those jars. But he had no will, either, and so followed, content to have someone tell him what to do.

But he couldn't quite bring himself to set foot on the elephant road. What if Philoneous hadn't found all of him, and he trod on his own remains? The wizard gently coaxed but finally gave in and walked with Abe a pace off the roadbed. Abe lagged behind him a step, watching the way the old man moved. He walked with a certain regalness, despite the shabby robes. Satchels and bags and jars hung all over him, swaying and clinking and giving the illusion of some sort of mobile shop. And he diverted his path for no one, whatever their station. They all stepped out of his way.

The road was full of merchants and shoppers, students and priests, the periodic strolling musician or jester. And true beggars, their hands thrusting like the beaks of eager geese. The occasional cart. And of course the occasional elephant, revered and untouchable as they had always been. He felt the various puzzle-pieces of his flesh shrink away independently, making him burn and itch all over, but he dared not scratch for fear of de-quilting himself. At least these specific elephants were calm and walked among the people as if they owned this road, which—of course—they did.

Suddenly the short wizard was right under his shoulder, peering up with that loopy grin. "The problem, you see, is my hat, or lack thereof." Naturally Abe's eyes were drawn to the

wizard's scalp, bald and raw as a plucked chicken's, as bumpy as a bowl full of beans. Unhealthy, split beans.

Abe averted his eyes, mumbling "I see your need."

"The merchant Vangelin has it, claims to have won it in a dice game. I have no memory of such a game, but that's never been proof of anything. Suffice to say he has my hat, and he keeps it well-guarded. He collects them, you know. Hats."

"People collect hats?" Abe didn't want to appear unsophisticated, but he was genuinely surprised by the idea.

A large woman pushed between them. She had six or more small children strapped around her waist. She told the children a story as she darted forward.

"He's quite fashion-conscious when it comes to hats," Philoneous continued. "I collect, other things, so it wouldn't be proper for me to make fun of another man's collections. Why, what do you collect? And don't tell me 'failures.'"

Abe stared at his feet, wishing the wizard had spent more time with them—he appeared to be missing some toes.

"Cheer up, lad. Get my hat back for me and you'll have a wizard's gratitude, and that's no small thing."

They were entering the restaurant district. Large balconies full of diners hung from the buildings like nests against cliffs. But he had no desire for food—in fact, the idea made him feel

ill. Had the wizard put his stomach back in? “Why can’t you ‘magic’ the hat away from him?”

“We don’t call what we do ‘magic.’ We are not magicians. We have definite limitations. Surely you know that much?” Abe didn’t, but wasn’t about to admit it. “We are scholar-technicians, at least that’s how I look at it. I require ingredients, tools. I know how to use those ingredients and tools to a very high level. That is the wizardry occupation in a nutshell. And the merchant Vangelin is a very powerful man. His guards would know not to let me that close.”

“Then why not simply buy another hat? Why all this bother?”

“A wizard’s tools are not replaceable. They are uniquely individual.”

“Your hat is a tool?”

“Oh, of great importance! It is both gateway and reservoir, shield and chalice. It is a focal point for transformations and communications. It holds everything I can put into it, and gives up only what I tell it to. Its delicate lining is stained with my dreams. It also hides those ugly scalp bumps you’ve been trying so hard to ignore.”

“Then why choose me? I’m hardly anyone’s idea of a champion.”

If the wizard answered him Abe did not hear, for at that moment he was sure he saw his beloved, the woman he had given up his life for, sitting in a nearby balcony dining with another man. He would know that profile anywhere, the long regal nose, the eyelashes as full and luxurious as butterfly wings, the lips pouting just as likely with amusement as with disdain. And her hair a waterfall of chestnut.

She glanced his way and his heart stopped. She leaned forward, pulling her hair aside with tiny fingers, apparently to get a better view. Then she shook her head and returned her attention to her dining companion.

“I recognize her from the road,” the wizard said beside him, “before your unfortunate mishap. Did you know she was well out of the road before you threw yourself in front of the herd? No, of course you didn’t. You also didn’t know she didn’t stick around afterward to see if she could help, because—of course—you were dead then. She could hardly control her impatience—she didn’t even look back.”

“She must have been too upset.”

“Hmmm, perhaps. But she appears to have recovered well. What’s her name, anyway?”

“I have no idea.”

“Of course you don’t. You’ve never even spoken to her.”

Abe gazed down at the wizard. “How could you know such a thing?”

“Such a commonplace deduction requires no wizardry, I assure you. Don’t you think, after all you’ve been through, that you should introduce yourself?”

“She is so beautiful. I don’t know. I don’t want to interrupt her evening.”

“You have interrupted *your life*. Have some perspective. She may be beautiful to look at, but from what I’ve seen of her, and I’ve spent some time up and down the elephant road, she is beautiful the way a garment is beautiful. That gentleman up there is eyeing her as if he were buying a new coat. In any case, what if we waited until she finished eating, accost her in the street?”

“I just don’t know if I should do something like that.”

“You’re the one who interrupted a highly annoyed collection of elephants! If only you had hesitated *then*!”

“I just don’t want to make a mistake.”

“Oh, bother! I need a champion who’ll make a decision, who isn’t afraid to throw himself at elephants, if I’m ever to get my hat back!”

Philoneous fumbled with the numerous pouches tied around his belt, finally choosing one and drawing from it a diaphanous cloth that fluttered out into a large flag. He held it

high in one hand, apparently so as not to drag it in the street. He looked at Abe and grinned, responded “Cape lining” to the unasked question, and ran for a nearby staircase.

Abe stood at the side of the road, not sure what he was supposed to do. The crowds pushed around him, everyone else apparently well-versed in what was expected of them. They were an exotic mixture of colors and perfumes, but he saw none with his sort of variegated, patchwork flesh. He wondered if he smelled peculiarly, given his recent history. He tried an armpit, the webbing between fingers. He could smell nothing out of the ordinary, but he thought it a difficult thing, trying to smell your own stink.

A commotion on the balcony distracted him from his self-examination. There stood his beloved and her lucky dining partner. Then something fluttered up above her head, and she was running, her companion shouting. There was Philoneous, at least as much as one might see of him above the balcony wall—his wizened head, his arms up waving—apparently running in circles, being chased, or chasing, Abe’s beloved, her entire head now enveloped by the fluttering cloth, her companion struggling to pry it off her.

A few minutes later Philoneous ran back into the street carrying aloft a beautiful reddish-brown cape with cowl. He passed Abe with no acknowledgment. After a small hesitation

Abe chased after him. They passed through a series of jagged lanes and less-than-lanes, careful to avoid the occasional slow-moving elephant left to wander unhindered into the farthest reaches of the city. Eventually the wizard pulled him into the shadows of a stable.

Philoneous held up the cape. “Slip it on. It is yours, for now.”

Abe never would have thought to wear such a thing, but it was so beautiful he could not resist. Immediately the neck clasp joined beneath his throat like the interleaving fingers of two delicate hands. The luscious perfume of the cape nearly made him swoon.

“How does it feel?”

“Marvelous,” Abe admitted.

“Good. Leave the cowl down, else you might find it a tad crowded.”

Abe puzzled over this instruction until warm breath softly caressed the back of his ear. *What is the meaning of this? Who is this person?*

Abe jumped. He tried to pull the cape off but the clasp held fast. The clasp tingled and burned to the touch. “Philoneous?”

Is that the name of this twisted little dwarf? Tell him to stop this, whatever it is, right now. And you let go of my hands, if you don't mind.

Abe squealed and dropped both hands, falling backwards into the wall behind him. *Aagh! You fool! You are crushing me!*

“Philoneous!” he shouted. “What have you done?!”

“No need to panic. You were the one torn apart by elephants, remember? Here.” He plunged his hand into his shirt and pulled out a square of shiny, stiff material, which he quickly unfolded into a mirror. “Use this to look more closely at the cowl. Focus particularly on that gap visible slightly right of the base of your neck.”

Abe did as he was told. In the dark hollow inside the cowl he made out a long, delicate, flesh-colored shape, and above to each side the beautiful eyes, the butterfly lashes, and below the pouty lips baring his beloved’s teeth.

Has no one told you it is impolite to stare at a lady above your station?

“Allow me to introduce the Madame...,” Philoneous began. “Oh, what was your name again?”

Oljon, you diminutive cretin.

“Hmmm. Yes. Well, this is the reckless young man who saved you, or tried to save you, as it were, if you in fact had needed saving.”

I know of no such person.

“Come now. You knew exactly what happened to this unfortunate lad. I saw everything. Certainly he was a fool, but he *thought* he was protecting you. That should count for something.”

The cowl did not reply.

Philoneous looked up at Abe with a sad smile. “I am sorry if this embarrasses you. It has become obvious you would not have completed your mission under the previous circumstances. I need someone both reckless *and* motivated, and with the ability to make a decision. I think that perhaps the two of you together, well, do you understand? Once you have gotten me my hat, I will turn her back into a lady, or whatever she was, again.”

And if we fail?

“Then young Abe will have you, but you will remain a garment. But surely that condition is not an unfamiliar one?”

You are an evil man!

“Well, hardly. I am not always a nice man, but your standards of evil are unrealistic, I think.”

“I have to wear her—*this* cape, until the task is complete? I cannot ever remove her—*it*?”

Philoneous scratched at his thinning beard. “It is customary to attach some highly impractical, completely useless loophole in such situations, or so I have observed in the

stories told by others far older than myself. Quite frustrating for all concerned. So then, suppose you can remove her, once only, and only for the purpose of transferring her to another? And even then, only for a count of thirty. She will always come back, one way or other.”

Abe closed his eyes. “Perhaps you should have left—” he mumbled, and stalled, unable to offer more.

* * *

The only portion of the merchant’s sprawling compound not under heavy guard was a narrow section of wall at the back, cast in shadow by nearby buildings and planted thickly around its base in thorn bushes. The only opening in the otherwise sheer wall was a small window at least the height of twenty men above the ground. Philoneous had supplied a pair of “cat’s claws” to meet the challenge of the wall—a kind of glove with metal tubes that went over the fingers, ending in extraordinarily sharp “claws” that went easily into the brick, the whole contraption braced over the arm with an arrangement of lacings and metal rods.

Abe supposed Philoneous had counted on his reckless nature where women were concerned to get him past the thorn bushes. The wizard had no doubt assumed Abe would just foolishly throw himself into those bushes and climb from there

onto the wall despite a fire of pain in back, legs, and groin. The wizard, unfortunately, had been correct.

Actually, the most difficult part of the mission so far had been the company.

There are thorns in my beautiful hair! Thorns! And you stink! You are sweating and you stink!

“Madame.” Abe took a breath and prayed for patience. “Properly speaking, that is not your hair anymore—it is a cape. But still, I apologize if I have damaged you in any way. Are you aware that I have thorn problems of my own? Twenty or thirty, I would say. In my feet, my lower legs, my belly, my thighs, and a nasty one in the groin area.”

I know. It is quite disgusting.

Abe ignored this. “I smell because I am exerting myself. Despite the help of the wizard’s claw-things, and they are quite helpful things, certainly, this is very difficult work. Hard. Labor. This labor naturally makes one perspire. If you were not a cape resting comfortably on my back, but someone having to *labor* up this wall, why, you too, Madame, I assure you, would stink.”

She said nothing then, a blessing he’d felt too confused to wish for. Wasn’t this the thing he’d always wanted, to have intimate talks with her in the closest proximity, her arms thrown about his neck?

And despite his annoyance, he recognized that his major fear of falling was what his weight might do to her upon landing.

There was a vague satisfaction now in the rhythmic, ever-so-soft pocking sound the claws made as they sank into brick, too soft for any guards to hear but loud enough to count off his vertical progress. He'd never imagined himself capable of such a physical feat and assumed that, besides the engineering miracle of these cats' claws, some rearrangement resulting in better efficiency had occurred when the wizard had reassembled him. Certainly this didn't feel like any magic he'd been told of when he was small. This felt more like old-fashioned ingenuity at work.

Which might all come to naught without perfect execution of a brilliant plan. And he had no real plan, much less a brilliant one.

Your skin is patterned with all these lines, hundreds of them, as if it were a map that had been creased and creased again, then perhaps crumpled into a ball before being smoothed out again and stretched across a frame.

Abe attempted not to sigh. "The lines are seams, from when he reassembled me. I told you about the reassemblage, how I had awakened mostly head and barely that."

But surely a wizard could have solved such a drawback. Perhaps you moved, or otherwise followed his instructions poorly.

“I really don’t think he considered it a problem. He is not much into appearances—haven’t you noticed?”

I realize this has caused you discomfort. I am truly sorry for that, but I did not know you before, so I tried not to think about what had happened to you. I’ve never liked thinking about sad things—there seems no point. Why would anyone want to think about sad things?

“I don’t think I even know how to answer that.”

I cannot as well. See? We are understanding each other.

“I’m fast approaching the window—any ideas about that?”

We should climb inside, if at all possible. It is getting quite cold out here.

“And then?”

And then we must find this hat.

“That is simply amazing. If you should have further ideas, please do not hesitate to share.”

* * *

The interior of the merchant’s dwelling was quite noisy. Abe had expected some sort of tranquil mausoleum, lit by a few well-placed lanterns whose light was only now and then shadowed by the gentle glide from room to room of barefoot

servants. It was the kind of peace only the rich could afford, and which he—the youngest of sixteen growing up on a poor farm—had always dreamed of for himself. The master of such a house might spend his time reading and listening to soft music, not hanging onto a sheer wall for dear life while being harangued by a talkative cloak.

But clearly some sort of celebration was taking place. Waves of sound climbed the stairs and rushed down the halls, rattling anything not spiked or tied to the richly-decorated walls. There was indeed music, but it was a raucous sort as if the instruments were thrown at each other by impatient apes. Abe heard footsteps, and fearing that his patchwork face would betray him, he pulled the hood up over his head.

WHAT are you doing?! He was not sure where her lips were currently located, but they had definitely brushed his face. It did not matter that it had been accidental, or that they had been flapping in anger. They smelled faintly of cinnamon and fish.

“Shhh. They’ll hear.”

She said nothing more but made subtle nudgings with jaw and cheekbones as if to create more room inside the improbable geometry of the cowl. It was not as if two heads were occupying the cowl—more like a head and a third, or a head and a half. Either way, he hoped the drunken guests now

passing noticed nothing unusual. As they strode by he raised his chin slightly for a peek—they each wore several elaborate hats jammed one atop the other pushed down almost over their eyes. Perhaps they weren't drunk so much as visually impaired?

But they were laughing, pointing at the hats and howling. Once they'd gone Abe made his way toward the stairs from which they'd come. He descended rapidly and, despite his beloved's protests, kept the cowl firmly in place.

The great room of the house of the merchant Vangelin looked more like a busy outdoor market than the dwelling of a man with taste and refinement. As he made the last few steps off the stairs a large black bird perched on a towering hat (complete with colorful windows and tiny pennants flying) soared his way, wingtip leaning into the cowl and touching his nose. His companion squealed, pulling away hard enough he had to grab the cowl on both sides of his head, gripping it desperately to keep his face covered.

Abe staggered to the floor and almost ran into a tall man with an even taller hat encircled with multiple spiraling rims. "Careful," the tall man admonished, then leaned over and tapped the top of Abe's head with one ridiculously long finger. "Not much of a hat," he said, frowning. "I don't know why you bother to protect it." He strolled away.

Could you please be more careful? she whispered urgently, spraying his forehead with spit.

“Then calm down,” he murmured back, looking for her eyes and finding one in a far off corner of the cowl. It was bright blue, intelligent, a star.

Abe stepped more carefully then, keeping his breathing as steady as possible, thinking that if he kept things calm, he might pass that calmness along to her. But this did not prevent him from feeling considerable surprise at what he saw in the house: heads held rigidly to balance towering collections of hats, hats molded of paper and cloth and foil and fur and—apparently—garbage, hats looking like shoes and books and animals and cages and even—disturbingly—like human heads, including human heads exactly like the human heads wearing the human heads. Hats with wings and legs and tails and fields of glittering, startled eyes. And wandering through the crowd were dogs, cats, pigs, some with fancy hats of their own, others bareheaded, the shreds of their hats hanging from their mouths.

“What is wrong with these people? How much did they spend on all this distraction?”

Really? I find some of these quite—well, I would certainly wear some, perhaps not all—

“Madame, have you lost—?”

Wait! I believe that is Vangelin!

Abe experienced the odd sensation of Madame Oljon aligning her face with his, pushing eyes and lips forward past his own as they both stared at the small figure near the center of the room, sitting cross-legged on a high cushion, naked save for a loincloth, smiling idiotically (not unlike, Abe thought, the wizard Philoneous's own idiotic smile). In all aspects of his person unremarkable.

But what *was* remarkable was the large hat of gently shifting colors, tip softly collapsed, rim fluttery with light, floating and turning a head's height above the near-naked man's hairless, mottled pate.

"Isn't that a rather large hat for Philoneous's tiny little head?"

Focus, please. I tire of this position.

"Certainly. But how do we retrieve the hat with all these people here?"

See the staircase behind him? You could reach out and snatch it away! Nothing could be easier! Quickly, we need a distraction!

"What kind of distraction? If I do anything these people will be watching me, and then how will I grab the hat?"

Think of one! If we do not retrieve that hat I will remain in this state forever! Damn that wizard for attaching me to such an imbecile!

“I will count to thirty. Be ready.” Abe snatched off the cape and planted it roughly on the back of a large passing dog. The animal reared up on its hind legs, howling, and raced around the room, the frantically flapping cape fastened securely around its neck with the pale, clasped hands. Abe imagined the Madame’s fury and could not resist a smile.

As Abe bounded up the staircase hanging over Vangelin, the caped animal continued to wreak havoc in the room. Towering hat collections toppled into one another as guests lost their balance and fell. Delicately-placed hat superstructures and accessories snapped, crumpled, and littered the floor as debris to be tripped, slipped, and stumbled upon. The other animals, now agitated beyond endurance, shook off their ridiculous headgear and attacked their masters and each other.

By the time Abe reached the correct landing and leaned over to grab the wizard’s hat, the room was in full, running disaster. Vangelin looked helpless, throwing up his arms as his guards rushed in and began wrestling with his guests. “No, no!” he cried, but without further elaboration the guards clearly did not know what to do.

Abe did not have to grab the hat so much as receive it. Once he touched it, it leapt into his arms, quivering like some frightened animal. Since the hat had had no actual physical contact with Vangelin, the merchant had no idea it was gone.

Abe tucked the hat under his arm and raced back down the stairs. He could feel the hat folding, shrinking with each step. As the caped dog passed nearby Abe reached out and grabbed the cowl, pulling it from the dog and snapping it around his own neck in one movement.

Not so rough! You will rip me!

Abe felt the wizard's hat folding itself smaller and smaller and then sliding into his hand. He pocketed it.

I was afraid you might not retrieve me in time! I tried, but I lost count after ten—I was so frightened!

Abe did not tell her he'd completely forgotten to count at all. The grand front doors yawned open before them.

Why are you slowing down? We must leave!

"There are guards around the door! They're watching every guest that passes through. If we attempt to approach without some sort of hat on my head we will draw too much attention to ourselves."

Then get a hat somewhere!

"Do you see an available hat? Every hat I see is either on someone's head, clutched desperately so as not to be lost, or

lying in shreds on the floor.” He felt the cape suddenly writhing about in a frenzy, twisting and rising off his back. “Don’t panic now! Be still or they will notice us!” Then he felt the cape cowering on top of his head.

Keep moving, and glance to your right.

Abe saw the mirror, and as he passed, a reflection of a grand chestnut-hued turban wrapped expertly about his head. The guards barely spared them a glance as they passed.

When they were out of view of the compound Abe ran to put some distance between them and whoever might follow. But even at this pace he experienced considerable pain—obviously he hadn’t healed completely. He could feel various organs struggling against each other as he pushed his body on.

You are slowing down again.

“I am.”

I have really had enough of this ‘style’ of existence. The sooner we reach that foul master of yours, the sooner I will be my old self again.

“I am breathless in anticipation. Or is that fatigue? By the way, he is *not* my master, anymore than you are.”

Move along faster! I insist!

“I really can’t right now. There’s an elephant ahead and I can’t get around it. They move quite slowly, you know, when they’re not trampling someone to pieces.”

I will not forget such a, such an experience!

“Nor will I, hopefully. Right at this moment it feels like the most real experience I have ever had.”

Abe walked slowly, but still was soon alongside the elephant. He was surprised that he was not frightened—perhaps he was simply too tired. He gazed into the elephant’s eye, then rested his hand on the rough flank. Then, with little consideration of the consequences, he leapt up and clambered onto the elephant’s back.

What are you doing? This is forbidden!

“It’s dark, no one will see. Besides, this elephant, I think he owes me at least a ride.”

You are impossibly reckless!

Abe sighed. “And thanks to the wizard I now know that recklessness is both my talent and my one true calling.” He rocked his body forward, nudging the elephant behind the ears with his knees. “Go, please,” he said less-than-firmly.

The elephant remained statue-still.

I do not believe that is the proper command.

“Have you a better suggestion?”

Since climbing onto these creatures is forbidden and riding them out of the question, might it be possible there is no command that will work?

A few minutes later having completely exhausted his working vocabulary, a dejected Abraham slid down from the elephant's back. He trudged down the lane, the folded wizard's hat secure under his belt. The cowl and cape fell into a sullen silence, interrupted now and then by a furious repositioning on Abe's head and shoulders.

Hours later dawn peeked over the tops of buildings and light began to fill the lanes. Hours after that Abe slumped to the pavement beside one of the public wells, filled both hands with water, and poured them over his face.

You've wet me!

"Aren't you as hot as I am?"

Of course, I am! Much hotter in fact—remember I am doomed to shelter you, and what, exactly, is to shelter me in return? Nothing! But that doesn't mean I want to be wet.

"Sorry, but the heat makes my seams itch."

Ugh. Please don't talk to me of seams. You are lost, I assume. You kept saying the way to the wizard's abode is complicated and that was why our journey was taking a lifetime, but that is simply because you are lost.

"It is complicated because he never told me where he lives. I think he forgot to."

And why did you not mention this before?

“He just showed up last time. I assumed he would do so again.”

How are we ever to get the wizard his hat back? How am I to return to my normal self?

“Funny, I was wondering how I was ever going to get you off my back.”

Idiot! In this heat I will surely catch on fire before the day is done!

“Wear this. It might help.”

What are you doing?

Abe unfolded the wizard's hat. It expanded immediately, the tip rising into the air like a tent top, unfurling the sides and blowing out the glistening rim. He slipped it over the cloak on top of his head. He leaned over to admire his reflection on the surface of the water. It looked grand.

This looks ridiculous!

“It'll keep the sun off until we find the wizard's house.”

Some hovel, no doubt. I—

The wizard's hat suddenly leaned over as if imbalanced but still firmly attached to Abe's head. His neck strained under the pressure as he stared at the filthy cobblestones. He could see the shadow of the hat and the bent tip suddenly spinning like a weathervane.

The hat rose, dragging his head and his unfortunate neck with it. It tilted slightly, giving his head a somewhat quizzical orientation, and then he was moving, stumbling sideways in an attempt to keep up with his headstrong headgear.

Where are we going?

“Ask the hat—I’m just trying to keep my neck from breaking!”

The hat dragged them around the corner and down a succession of narrow alleys. Abe was able to rotate himself somewhat until his body was properly aligned with the hat’s forward movement, and eventually discovered he could sense when the hat needed to change direction and adjust his position accordingly.

Still, the journey was no easy endeavor. Several times he had to leap over animals and prostrate beggars, mount staircases with no regard to the people already using them, plow through busy market stalls and slip through horrid pools of stagnant waste.

Finally they were headed toward a door of dubious vertical clearance, and only as he readied himself to knock did he realize the hat had no intention of stopping. At the last moment he thought to lower his head, and they rammed hat-first through a shower of splintering wood.

A few moments later Abe was looking up from the floor in a daze as the hat sprang into the air and, spinning, lowered itself onto the bumpy bald head of the beaming Philoneous. The tip bowed, the hat bulged about its base as if containing an explosion, and then it settled, content.

Philoneous looked down at Abe, shaking his head. “Well, I *suppose* I could find a few jobs around here for you to do in order to pay for the broken door.”

Abe staggered to his feet. Philoneous’s quarters were a riot of vase and jar, feather and hide, eye and claw, filth and gleam, contraption and destruction, mounted head and preserved foot, collected and dispersed and dissected and generally rank. He also had a very nice display of framed doilies along one wall.

Get me off get me off get me off!

“Excuse me, Mr. Philoneous, sir, my—erm—beloved has a request?”

“Ah, yes, the delightful Madame Oljon!” Philoneous grabbed the cloak at the back of Abe’s neck, ripped it off (the hand clasps raking at Abe’s throat as they attempted to hold on), and began twirling it rapidly in the air while mumbling indecipherably fast.

The cloak suddenly whistled, jerked, and ballooned with a rude bladder sound. Madame Oljon tumbled out, all legs and

arms, and the cloak disappeared. She struggled to her feet, stunned, her beautiful chestnut hair now a pile of brownish mulched rubbish. Abe tittered despite a desperate attempt to suppress it.

“Why is he laughing?” she demanded.

Philoneous considered her. “Well, it’s—fashion was never—I’m sure eventually—” He stopped. “Frankly, Madame, you have a rather serious case of hat hair.”

Madame Oljon screamed something inarticulate and stalked toward the doorless opening.

“Erm—Madame?” Abe called out.

She spun on him. “What is it, idiot?”

“I thought maybe—you might have a nicer sister at home?”

She turned back around and walked out, her hair snagging on a sharp piece of broken door frame. She tugged, a patch of hair ripped out of her scalp, she staggered, and continued on her way.

“Didn’t even say goodbye,” Philoneous mumbled. “Ah, yes, well I have some reading to catch up on. You can start your servitude—erm—work as my assistant—now by, yes, organizing this room a bit. I’m quite sure it will be obvious where everything goes. And don’t throw anything out, not even those little bits of wood. Everything’s useful, I always say. My, I’d forgotten what it’s like having an assistant, it’s been so long.”

Abe studied the catastrophe awaiting him. “So what happened to the last one?”

“Oh, you’ll find him there on the shelf somewhere.” The wizard smiled, and gently stroked his hat.

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Steve Rasnic Tem is a past winner of the World Fantasy, British Fantasy, & Bram Stoker awards. He has recent and upcoming stories in Asimov's, Postscripts, and the anthologies Werewolves and Shape Shifters, Visitants, Mountain Magic, and Spectres in Coal Dust. A collection of all his story collaborations with wife Melanie Tem, In Concert, recently came out from Centipede Press. Speaking Volumes (www.speakingvolumes.us) has brought out Invisible, a six CD audio and downloadable MP3 collection of some of his recent stories, most previously uncollected, and his first two novels have just been re-released as ebooks from crossroadpress.com.

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BELOVED OF THE SUN

by Ann Leckie

I knelt on a woven mat. The room was dark, the walls barely visible. A low fire burned on the packed-earth floor. Human heads circled the fire, eyes shadowed, dark mouths open as though they were about to speak or scream. The fire flared up momentarily, and I saw they were round clay pots, the faces molded and painted on.

Across the fire from me sat a man in leggings and linen shirt, his face strong-boned and sharp, long black hair pulled back. Behind him sat a large, dark bird on a perch.

“She sees,” said a voice like wind through an empty jar. “She hears. She may or may not understand what she hears. But her mind seems to receive speech as words, not merely sounds.”

“But she doesn’t speak,” said the man. “Is there damage?”

My gaze dropped to the mat. The low fire made shadows waver in its surface.

“Possibly,” said the windy voice. “According to witnesses she was underwater for at least ten minutes.”

“Probably longer,” said the man. “And she wasn’t dead?”

A tiny fragment of shadow crept out of a valley in the grass mat, wavered, grew large and then small again. An ant. It crept towards my hand, that I had placed on the mat to steady myself. Or had I? I had no memory of coming here, of kneeling down.

“The cold saved her,” said the windy voice. I thought it belonged to one of the clay heads.

“We could torture her, to make her speak,” said the man. “But it might not work, and it would defeat the purpose. The sacrifice must be without perceptible flaw, and she would almost certainly be damaged in the process.”

The ant, having labored across the mat, set one delicate leg on the base of my thumb, then another.

“What threatens me?” asked the bird suddenly, in a grating, screaming voice. It flapped its wings. “Who threatens me?”

“Nothing threatens you, Lord Sun,” replied a chorus of airy voices. “No one opposes you.”

“Well,” said the man after a moment. “She’s damaged, so we can’t use her. Get up, Itet.” Silence. He stood, walked around the fire, took my arm—not the side with the ant, which was now halfway to my wrist—and pulled me up, turned me around, and led me out through a door into daylight, bitter cold.

The ground in front of us sloped away into white. Far below more white, a flat expanse of it, tracked with paths, and farther off high, square, flat-topped hills and low, snow covered houses, and trees. Nothing in the landscape was familiar to me, but I felt neither surprise nor curiosity.

The tops of the trees were below our feet. Curving around the horizon to the right, a river rushed and foamed.

We walked down steps to a terrace, still high, where a dozen women stood, wrapped in furs against the cold, hair braided and pinned with bone and iridescent shell. Except one—her hands were bound, her hair loose and ragged. When we drew near, the others knelt in the snow, but she stood and stared.

The man loosed my arm, raised a hand. He held a long pin, like the ones in the bowed heads before us, dark wood inlaid with shell. “This was in Itet’s hand when they pulled her out of the water,” said the man. The staring woman didn’t answer. “I have seen it in your hair before, Eritiri. Itet was chosen to be sacrificed this year. And you were not. Did you think, if she was dead, you could win her place?”

“I would have liked to make you watch her sacrificed, before your execution. But you have succeeded in that much, at least—she is ineligible.” A twitch of the woman’s mouth, the beginning of a bitter smile. “As for you, your body will be cast

on the trash heap, a sacrifice for nothing and no one, like any common criminal.” The woman’s mouth trembled, and a tear formed and rolled down her cheek.

“Hondjetat, it will be you,” said the man, and one of the kneeling women started, head coming up and then quickly down again. She was very pretty, with a wide, round face and large, dark eyes. I shivered, wondering why I had to stand out in the cold. I wanted very much to be warm again. “All of you,” said the man. “Go home.”

Which was all very well, but I had no idea where that was.

* * *

Home, it turned out, was on top of another of those square, flat hills. The house was the same size as the building with the bird and the heads, but the fire was higher and brighter. A small crowd of girls in brown and blue wool dresses, blankets around their shoulders, stared from the back of the house, and six older women, similarly dressed, sat on a bench along the wall.

We stood just inside the door for three breaths. No one asked what had happened, or where the woman was who we had left on that high terrace. Then one of the older women asked, “Is she still the one?” Her pinned and braided hair was graying, her wide forehead creased slightly. Her face, with its wide jaw and jutting nose, was striking.

The woman holding my arm seated me on a cushion near the fire and set a blanket over my lap. “She’s damaged,” said the one who had held my arm, her voice expressionless. “He said it was Hondjetat now.” An itch below my shoulder blade made me think of the ant again.

The woman who had startled on the terrace sniffled. “I was never good enough. I don’t deserve it, it should be Itet.”

“This is no time for foolishness, Hondjetat,” said the older woman, clearly in charge here. “Or misplaced guilt. It wasn’t you who injured Itet.”

Then the ant crawled around the side of my ear, and a tiny, quiet voice said, *You are Itet.*

Was I Itet? Everyone had been saying so, but the name didn’t seem familiar. *You are Itet*, the ant said again. *And Eritiri tried to kill you. But she failed.*

* * *

Someone set a spindle in my hands, and it seemed I knew what to do with it. *Some things you knew but have forgotten*, the ant whispered. *Some things you never knew.*

There are many gods, but all share this one characteristic—their words must be truth. If a god says what is already true, it spends no power. If a god says what is currently untrue, its speaking must make those words truth. If making that truth takes more power than a god has, that god will be

drained, injured, even possibly killed. This is true of every god, from the smallest, least significant, to the most powerful. Anything a god utters is a binding promise. Gods are therefore generally careful with their words.

Women bustled in and out of the house—there seemed to be thirty or forty of them living here. No one spoke to me directly except the ant.

Gods feed on prayers and sacrifices. The more extreme and elaborate the ritual, the more power accrues to the god. Someone pulled the spindle out of my hands and put a bowl of gruel in its place. The other women took their own bowls and sat around the fire on cushions embroidered with flowers and animals, or along the walls.

“It’s so cold outside,” said one woman, after we had eaten. “Let’s have hazelnuts, and stories. Can we, Essferend?”

“We already did,” protested Hondjetat.

“That was for Itet,” someone said. The older woman—Essferend—gestured assent. No one had spoken about the condemned woman all day. A girl hopped up, ran to the back of the house, returned with a skirt full of nuts.

“In those days,” said Essferend after a while. “In the days before the earth, there was the Sun. We know this to be true, because the Lord Sun, the god himself, has said it.”

No, sighed the ant, *but the man working for him has*. The sharp-faced man in the linen shirt, I realized. *And unlike gods, men can lie with impunity.*

“He made the people, and every good thing for their well-being and enjoyment. He shone unceasingly on the whole world. He said one day, ‘I will make other gods, to assist me in blessing the people.’ He made Crane and Heron, Snake and Lizard, Antelope and Wolf, Sparrow and Hummingbird, Fox and Shrew, Aurochs and Boar, Owl and Vulture, Squirrel and Mouse. Ant.”

No mention of creating the river, note, whispered the ant. *He does not dare presume so far, even though so far she is his willing ally.*

“After making them He named them. But when he had named Ant...”

An almost inaudible indignant hiss in my ear. *The usurper did not make me. Ant was already one of my names.*

“...Lord Sun was distracted by Ant’s capering, and so He forgot to name the last.”

Caper, did I? fumed the ant. *For that one? Never!* Flames snapped. One woman pulled a hazelnut to her with a stick.

“Unnamed and nameless, it roamed the world on thousands of dark and silent wings killing, swallowing souls.

No one had ever died before. The people cried out to Lord Sun.”

We were already here, already part of a confederation of peoples who lived in what is now Lord Sun’s territory. We welcomed any newcomer who seemed willing to live at peace with us.

We were betrayed by our bonds to the river Schael. But the last one, the one he dares not name, even the Schael is wary of her.

“But Lord Sun had forgotten to name it! And as it was nameless, he could not speak of it. But Lord Sun heard the cries of the people. He called His creature gods together and said, *Make flowers, as many as you can.* They made flowers—cornflowers, poppies, chamomile, hawkweed, violets, every kind of flower. The Lord Sun covered his light so that the unnamed one would not see what they were doing. This was the beginning of night, when Lord Sun covers His brilliance so He may work His plans in secret, and triumph in daylight.”

The sun, said the ant, is a star. The world turns, and in the night we are on the side facing away from the sun.

“When the Sun rose the ground was covered with flowers. And in the heart of each one, poison. With its thousand wings, the nameless swallower of souls landed and drank. And poisoned, it died. And nothing that dies ever returns.”

That last is true enough, said the ant.

Though apparently *I* had died and returned—or something like it. The thought should have disturbed me, but everything was so distant, so unreal.

One would do well, the ant continued, *to be sure one's enemies are truly dead*.

* * *

That night I lay awake on a mat while forty women and girls slept around me, and the ant whispered in my ear.

Any good sized river (the ant said) can be assured of a comfortable living. Let it only be navigable, prayers and sacrifices will follow. The river Schael does not care if people love her or hate her, or who dies when she floods her banks. Does not care if war or disease destroy whole peoples near her. Others will eventually replace them, and they too will need the river, and sacrifice and pray. Children fetching water, fishermen, pilots of boats loaded with flint cores or copper or furs, anyone whose life depends on the river, will make offerings in the hope that she will at least not turn against them.

Since she doesn't care, she doesn't—usually—expend any effort to harm them. The prayers and sacrifices continue unabated, and the Schael receives them and cares nothing for their origins.

I sometimes wish for a river more like the Nalendar, to the west, who takes an interest in commerce, who nurtures the peoples along her banks. But the Schael is the river we have.

We made agreements with the Schael, for our own sakes and for our people. Three centuries of careful negotiations, of convincing her that the agreements would not curtail her riverine pleasures and prerogatives. I would be an hour reciting the details of those agreements, and the specifics are not relevant just now. What matters is that when the interloper came, and offered her half of almost every sacrifice he received, she broke those agreements. It was a minor matter for her, so much power does she have, so delicately constructed had the agreements been, for her sake.

For all of us but one it was a grievous blow. Our words had been made untrue, and while we were still reeling under the sudden loss of power, that usurper who calls himself Lord Sun had but to speak us into captivity.

That one remaining, whom I am forbidden to name, older even than the river, capricious and chancy, ravenous in one season, abstemious in others, beautiful and deadly dangerous: she forced the interloper to meet her in open battle. At the point of defeat, she said, "When I confront you again, your power will be broken."

The interloper, knowing that if she had the power what she said would certainly be true, said, “How will you confront me again if you are dead?”

And she replied, “Anyone who knows me can tell you that dying and returning from the dead is in my nature.”

After that he was at pains to remove all traces of her from his territory. Impossible, of course—even the empty space where her name once was leaves a shape that speaks of her. And if he suppressed all memory of her she might come on him unawares because no one recognized her. But he has done his best.

Which is why (the ant concluded) there are no butterflies here.

* * *

Over days the routine of the house became familiar to me. People would gather at the foot of our hill before sunrise to make offerings to Hondjetat. They cut themselves with small stone blades and bled onto strips of unbleached linen, which they burned. They called her *Beloved of the Sun* and begged her to grant favors when she ascended to godhood on the first day of summer. They left dried fruit and milk and eggs.

Hondjetat herself made bread for Lord Sun. Daily she left the house with the bread and a pot of milk, attended by two girls who lay blankets before her so she didn't step on the

earth. Anyone else crossing the plaza would look down and clear quickly out of her path.

The rest of us spun, wove and embroidered, ground barley and made bread. Essferend watched us all, and missed very little. She knotted and unknotted lengths of leather, counting things—quarts of barley, loaves of bread, pots of milk carried from outlying villages by thin, nervous children. How many received, how many consumed, how many needed for tomorrow and the next day and the next.

Days and weeks passed, and though I learned the names and the faces of the women around me, they never excited any other sort of familiarity. This did not distress me—I had nothing, after all, to compare it to.

It didn't snow again, or rain. The autumn had been uncharacteristically dry, the women said to each other, and this winter as well: only the one snow, no rain. This did not seem to alarm them. Every first day of summer Lord Sun in the person of the hawk spoke the prosperity of the next year—plentiful harvests for those who had pleased him, less for any who had failed in their devotion. Famine, perhaps, for villages that had offended him. But no town or village had offended him last year.

The skies cleared and the air warmed. The tattered remnants of the winter's only snow melted away, spring

breezes gusted, and the women took their work outside and sat in the lee of the house. Below, Hondjetat made her slow progress across the plaza. The girls attending her had to scramble to keep the blankets from blowing away. Men in leggings and short cloaks, women in long dresses, brought their own work out or hurried back and forth on errands as mysterious to me as everything else.

I put a fine bone needle to bleached linen, made small, precise stitches with indigo thread. The ends of the cloth streamed and fluttered in a gust.

What power there is in deception! said Ant.

Stitch after tiny stitch. It would be the petal of a flower. One of the girls had lightly marked the outline for me with a charred twig. The petal was already beginning to take shape.

Gods can deceive. One may speak vaguely or in riddles, saying what means one thing but also another. Or one can collude with a human. Let the human declare himself the god. The god will provide any necessary display of godly power—including, perhaps, an unnaturally long life for that human. After a sufficiently convincing demonstration, people will believe all but the rankest lie.

The blue thread grew short. I tied it off on the back side of the design and unwound a new length.

It's an old trick, but one that can only work for so long. The god in question must control or destroy any other gods who might betray his secret, and must prevent clever humans from discovering the truth.

I finished one petal and began the next. Around me women sang or chatted, spun or wove. In the silences between words or verses I heard the sound of stone grinding against stone, one of the girls milling barley for our bread next morning. None of them spoke to me. None of them ever did, except for simple instructions. No one seemed to truly acknowledge my existence. Except Ant.

Flower is its name, it whispered when I had started on the third petal. *Cornflower. That blue thing there.* It paused. *Can you speak of a thing without naming it?*

It seemed the urge to speak was beyond me, or knowledge of how to do it was lost with those memories that would have told me who I was and what I was doing here.

But Ant didn't seem to expect an answer. *The rapids you see are the one stretch of river that is impassable to boats.*

A woman beside me set down her spinning, raised her hand to shade her eyes. "It's a boat!"

We all stopped, except the girl grinding the barley, and turned to look upstream, beyond the beginning of the rapids. The boat was long and flat, nearly a raft with side rails and two

small huts. Three quarters of its deck was covered with bales and baskets.

“We need salt,” said Essferend. She rose. “Who’ll go with me?” Silence. “Itet.”

For the first time in all the weeks I could remember, I was surprised, a distant and unfamiliar feeling that took me a breath to identify. But I had been in the house long enough to know that Essferend’s orders were to be obeyed. I put away my work and followed her down the steps, around our hill and down to the river Schael.

By the time we reached the riverbank the boat had grounded at the head of the rapids. A group of people and their luggage stood on the bank, confronted by Lord Sun’s men, who wore knives at their belts, and bows slung behind their shoulders.

“It’s my personal belongings,” one of the foreigners was saying to them. She was about twelve or thirteen and wore a long, dark cloak which she held closed against the spring wind. “You know, *personal*.” She seemed confident and slightly exasperated.

“We search everything,” said the leader of Lord Sun’s men, placing his hand deliberately on his knife.

A woman in the girl’s party spoke. “We have nothing of interest to you. And we’ve brought the fee and will say the

prayers. And see here.” She pulled a pouch from her belt, pointedly avoiding the stone blade at her waist. She shook the pouch open. Gold gleamed inside. “A little extra for your efforts.”

The man’s fingers moved just slightly away from his blade. He would take the offer, let the girl’s luggage through unsearched.

At that moment the wind gusted hard, and the girl’s cloak blew out behind her, billowing wide. Down its center was a black stripe, and on either side were wings of brown bordered in black with a row of blue circles inside it, and outside that another border of yellow. It streamed and fluttered in the wind, seemingly alive.

Beside me Essferend made a distressed noise and turned her face away. Lord Sun’s men drew their knives and stepped forward. The girl’s party drew their own weapons and closed defensively around her.

“It’s only a butterfly!” cried the girl.

The woman who had offered the gold said, “We have safe passage, guaranteed by the Schael and the Nalendar.”

The leader of Lord Sun’s men shrugged without abandoning his threatening posture. “So?” He stepped forward. “I’ll see what’s in those baskets.”

The girl made an exasperated noise. She bent and pulled a rope aside, yanked the lid off a basket. Curious, I stepped forward to see.

More butterflies. Dozens of them, copper inlaid with gold, wood inlaid with shell. Shining black obsidian. Tiny as a fingertip, large as my two hands spread out, every size in between.

“I,” said the foreign girl, “am the youngest daughter of the matriarch of the Zuxugo. If you hurt me you’ll have a war on your hands. I’m on my way to the Nalendar’s school, to learn reckoning and merchantry. This...,” she gestured to the basket of butterflies. “Is the fee for my schooling, very specifically requested by the Nalendar. So you see I couldn’t have possibly left it behind. And you see what sort of trouble you’ll be in if you threaten me.”

“We have never been defeated in war,” said Lord Sun’s man, “Nor do I care about the Nalendar. Or the Schael for that matter.”

Yes! said the ant happily, almost a squeak. Threaten someone to whom the Schael has, against her natural inclination, granted safe passage! One step forward, one step forward!

Lord Sun’s man took one step forward.

Time froze. I was drowning, gasping, freezing. The scene before me took on a brown-green tinge, as though I saw it through cold river water. My lungs and throat convulsed, and I cried out, “Hawk!” A brown hawk plummeted to the ground before me, the bird I had seen in Lord Sun’s house weeks, months ago.

My mouth moved without my willing it, and I spoke. “The Nalendar has promised these people and their goods safe passage. I have certain agreements with the Nalendar regarding them.”

“You’ve broken agreements before, River Schael,” said the hawk in a grating, screaming voice. “What is the Nalendar to you?”

“And what are *you* to *me*, little bird?” I could feel the river’s anger, an icy flood inside me.

“Is *she* here?” demanded the hawk.

“I neither know nor care.”

The man who purported to be Lord Sun stepped before me—I didn’t know when he had arrived, all my attention was for the river that seemed to have filled my body and mind. “Mighty and beautiful Schael!” he said, his voice sonorous and pacifying. “Let us come to an agreement that will satisfy us both.” The hawk made an angry noise but it must have seen the wisdom of the man’s course, and said nothing else.

I—the river—made no answer. The man seemed to take this for an affirmative. He walked over to his own men. “Let them go. They’re not to spend the night here. They can take the next boat downstream. And they can find another route home.” He came back to me then, and the hawk shot up into the sky. “Is that satisfactory?” he asked.

A wordless sound bubbled up out of my throat, and suddenly the river was gone. I collapsed shivering to the ground.

“Is she alive?” asked the man, his voice surprised. “I’ve never known a human to survive speaking for the Schael.”

To my own surprise I opened my mouth and let out a croaking, “I’m alive.”

“And speaking!” The man seemed pleased.

“What....” I swallowed. “What were those things in the basket?”

“Nothing!” he said. “Nothing at all. Take her home, Essferend. Put her to bed and give her warm milk with honey. She’ll feel better in the morning.”

* * *

The next morning, Hondjetat insisted I come with her to visit Lord Sun.

Though the hawk was not on its perch, the man sat in the circle of clay heads. Seventeen of them. I thought of the story

Essferend had told, the first night I remembered. *Crane and Heron, Snake and Lizard, Antelope and Wolf, Starling and Hummingbird, Fox and Shrew, Aurochs and Boar, Owl and Vulture, Squirrel and Mouse. Ant.* I remembered Ant saying, *He had only to speak us into captivity.* They must all be tied here somehow, bound to the jars.

“My lord!” said Hondjetat when she had prostrated herself.

“You’re going to say,” said the man, “that Itet is cured and you think your place is rightfully hers.”

“Lord Sun sees everything.” Hondjetat sounded as though she were about to cry.

“I have reasons for everything I do,” said the man. “Your place is rightly yours. Or don’t you want it?”

“I do, Lord! I want it so much, only....”

“You feel you’ve stolen it, or gotten it unfairly. But you haven’t. Wipe your eyes and go home. All will be well. Itet, stay, I wish to speak with you.”

After Hondjetat left, the man said, “Ant! This is your specialty. Is Itet cured?”

The sound of air in a hollow jar became words. “In some respects. Her ability to speak is restored. Her memory, however, is impaired. She remembers nothing before her near-drowning.”

“What causes this?”

“I would not dare speculate. Some cases of memory loss are caused by damage to the brain. Others by an overpowering desire to forget things too painful to bear.”

“And the business down by the river? She shouldn’t have survived the Schael possessing her like that. Is it related?”

“I would not dare speculate,” said Ant airily. “But it strikes me as at least possible. She was in the Schael for quite some time. That sort of cold-water almost-drowning is rare. Victims don’t usually survive long after rescue unless assisted.”

“That’s an interesting thought,” said the man. “I’d wondered...it looked so much like she had died and come back. Which was worrisome. But at the time you said nothing threatened, and now I’m wondering if this isn’t the Schael’s doing. What can she be up to?” He looked at me. “Itet, go down to the river and ask her what she’s doing.”

My first impulse was to say, *You go ask*, but it occurred to me that the Schael might use me to answer. The man must have seen my hesitation, because he smiled and said, “Don’t be afraid. Just go ask. She is angry with me just now, but perhaps she’ll talk to you.”

* * *

The boat the Zuxugo had come on was disassembled, ready to be walked to the other end of the rapids. Two more

boats rested on the shore, these pointed at each end. *Those can go upstream as well as down*, Ant said to my unspoken question. Armed men watched as the boatmen unloaded baskets and bales. I wondered if Essferend had gotten her salt.

I walked upstream until I couldn't hear the sound of the people by the boats. Then I knelt at the edge of the water and called out, "River Schael!" And sat back on my heels. It was cold by the water, even in late afternoon, even in the sunshine. I shivered. "She won't answer," I said.

Be patient, said Ant, but before it had finished speaking a gray-green fish with a whiskered, pointed snout broke the surface two feet from the shore. Its head was large as a man's. Its body must have been seven feet long.

"You again," it said in a voice like water over rocks.

I had expected more time to compose my thoughts. "River Schael," I said again. "Why did you let those...." I looked around. No one else was in earshot, but I lowered my voice anyway. "Those butterflies come down the river?"

"The Zuxugo procured safe passage from the Nalendar," said the fish. "The Nalendar asked that I extend my protection to them, in order that she could keep her word. Their luggage was not an issue."

"So you didn't know?"

“I did not,” gurgled the fish. “Though it amused me. Those brave men, that god who fancies himself so powerful, afraid of a picture of a bug.” It gurgled more, and I realized it was laughing.

“Why,” I asked, wondering aloud as much as asking the Schael, “would the Nalendar require them to bring....” I stopped.

“It amuses the Nalendar to send humans back and forth carrying things,” said the fish. “And she is powerful enough that I do not wish to provoke her anger.”

I thought about that for a moment, and about the things Lord Sun most wanted me to find out. “Lord Sun is worried that...that *she* might have returned.”

Gurgling laughter. “The bird told me that she would never trouble me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It was I who broke the power of the land-gods your peoples held in esteem. And in among the rocks of the rapids are the bones of her own people who fought for her to the last. She is older than I am and very possibly more powerful. And her memory is long. I think it likely that if she returns she will attempt to give me some difficulty, and perhaps the bird will not be able to stop her.”

“Why doesn’t he just say she’s permanently dead?” I asked.

“He would destroy himself if he were mistaken or if he were insufficiently powerful,” said the fish. “Humans—or something like enough—have been here two million years. But she is more than ten times older. One of the ancient ones.”

That didn’t make sense to me. “How could there be gods so long before humans? I thought gods lived on prayers and sacrifices.”

“They do now. Tell me, what is Ant up to?”

I blinked. Opened my mouth. Closed it.

“Of all the land-gods your peoples revered, Ant was closest to *her*. Now it keeps close about you and its handiwork is obvious in your mind. I saw it when I was inside you.”

Ant had said it wouldn’t dare speculate about the reasons for my lack of speech or memory. That must have been an evasion—it didn’t dare reveal the truth. “But why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Or did Ant’s surgery dull your wits as well?”

I had no answer.

“I would not trouble myself,” said the fish disdainfully, “except that Ant’s involvement—among other things—strongly suggests that *she* will be returning. I don’t care particularly whether she does or doesn’t, so long as she doesn’t cause me any difficulties. Perhaps the bird cannot ensure that. She is capricious and sometimes deadly in her caprice. She has reason

to resent me. I do not think she is able to destroy me, but she may be able to injure me despite the bird's promise. Tell Ant, if she gives her word that she will not trouble me, I will not trouble her."

"But." I frowned.

"I alone," said the fish wetly, "matter to myself. What do I need that I do not have?" It dipped below the water and then re-emerged, river water pouring off its whiskered snout. "Ant seems to think that each must be tied to another in a web of obligation and promises. I am not an ant. I do not care which queen rules what nest. In the end they are still ants, and still do what ants do."

A web of obligations and promises. "What about your obligations to Lo...to the bird? What if I go back and tell him everything you've said?"

"Do, if it amuses you," said the fish, and sank below the water. I waited several minutes, but she did not return.

* * *

That night, when everyone was asleep, Hondjetat crept over to where I lay on my mat. "Itet," she whispered.

I propped myself up on one elbow. One of the girls sighed, muttered unintelligibly, and was still again.

Hondjetat was a motionless, crouching shadow in the dark. “I cried when I heard it was to be you, and not me. I wished....” She stopped.

For a moment I didn’t understand. “You wished I would die,” I guessed. She’d almost gotten her wish.

“When they brought you in from the river that night, I thought no, that wasn’t what I really wanted! But it was. I’d wished for it.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” I sat up, pulled my blanket up around my shoulders against the chill night air. “You’re not a god, your wishes don’t come true.”

“But I’m going to be a god after....” She didn’t finish.

“Are you afraid?” Just like my almost-death, she’d wished and wished, and then it had happened.

“What was it like?”

“What?”

“To....” She hesitated. “To be so close to a god.”

I hadn’t thought much about what it was Eritiri had tried to kill me for, about what it meant, that honor that Hondjetat had cried over losing, wished me dead over. I felt foreign, uninvolved in what was happening. And no one had contradicted that feeling. No one had been particularly kind, or behaved as though they had any attachment to me.

The Beloved of the Sun, said Ant, tiny and quiet, is decked with flowers and ornaments of shell and copper and gold. She is burned alive on the first terrace of the interloper's mound. Willing self-sacrifice holds a great deal of power, and she carries with her the prayers of the people, accumulated over months. It is a feast for the god who can achieve such a thing.

"I didn't die," I said to Hondjetat, when I thought I could master my voice. "The river only used me to speak. So I can't tell you what it's like to die, or to become a god." I thought a moment. "You wanted it so badly, and now you have it and it frightens you. Are you afraid to admit to Lord Sun that you don't want it?"

"No! I want it more than anything. It's what I was born for. I *am* nervous...frightened," she amended. "A little. But Lord Sun said it won't hurt."

The man, or the bird, I wondered?

"It's not that," Hondjetat continued. "It's...I remember what it was like, when we heard it would be you. I thought my whole life was over. I don't want to make anybody feel like that. And how much worse it must be, to know you had it but then it was taken away from you."

Hondjetat had so far struck me as teary and vacuous. Now I saw she was also absurdly generous, and I found I liked her

for it. “I’m not angry. I’m not jealous. You didn’t steal anything from me.”

Hondjetat kissed me on the cheek. “Thank you!”

When I am free to speak as I wish, said Ant, oh, what words I will say.

* * *

Even captive, Ant had plenty of words. All night it whispered, telling me about the flavor of the dirt under the city, the extent of Lord Sun’s territory, the lives of ants, from eggs to larvae to pupae to adults. The diplomatic maneuvering of sister queens and their attendants. Schisms and epic battles.

Butterflies, Ant said, tickling the inside of my ear, also go from egg to larva to pupa. The pupae develop inside a case that hangs from leaves or tree branches, or lies underground. Because they are helpless during this time, the case is often disguised as a twig, or a dead leaf, or something else a bird wouldn’t want to eat.

For some species the transformation takes mere days. For others—in the desert, or on cold mountaintops—the pupae lie dormant for years, until it rains or the air warms sufficiently. Many peoples, including the Zuxogo, and your peoples before the usurper came, consider butterflies to be a symbol of rebirth and resurrection.

“Ant,” I whispered. I wanted to sleep.

It hasn't rained all spring.

"Ant."

It's almost morning. You should get some sleep.

I sighed but didn't answer, and knew nothing more until morning.

* * *

When I woke I went to see Lord Sun. I heard voices through the door, the chorus of clay heads sighing, "Nothing threatens Lord Sun. No one opposes him."

"Say it again," came the man's voice.

"Nothing threatens Lord Sun. No one opposes him. Nothing prevents the rain."

"Something prevents it," insisted the man.

"Nothing," sighed the voice of Ant.

I thought of the river telling me Ant was closest to *her*. The door opened, and I entered and prostrated myself.

"What did the Schael say?" asked the man.

I repeated the river's words about not knowing what the Zuxugo had carried, about neither knowing nor caring about the Nalendar's desires.

"But something is wrong," said the man.

"All of you say it!" screamed the bird.

“Nothing threatens Lord Sun,” chorused the clay heads in fluting, discordant moans. “No one opposes him. Nothing prevents the rain.”

Silence, then, as though we waited for something.

“Go down to the river, girl,” shrieked the hawk. “Listen if it speaks to you. Tell me what you hear.”

“Yes, Lord.”

“And,” added the man, “don’t tell anyone what you’ve seen and heard here.”

* * *

I took my spinning to the riverside. Now I could speak, I hadn’t spoken much to the other women, nor they to me, but it was oddly lonely with nothing but the rush of the river in my ears.

“Ant,” I said, “what prevents the rain?”

Nothing, said the ant. It sounded pleased with itself.

“Then why doesn’t it rain?”

How did you get your name?

I frowned. “It’s just what people call me.”

If people called you Woman Who Spins, would that be your name?

“I don’t know. Is that how names work?”

Is Lord Sun, Lord Sun?

“You say not.” Movement in the grass beside me caught my eye. A stubby fragment of stick wiggled forward and back, slowly moving towards me. I wound thread, set down my spindle, leaned forward to look.

An ant, larger than the one sitting inside my ear. The stick it carried was still much larger than it was. Looking closer I saw it wasn't a stick, but something mottled in a way that suggested it was. “What is this?”

That, said Ant, is a very small part of a very large surprise. It's almost the last. It has taken a long time to collect them, and bring them such a long distance, and put them in place.

I remembered Ant whispering to me about butterfly pupae disguised as twigs or dried leaves. “You said there were no butterflies here.”

There aren't. But look, here comes Essferend.

I looked up. Essferend strode purposefully along the shore towards me, and sat beside me without greeting me. I picked up my spindle, suddenly guilty for shirking.

“I heard what you said to Hondjetat last night,” Essferend said after a while. “You've changed.”

She seemed to want an answer. “Have I?”

“You don't remember.” Her habitual frown deepened, her mouth grew tighter. “You laughed at her. You mocked her for

even daring to think she might be chosen. For two weeks you spoke of nothing but being Lord Sun's beloved. How much better you were than Hondjetat or Eiritiri. You were insufferable. Eritiri only did what everyone else wanted to do."

If I had remembered, perhaps I would have been ashamed. But it was as though Essferend was talking about a stranger. *She never liked you*, said Ant. I wound thread and let the spindle drop. "You were passed over," I guessed. "You wanted it as badly as Hondjetat, or Eritiri."

"You're not different after all," said Essferend bitterly. "Just quieter about it."

"I don't remember anything. I only understood after Hondjetat spoke last night. That everyone comes to that house hoping to be chosen."

"Each year three villages send a thirteen year old girl. One conceived and raised for no other purpose than to serve Lord Sun. When those three girls are twenty years old, Lord Sun chooses one to be his beloved."

That would explain the twenty or so adolescents. But what about the older women? The house held far fewer than it should. "What happens to the ones who aren't chosen?"

"Some stay at the house. Some live in the villages and only visit the house occasionally. Some kill themselves."

"It's a wonder there haven't been more murders."

“I keep order,” said Essferend.

Poor Essferend, whispered Ant. Far too competent to be wasted in the fire.

“Hondjetat is very kind-hearted,” I said.

“She’s silly, and weak-minded. But Lord Sun has chosen her.”

“He chose *you* to run the house. Someone silly and weak-minded couldn’t do it.”

“So he told me.” But her frown didn’t lessen. “If I had done my job right, Eritiri would never have done what she did.”

Suddenly I was sorry for Essferend. Her position of authority was, in her mind, a poor second place. She was too proud to accept less than perfection from herself, even so. And she had failed in that perfection. “What would have happened if someone silly or weak-minded had been in charge?”

Essferend gave a bitter half-laugh. “You’d be at each other’s throats. And you’d run out of barley halfway through winter, and waste half the milk.”

I didn’t see any reason to comment on that. “Why was everyone so afraid of that girl’s cloak? What was that in her basket?”

“It was nothing.” She made a dismissive gesture.

“If Lord Sun is the creator of everything, the most powerful god of all, why is he afraid of...”

“Lord Sun is afraid of nothing,” said Essferend firmly.

Lord Sun is afraid of nothing, echoed Ant happily.

“But if....”

“Hush! You’ve lost your memory or you’d know better. This is the sort of thing foreigners ask. They don’t know Lord Sun, they’ve been told all sorts of lies.”

“Why hasn’t it rained all Spring?” I asked.

“It will rain when Lord Sun wishes it. In the meantime,” she gestured around. “You see the plants all growing.”

No rain over his territory for months, remarked Ant. *If he failed to promise harvests, if he failed to deliver prosperity, his fraud would be exposed. And this year all his attempts to make it rain have come to nothing.*

“You must be right,” I said to Essferend. “I know so little.”

“It isn’t your fault,” she said, as though she didn’t actually believe it, and rose and walked back downstream.

When she was out of sight, the fish broke the water nearby. “Tell Ant to tell *her* that he asked me to flood,” said the Schael, whiskered and wet. “But it would mean flooding upstream and downstream from the bird’s territory, and I have agreements.”

“I thought no one mattered but you?” I thought of Ant telling me the Schael made agreements only reluctantly. “I thought you didn’t like obligations.”

“Some obligations are unavoidable,” said the Schael. “Besides, the bird annoys me.” And it was gone under the water.

Daily, Ant said, hourly, he loses strength that the sunrise and sunset prayers of the people are not sufficient to replace. He needs Hondjetat.

“Why?” I asked. “Why is it so draining?”

It can be very simple to make weather if circumstances favor you, if you know what you’re about. Given an amenable climate. But to make crops thrive without water—this is contrary to nature, this is not merely pushing clouds or changing breezes. All life requires water to survive, and so he must achieve a near impossibility at every moment, each stalk of barley, each radish and lettuce in each household garden must be made to thrive despite its lack. And though the barley will be in soon, the berries must also be fruitful, and the orchards, all summer.

“But nothing causes this.”

I have said so, answered Ant, and have lost nothing in the saying. It is therefore true. And I will say another true thing—it will rain before the first day of summer.

* * *

Two days before Hondjetat was to die, it rained—no thunder, no wind, just solid, pounding rain. I couldn’t go down

to the river, and Hondjetat couldn't even go across the plaza to bring Lord Sun his bread.

It stopped the next morning. Puddles of water silvered the plaza, irregular patches of gravel showing through here and there. Clouds of steam rose from the first terrace of Lord Sun's mound. "Lord Sun is drying the wood out for the fire," Hondjetat reported.

We woke the next morning before sunrise to make Hondjetat ready. One of the girls went out for water and immediately came back in the door. "Essferend," she said in a tiny, panicked voice. Essferend went out. I followed her.

At first I thought the plaza below had flooded. The sky was just beginning to light, and where I had seen puddles of water yesterday now I saw a dark, slowly heaving mass. Now and then it would splash up in places like spume, hover, and then flutter down again. Essferend turned, took my arm and pulled me back inside.

Everyone was motionless and silent, watching us. "Get back to work!" Essferend snapped.

"What is it?" asked the girl who had ventured outside.

"Lord Sun will deal with it."

Not ten minutes later one of the junior priests knocked on our door. When we admitted him he was holding his short cloak close around his shoulders. He trembled and jumped,

brushing his arms and legs convulsively, and told Essferend that Lord Sun wanted to see me.

“Work!” commanded Essferend, and the women looked away from her, away from the priest, and bent to their work again. But Hondjetat stared at me, eyes wide.

I went without saying anything to anyone. The light had increased, and as I set foot on the plaza I saw that it was one huge mass of butterflies. A cloud of them flew up where I stepped. One brushed against my cheek, and I started, setting more aflutter.

I had seen the image in the Zuxugo girl’s cloak, in the basketful of butterflies she had brought, but those had been stylized and lifeless. These were alive, brown, with one wide, staring eye on each upper wing. They didn’t fly straight as the hawk would have, but bobbed and circled, haphazard. The river Schael had called them bugs, and they were that, six-legged, with large, black eyes and antennae. Their wings were far more delicate than any gold or stone image could depict.

I was afraid. “Ant.” No answer. “Ant?”

I took another step. And another, and another, all the way across the plaza, butterflies billowing up each time I set my foot down. When I reached Lord Sun’s mound and began to climb, they dropped away from me.

The clay gods lay shattered, fragments strewn all over the floor of the house, even in the fire. So, I thought, Ant and the others must be freed, or destroyed. That must be why Ant hadn't answered me.

The man lay dead, the bird perched on his motionless chest. "He meant to betray me," it screamed. "Take this knife..." The hawk pulled a stone blade from the man's belt with its beak. "And kill Hondjetat."

For a moment I couldn't think how to answer that. Then I found my voice. "Lord, you've dried the wood out, I saw it when I came up. Why not bring her here?" I was only delaying. I didn't want to kill anyone, least of all sweet-tempered Hondjetat.

"*She* will attempt to prevent it if she sees. You can go stealthily, and work inside the house where she will not see you."

"You could..."

"If I leave the house I will be subject to an old curse." *When next I confront you your power will be broken*, she had said. "But I think she has given me a nice calculation of her strength. It seems to me that if she were confident she could defeat me no matter my resources, she would not have timed her arrival so close before the most important sacrifice of the year, the one I do not share with the Schael precisely because it

is so potent. By my reasoning, she must believe that once the sacrifice takes place her chances of victory must be lessened, if not erased entirely.”

“And therefore you are not currently strong enough to stand against her,” I concluded. A thrill of fear left me slightly sick. “You aren’t really the creator of the world, are you, because if you were....”

“That issue is not currently relevant,” said the hawk.

“If...,” my voice faltered and I began again. “If I do this, if I kill Hondjetat for you, will she become a goddess?”

The hawk eyed me warily from one side of its head. “No. She will merely die. You, on the other hand—if you do this for me you will have wealth and power and the people will revere you. You could live for centuries in such luxury. Does that not appeal to you?” I said nothing. “Come, Itet,” said the hawk. “Have you not always known you were better than the others? Do you not know in your heart that you deserve this, and more?”

I remembered Essferend saying, *Eritiri only did what everyone else wanted to do*. That other Itet, the one I no longer remembered, had been vain and cruel. The hawk must have known this, must have known such an offer would tempt her.

It didn't tempt me. But I couldn't refuse and live, I was sure. I picked up the knife. "So you aren't the creator god. You didn't make the others."

The hawk flapped its wings, settled again. "I have taken care of the people, given them food, and health, and safety from invasion. Do you care who rules, so long as you have what you want?"

There was, I saw suddenly, a reverse of that. Did he care about anyone else, so long as he had what he wanted? What happened when the health and safety of the people were no longer to his advantage? At least the Schael admitted openly that she didn't care.

But I knew nothing of this Nameless One, except what her own ally had told me, that she was capricious and dangerous. "She's down in the plaza. I'm afraid she won't let me cross, to do what you want me to do."

"I guarantee your safety, leaving here and crossing the plaza today. Put the knife under your dress so she doesn't see it. Kill Hondjetat, dedicate her death to me, and then stay in the house. Don't come out until I tell you it's safe."

I went down to the plaza, the knife under my dress cold against my body. At my first step into the mass of butterflies they flew up, circled around me, and then coalesced into a vaguely human shape that hung in the air in front of me,

swirling like smoke. “I am nothing,” it whispered, a shushing susurration. “I am no one. Every criminal dedicated to me, every foreigner executed for speaking an unseemly truth, has only made me stronger.”

“Why should I prefer your rule to his?” I asked, my mouth dry with fear.

“I never ruled,” the butterflies whispered. “I was one in an association. But if you would have a reason for his destruction, consider that his authority is built on deception. He must keep the world away or bring it under his rule, to keep his seat secure. When he topples—when, I say—he will take his followers down with him.”

The Schael had said the butterfly’s people had died fighting for her, that their bones were among the stones in the rapids. “Like your followers, at the bottom of the river?”

“I did not deceive them. They followed me from their own free choice. I did not lead them to their deaths with lies.”

“And yet,” I answered, “you led them to their deaths.”

“All humans die. The question is only when and how. Would you prefer a death you chose knowing the true circumstances? Or would you prefer to die deluded?”

“I would prefer not to die.”

“You have no choice in the matter. No, I do not threaten you. I only speak the truth.”

“I see little difference between you and Lord Sun.”

“Do you not?” asked the butterflies. “The one you call Lord Sun stands alone at this moment, his allies have deserted him. He gained them with bribes, or compulsion. It was a simple matter to deprive him through the same means. *My* allies are not so easily turned.”

The hawk had guaranteed my safety across the plaza, but this god frightened even him. “I’m going to walk now,” I said, more to bolster my courage than to communicate with the butterflies. “I’m going back to the house.”

The butterflies collapsed into a swirling cloud and then fluttered away to join the mass on the plaza ground.

I stepped forward and a cloud of butterflies enveloped me, dashing themselves against me. “You will die!” they shushed. “You will weep in terror and I will drink your tears and your blood!”

I put my hands over my face, terrified. But after a few seconds I realized I was unhurt. The butterflies still assaulted me, still insisted I would die, but nothing beyond that had happened.

I moved my fingers apart so I could see while still keeping butterflies out of my face, and walked across the plaza, step by slow and careful step, thinking hard the whole way about what choices I had, and what I should do.

* * *

Hondjetat sat on a bench by the wall, still dressed in her sacrificial finery, linen weighed down with embroidery and copper and gold. She wept, one woman on either side of her holding her hands. Others spun, or wove, or sewed, Essferend looking on.

“Hondjetat,” I said. “Come here.”

She sniffled, and swallowed a sob. The women beside her helped her to her feet.

“I want to speak privately. Let’s go to the back of the house.”

She made a gesture of assent. I took her arm and we walked to the back of the house and sat on the end of the bench there. “Why are you crying?” I whispered.

“Oh, Itet,” she moaned.

“Quietly.” I hushed her with a gesture.

“You were meant for this,” she said in a tremulous whisper. “You were so sure and so brave.”

“You’re relieved that it seems like the sacrifice won’t happen,” I guessed. “You’re hoping it won’t. And ashamed of that.”

She sniffled again. “I wouldn’t be afraid if I was meant for it. *You* weren’t afraid.”

“Listen, and don’t make a sound the others can hear. The women who have burned every first day of summer haven’t become gods. They died to give Lord Sun power. Their only reward was to burn to death.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Believe what you like,” I said. “It’s true. The fire is out of the question. But do you still want to die for Lord Sun?”

A fresh spate of tears welled. “No. But....”

“Then you won’t,” I said. Inexpressibly relieved.

Outside the house a voice like wind rushing cried, “Come out, bird, and face me!” The women froze, looms and spindles suddenly stilled. One of them made a wordless, frightened sound.

They might live, whoever won the battle that was coming. I didn’t see how I could. I stood, walked past them all, opened the door, and stepped out.

Across the plaza Lord Sun’s mound was a seething mass of dark, staring-eyed wings. The hawk arrowed into the sky, scattering butterflies in his wake. “I defeated you!” it shrieked. “You are nothing! You are no one!”

“I am Nothing!” susurated the butterflies. “I am No One! You endeavored mightily to make me so, behold your success!”

“You said when next you confronted me my power would be broken!” cried the hawk.

“Your power is broken!” came the hissing, whispering answer. The hawk screamed, and fell out of the sky into the plaza. Its impact sent the entire mass of butterflies into the air and for several minutes I saw nothing but dark wings. I thought of them close up, flying in my face as I crossed the plaza, so fragile and so terrifying.

Then, as if at some signal, the butterflies flew up into the sky and away in a black cloud, leaving the plaza wet and pristine, not a trace of the hawk.

* * *

Essferend wasted no time assuming authority, concerning herself immediately with supplies of food and water for the city. No priests opposed her; all were dead.

“It’s a good thing you lived,” I said to her. She ignored me; she liked me even less now that I’d helped destroy Lord Sun. But she had always been eminently practical, and the people must be housed and fed.

The other gods returned—Crane and Heron, Snake and Lizard, Antelope and Wolf, Sparrow and Hummingbird, Fox and Shrew, Aurochs and Boar, Owl and Vulture, Squirrel and Mouse. They conferred with Essferend, and messengers from the outlying villages. Everyone ignored me except Hondjetat, but Hondjetat was openly angry with me, and wept constantly.

After several days of this, I went down to the river. "River Schael," I called, without the slightest hope that she would reply.

The fish surfaced immediately. "The butterfly asked me to give you safe passage downriver, if you wanted it," it said. "She also asked me to give you her advice, that you take that safe passage." It sank under the water again and was gone.

"You should," said a tiny voice at my feet. I crouched, and found an ant on a blade of grass. "We need many of the hawk's officials to keep things running smoothly. Those who would reward you for your help cannot do so without offending those who resent your actions. And those who would kill you...."

"Don't wish to offend the new administration."

"It's uncomfortable for everyone."

"More so for me, I think."

"I wouldn't dare speculate," said Ant. "You are welcome to your own opinion. Certainly we used you. But had we done nothing, you would be dead now."

"She tried to kill me." I remembered the whispering assault as I crossed the plaza. "She said untrue things, and it didn't seem to hurt her."

"Did she?"

"She said I would die."

"And so you will," said Ant. "Every human does."

“She said I would weep in terror and she would drink my tears and my blood.”

“Then you will, and she will. Depend on it.”

I suppressed a shiver. The more I thought about leaving the more I wanted it. “Where do I go?”

“Downriver. Beyond our territory. To the Nalendar, perhaps.”

“The Zuxugo girl said the Nalendar had a school.”

“Ah, yes!” said Ant, sounding very satisfied. “We could use the connection, good relations with powerful rivers being advantageous.”

“You meant to direct me there from the start!” I accused.

“Take Hondjetat with you.”

“She won’t want to go.”

“She will be resigned to it,” said Ant, “or she will not.”

“And the butterfly?”

“She comes and goes as she pleases. Come, the boat is waiting for you at the other end of the rapids. I’ll have someone send for Hondjetat.”

I wanted to be angry at the way Ant had used me, altered me without asking, the way it was arranging my life without consulting me. But it had been a friendly voice for so long, and I wanted so badly to be away from here that I found it difficult to sustain more than dread and sorrow at Hondjetat’s hatred.

“All right,” I said, and stood and walked downstream, not waiting for Ant to lead me to the boat, and my future.

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Ann Leckie has published short stories in Subterranean Magazine, Strange Horizons, and Realms of Fantasy. Her story “Hesperia and Glory” was reprinted in Science Fiction: The Best of the Year, 2007 Edition edited by Rich Horton. She has worked as a waitress, a receptionist, a rodman on a land-surveying crew, and a recording engineer. She lives in St. Louis, Missouri, with her husband, children, and cats.

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COVER ART

“Fantasy Gate,” by Wolfgang Wachelhofer



Wolfgang Wachelhofer is an Austrian graphic artist and web designer who has a deep passion for surreal art. Most of his inspiration comes from the rich and colorful cultures of Brazil, where he lived for four years. He has done a lot of work for various clients for which he has earned a high reputation for his uniqueness. View more of his art in his [online galleries](#).

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