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THE SUMMER KING

by Megan Arkenberg

“Guess,” Boss Gaude said, dripping her sticky smile all over my parlor. “You’ll never—”

“Shit, Gaude,” I said, “just cough it up. I know Camden sent you.”

“You ain’t got cause to get fresh with me.”

“You’re wasting my time.”

That’s how it had been all summer—all Prairial, I should say, since that’s as far into the season as we’d gotten, though the air was already hot enough to singe. Gaude had taken to hanging around my place because her district, Acacey, was right on the river and it smelled like a corpse. So here I was, trying to collect rent and settle fresh-off-the-boat immigrants and keep influenza from reigning hell in the tenements, and here was Gaude letting Acacey fall to pieces and tangling herself up under my feet—when she wasn’t running errands for Boss Camden up in Eustache. It made me mad enough to spit.

Gaude may be stupid, but even she knows not to keep kicking me when I’m in that kind of mood. She sat straight and

prissy on the center arm of the chaperone sofa and swung her feet like a kid.

“Alright, I’ll guess,” I said, massaging my forehead. I’d pinned my hair too tight that morning, but there wasn’t time to fix it. “It’s not your news, Camden wants to tell me in person, and you’re jealous as a bridesmaid.”

“Of *Camden*?”

“Of *me*.” I took a deep breath and pressed my eyes closed with my fingertips. Nice going, Livy, now you’ve got the bitch confused. But this conversation was shot in the gutter anyway. “I suppose rent can wait. Did he say where to meet him?”

Gaude mumbled unintelligibly, which meant two things: one, that Camden was meeting me somewhere nice. And two, that he was meeting me alone.

Now, Gaude’s crush on Camden had been old news since they hung King Bastian, back before they changed the calendar. I couldn’t see the attraction myself—I mean, he was cool and smart and pretty as a peach tree, but he had this slow sprawly way of moving and talking that frustrated the shit out of me. How he’d kept Gaude in his bag for twelve and a half years, I’ll never know.

“Cough it *up*, Gaude,” I sighed, “and I promise I’ll let you come.”

She did, and I did, and that's how I wound up with Gaude in the ballroom of the old Hôtel Vienne, sheeting sweat in the ugliest armchair imaginable while Boss Camden of Eustache told me we were completely, irredeemably, and uncompromisingly fucked.

* * *

"The Assembly," Camden said, spinning the word out like a spider, "has appointed a king."

My jaw just dropped. I wouldn't've been more surprised if he said they'd appointed an imperial flower arranger.

"Shit," I said, and was surprised it came out clear. "*Why?*"

Camden shrugged. He'd managed to get himself silhouetted by a full-story window, and the sunlight made his curly hair into a mesh of shadows. Pretty as a peach tree, and knew it.

"Scapegoat," he said. "The Assembly knows we've got the people trained to spit at their coat-tails and now they want to pass the blame."

"They want to take over from us, you mean."

Gaude made a confused little grunt, which didn't surprise me. Camden raised his eyebrows, which did.

"No offense, Livy darling, but I can't quite see Speaker Jaque bringing bottles of camphor to the tenements in Olimpia."

“I didn’t say they’d do it well. But they’ve wanted to drown out the ward bosses for years. They know they can’t make the plebes hate us, but if they can hand over a king on a bed of rose petals—”

“Then they can take over for the bosses and we become superfluous.”

“Shit,” I said again. And stood up, and sat back down. “Shit.”

“That’s not the worst of it.” Camden slid over to the couch, where Gaude was busy arranging her skirt like a lady’s fan. He sat down right over the hem, which must’ve cut off the breeze on her fat shapely legs and oh, that just about made me queasy imagining it. I don’t know how Gaude, with her tight corset and massive crush on Camden—whose warm golden skin was just a squirm away from hers—well, I don’t know how she could breathe at all.

I picked a dusty fan off the dressing table behind me and waved it in a way I hoped could be described as languid. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Shit, Livy,” Gaude giggled. “Show some respect.”

“Shut up, Gaude.” I turned physically to Camden. “What do you mean, that’s not the worst of it?”

“Look at it from the Assembly’s point of view. They want to make the people hate the new king instead of hating them, yes?”

“Yes.” I didn’t need to say it, but Boss Camden’s bright brown eyes were like a magnet drawing it out of me.

“And they want to get rid of us, the bosses, who the people love.”

“Yes. But how does that fit—” And then I saw it, clear and hot as summer. “Oh, shit. *Shit.*”

“What?” Gaude asked, stupid as a peacock.

“The King’s going to kill us,” Camden said. He rose and went around behind the couch, where a splintered crate was hidden in the black shadow of a piano-forte. The bottle he dredged up was green and dusty and probably hotter than tea, but I was shaken enough that when he handed me a glass I gulped it like iced lemonade. “To make the people hate him, the Assembly’s got to make him kill us.”

“The people will protect us,” Gaude said. She took a glass from Camden but didn’t drink; the wine shuddered in her moist white palms.

“Gaude, darling, even you ain’t that stupid.” Camden rolled his eyes to me. “You see why I’m distressed.”

“I’ll kill him,” I said. Despite the wine, my throat felt like glue. “I’ll kill the King.”

“You’re no assassin,” Camden said, but not like it bothered him. He’d been hoping I’d have a bright idea to take the load off his shoulders, and it was beginning to look like I did.

Except for the part where my idea was fucking horrible.

“We have until Thermidor,” I said. Thermidor was the riot month; nobody would start anything until then, not even the Assembly. “Everyone can go to ground by the end of Prairial, and I’ll have the King’s head in a basket before you can say apple harvest.”

“How?” Gaude pouted.

Camden grinned wryly and raised a toast, which I drank without liking it. For the first time in history, I knew Gaude was thinking smarter.

* * *

“Going to ground” for Gaude apparently meant “moving into Boss Livy’s parlor.” Worse, her shitheaded worship of Camden meant she’d adopted his taste in decorating, which ran to stuffed birds and dried flowers under glass. So there was my parlor, looking like Queen Gloria’s Garden for all the Olimpia district to goggle at, and there was me still fighting influenza and employers and taxes on property I wouldn’t choose to keep a dog on, and—how could I forget—I had a King to off by Thermidor. Oh, yeah, and it was still fucking hot.

I'd seen the King once, from a distance. I didn't know if they'd made the title official yet, but that was what Camden was calling him, and what Camden said the other bosses all repeated. The plebes had picked it up somewhere—not from me, since I watched my mouth, but I knew plenty of ward bosses who didn't—and now it was stuck like a wine stain.

So anyway, I saw the King one day towards the end of Prairial, a little after the meeting in Hôtel Vienne and a little before Gaude dumped her plants in my parlor. Shit, the boy was gorgeous—not like Camden, all blond and brown and soft golden lace—but like something out of a fairy tale. His hair was this rich coffee-black, and his eyes were huge and piercing, and I swear you could smell apple blossoms just from looking at him. He was summer dipped in chocolate with a glass of rich red wine, and when he spoke his voice just melted in your bones.

I had it on passable authority that His Majesty was eighteen or nineteen years old; that he'd showed up in Bonifaz's orchard some nine years ago and moved between hostels in the bad wards ever since; and that he was clever as a goat about words but couldn't follow politics for a penny or a princedom.

It was like that old tradition they'd had back when I was a girl, of making some kid the King or Queen of May—May was

like Floréal or Prairial back then, I can't remember which—but anyway, we'd make this kid a crown of flowers and he or she would read speeches and poems and all that kind of shit, and like as not they'd get beaten up by the older kids on the way home from Acacey.

That was exactly what they were doing to this boy—only this time the Assembly had gotten involved. And where the Assembly gets involved, somebody has to die.

I was sorry it was him, but I sure as hell wasn't sorry that it wasn't going to be me.

* * *

I was fourteen or so when they hung King Bastian, so I remembered it but not the way people like Camden and Gaude did. I remembered the singing and the banners and these big heavy flowers I bought for my sweetheart, and the hot sticky pastries he bought for me. They were wrapped in blue paper, and my sweetheart's eyes were blue, and the sky that day was so blue that it hurt. So that's what a king meant to me, in its own strange way—songs and sunflowers and the color blue.

And I knew the new king couldn't have remembered it that way, but that didn't stop him from making blue his color. Not like livery—I mean, he never wore it, never wore color at all, just plain black vests and a shirt so white it could blind you. But, well, here's the best way I can explain it. Mama Stanislaw

in the rooms below mine has this Crotian phrase that she says means “blue-talk,” like whoever’s doing it is trying to talk down the sky. And that’s how it was with the King. He talked blue, all hope and plenty and sacrifice and yes, war too, because the plebes wanted something to be flamed about and the Assembly wouldn’t give them one. The King couldn’t give it to them either, but he didn’t know that yet. The Assembly was writing his speeches.

He lived in the old Hôtel Camus, which was just up the street from Hôtel Vienne and thus Eustache territory. The Eustachites tend towards quiet, though, and they didn’t take much exception to Boss Livy of Olimpia loitering under their windows. Well, the King’s window was actually a door, but it opened onto a blue-slate roof and I didn’t think his majesty was going to take a trip out any time soon—unfortunately, since that would make my job a lot easier.

For the first few days, I made like I was admiring the curtains. Stand beneath the nearest lamppost, lips quivering in excitement or peachy unalleviated boredom, shit, even fake a faint when His Prairial Excellency threw a glance at me. People like to see that kind of thing, and besides, it set me up as a silly love-struck bitch with more guts than sense. Scary but, well, harmless.

Sometime in the last stretch of the month, I made a bid to meet him. I mean “made a bid”—it was like the Winter Market on auction day. The Hôtel’s waiting room was just *packed*, with everybody shouting and offering up gold and silver for the privilege of kissing His Majesty’s hand. Or sticking a dagger down his throat. I’m sure I wasn’t the only one thinking to do it.

The guards must have thought so too, because they wouldn’t let any of us in. No, not one of us, not even the lady who looked fit to sell half the family jewels for the privilege. I pitched a tantrum, of course—not enough to be remembered, just enough that nobody’d get suspicious. Then I tramped down to Camden’s rooms in the Vienne.

“He’s not taking visitors,” I said as soon as he opened the door.

“Shit, Livy,” Camden said—drawled, actually, so I knew he was mocking me. “You’re no kind of assassin at all. Crawl through his window or something.”

Which I guess I should have expected. “That kind of thing doesn’t end well,” I said. He took a step back—not because of me, I’m sure, but I took advantage of it anyway, sweeping into the ballroom and taking a seat on the couch.

Camden’s lips twitched, but he only closed the door and stood leaning against the wall. The wallpaper was striped green

and red and yellow, and it did absolutely *nothing* for his color. “You’re not going to marry the boy, Livy. Why does it matter if you meet him before?”

“Shit, Camden, that’s not what I’m thinking. Can you picture me scaling a wall and half a slate roof and then having enough red blood left to knife the bastard?”

“Then wait.” He made a face that probably mirrored mine. “You’ve got a while yet. Keep listening to those half-assed speeches and waving your handkerchief. You’ll get your chance.”

It wasn’t very helpful, but it was all I was going to get. I took it and left.

* * *

The Assembly and the bosses didn’t like each other much, and we did our best to keep our distance. We had the people, the tenements, the carnivals; they had the law, the Hôtels, and the feast days. They hung kings, we cheered. We collected rent for our services and they taxed us, imprisoned us, shot us like sick dogs.

We trained the plebes to bite, and the Assembly lost fingers.

So a scapegoat made sense from their point of view. The problem was getting the people to accept their new whipping

boy. No, not accept—they took to him like flies to honey. The problem was making them hate him.

Some people—Camden again, and the older bosses like Hucky and Mirabel up in Greensleeve—just hated the *idea* of a King, and it didn't matter to them if he tossed golden coins out his windows, which he did, or kissed babies and grandmas, which he also did, or got down on his knees and asked them to marry him—which he hadn't done yet, but I wasn't far from holding my breath—they weren't going to like him. But most everybody else—including Gaude, who was thinking away from Camden for a change—well, most everybody else loved him for the coins and kisses and his pretty blue speeches. And they loved the Assembly for giving him to them, which must have been all sorts of awkward over in the Hôtel de Ville.

I'm not the gambling sort, but my fingers were just *itching* to bet on when the Assembly was going to say no, little children, you've got it wrong—*this* is how you play with your new toy. And the plebes would get caught up in the game, and next thing you know, the gorgeous Summer King is hanging and the old ladies are selling hot buns. Which would be fine and dandy, if it weren't for the fact that the Assembly was sure as hell going to kill the ward bosses to show the people how it's done.

Which was why I had to kill the King first.

Complicated, and maybe a little ironic. I don't know. There's a lot of things you learn as a ward boss, but irony isn't one of them.

I actually got to speak to him on 1 Messidor, at the horse festival. Not that anyone except the Assembly could afford a horse but, well, it's a nice gesture. His Majesty was sitting on a huge white stallion—picked out by the Assembly, you can bet, to whet the crowd's jealousy—and I was slouched over by the water bucket, waving at myself with one of those silly commemorative fans. He steered his horse over to get a drink, and when I looked up to see those big, pretty eyes looking down on me I just about fainted. Or, well, faked it pretty good. The King slid out of his saddle and caught me around the waist at the last possible moment, before I drenched myself in the trough or broke my act by stepping out of fall. So far, so good.

"Thanks, Your Majesty." I said.

He smiled—dazzlingly, his white teeth like a slice of apple flesh against the red skin—and straightened me. I think I was blushing a little. He really did smell like apple blossoms. "What's your name?" he asked, like the kid he was.

He may have been silly as a bird, but there was no way he was going to hear "Boss Livy" without thinking of some pretty nasty shit. So I batted my eyelashes, channeling Gaude like a hot wire, and said, "Livia, Your Majesty. What's yours?"

Part of that was honest-to-goodness curiosity, because of all the things the Assembly had let leak, no one had mentioned His Majesty's name.

The King looked a little flushed, like I'd propositioned him or something, but the smile didn't melt all the way. "I can't tell you," he said. "They haven't picked one yet."

His arm was still on my waist, hot like an iron rail.

"Why don't you think of something to call me, Livia? Something other than *Your Majesty*."

"Shit," I said, and that sat there ugly and twitching for a few seconds before the stallion decided he'd had enough and wanted to go check out the mares. The King just had enough time to swoop up into his saddle before the horse made a beeline through the crowd.

"Come and see me sometime, Livia!" he called, and then he was gone, swallowed up in the blue.

"Shit," I said again, and grabbed a palmful of water before I fainted for real.

* * *

"Good girl," Camden said—but absently, like his mind was swirling along with the wine in his glass. Gaude gave me a poison-steeped look over his shoulder.

"So you want me to take him at his word?" I asked.

“Shit, Livy.” The drawl was in his voice, and hard. “Why not?”

For once, Gaude got it quick. “Kings *lie*,” she said, nasty as a gutter.

“Not about wanting to see a pretty girl. *Alone*.” He gave me a short, inscrutable look before turning back to his wine. “And not about seeing us hang.”

“He’s starting that already?”

Gaude giggled until I looked at her. “You ain’t seen the handbills, Livy? Or you ain’t able to read?”

“I can read just fine, unlike present company. What handbills?”

Camden brushed the insult away like a fly. He’d tried being a poet some years back, and enough people remembered it that he was used to being called illiterate. “It’s posted on the lamppost out front,” he said. “‘All persons seeking unfair financial and political advantages through the exploitation of the people are hereby declared outside of the law,’ etc. etc. Thermidor’s coming fast.” He lay down on the couch, just brushing Gaude’s knees with the golden strands of his hair. “Take the King at his word, Livy, and soon.”

And Gaude, the silly stupid bitch, giggled like he’d lipped the world’s funniest joke.

* * *

The Varlows were fresh off the boat, fresh enough that you half expected them to trail salt water. They wanted me to find them rooms, which wasn't so bad, even though tramping up and down the stairs of every hot and rotting tenement between Greensleeve and Finn Street isn't something I look forward to doing again. The problem was that young master Varlow had been playing politics back home in Kazaria, and now he wanted me to get him into the Assembly. Yes, that Assembly.

Shit.

So there I was, trying to explain—in Kazarian, because there was no way they could understand me otherwise—that the Assembly was an elected position, and a bunch of assholes besides—and there they were trying to convince me that I must have gotten my own politics wrong because Speaker So-and-So at the Ashersen's house was so sweet and wonderful, and there I was again trying to remember which of the white-wigged featherbrains Speaker So-and-So was, when *wham!* opens the door and Gaude comes in.

She was still semi-officially settled in my parlor—which still looked like a garden only now it was dusty and wilted and cracked—and that made her think she had a part in my business. I don't know how Acacey was holding up, honest, between the heat and their boss being a shithead.

“When are you going to meet the King?” she asked.

Which of course launched the Varlows, who only caught the last word. They had some pretty twisted ideas about royalty in Kazaria. Fortunately—praise and honor to you, Saint Lalage patron of ward bosses—ma'am Varlow broke out in a coughing fit and I was able to bustle the whole family down into the kitchen where Mama Stanislaw could take care of them. Only when *that* fiasco was finally settled did I get a chance to start chewing Gaude to ribbons.

"Silly Livy," she cooed when I was finished. "Come on and let's get you dressed for royalty."

"Dressed for royalty" to me meant a black vest and powder blue cravat; to Gaude, it meant a sea of ruffles and a string of pearls long enough to strangle a horse. Guess who won.

* * *

By the time the carriage stopped at the Hôtel Camus the bleeding had mostly stopped. I dabbed at my lip with my cravat—burgundy instead of blue, my one fortunate concession to Gaude—and stepped out on the sidewalk with my head held high. Winning a fight always puts me in a good mood.

I won another fight in the waiting room of the Hôtel, where the little bespectacled secretary thought he was going to make me wait, until my landlord-glare proved otherwise. I found the King in his dining room, which was way up on the third story overlooking the street. I didn't know if he was happy

to see me or not—I was beginning to think that apple-bite smile was permanent.

“Livia,” he said, bright and a little breathy. I think he wanted to shake my hand, but I remembered my manners at the last moment and bowed to kiss his. It made him blush like a bride.

He was beautiful, really and truly. It was the kind of beauty that would make some people desire him, and others envy him, and still others—the ones like me—hopelessly, horrendously lost. I didn’t know what to say to him, didn’t know if the mind behind those gorgeous eyes would comprehend anything I did say. I didn’t want him, not his looks and not his attention. I wanted to burst into Camden’s rooms, hand him the dagger from my boot, and tell him to do his own dirty work.

But I was a ward boss, and I was used to doing things I didn’t want to do.

We ate. I don’t know what anything tasted like, but it smelled like summer, grass and sky and blossoms. The dagger itched against my ankle, but I didn’t dare reach down to adjust it. The King told me stories—not personal stories, which he claimed not to remember and I wouldn’t have enjoyed anyway. He told me kid’s stories about the Assembly of Flowers and about the Lily Boss and the Weed Boss and what happened when they met on the battlefield, and a hundred other stories I

had heard as a girl—only then it was the *Court* of Flowers, and the Weed Boss was calling herself a Queen.

In return, I told him about my childhood in Olimpia, about catching grasshoppers in jars in the abandoned lots on Gyre Street, about stealing apples from the trees in the back of Saint Banbury's cemetery and selling them to mourners at the gate, about the blue-eyed boy who had bought me pastries wrapped in blue paper on the day they hung the king. He smiled and laughed, as I had at his stories. He treated Bastian's death like it was nothing but a quaint dating convention, 1 Thermidor of Year I.

Then dinner was over, and the King came around to stand behind my chair, and I felt his soft warm hands on my shoulders and the back of my neck. I didn't like it but I'd expected it, so I managed to grit out a smile and let his hands do what they wanted to.

His lips were at my ear, but instead of kissing me, he whispered, "You wanted to know my name. Well, the Assembly hasn't decided anything official, but I'll tell you the one I've always wanted."

The conversation at the festival came back to me in a rush, and I just managed to save myself from answering the same way I had at the water bucket. I fluttered my eyelashes, the way

Gaude would've, and made my breathing hard and kind of panting.

But I must have been doing it wrong, because instead of falling over me in passion or whatever the fuck he should've done, he straightened and walked back to his chair.

I cut the act fast. "What is it? Your name, I mean."

"Sylvain."

It was a blue name, deep green-blue like a forest. I looked at him and shrugged. "It fits, but we've already had a King Sylvain. Four of them, actually."

"Then I'll be Sylvain the Fifth."

"No." I reached for a grape from the bowl in the center of the table, just realizing at the last moment that it was wax. I let my hand drop roughly. "Too pompous. You need an epithet."

"A what?"

"You know, an epithet. The Good, the Beautiful, the Flesh-Eater. Something descriptive. Something unique."

We spent the rest of the night talking about kings and epithets and the more colorful stories I could remember to go with them. By the time I got home it was morning, and I didn't remember what I had been doing out in the first place.

No, that's a lie. I did remember.

I was supposed to be killing a king.

* * *

The next time we met, it was by the Rivermill, where I had just gotten a job for young master Varlow. I don't know how Sylvain shook his keepers, but he had, and now he was standing in front of me with the river-spray in his hair and the smell of apple blossoms just everywhere.

"I've been thinking," he said. "About kings."

"Probably a good idea, you being one and all."

He blushed at that. Beautiful little fool. "No, I mean...what you were telling me before. About Sylvain the First and Bastian and all them."

"What about them?"

"Well, how did *they* do it? How did they get to be kings?"

"Shit, Sylvain, they were born into it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, their mommies and daddies—and on back for as long as anybody can remember—were royalty. That made them King. Or Queen," I added, to be fair. Didn't want to neglect Queen Parsifal the Flesh-Eater.

"Oh," the King said in a teeny-tiny voice. "That's not—I mean, my parents weren't even—"

"Yeah, well, you're different." And I deserve a medal or something for keeping my mouth from saying *scapegoat*. "The Assembly picked you."

"I know that. But *why*, Livia? Why me?"

I shrugged. “Why did God pick the old kings the way he did? Trying to understand that stuff is like trying to stick your finger through a needle’s eye.”

He was quiet for a few moments—thinking. Shit, I felt like it was the first time anyone but me or Camden had done it, and for a moment I considered sharing that medal.

“Did God really pick the old kings?”

“That’s what they used to say. Only it’ll probably get you hung now, so I wouldn’t go shouting it or anything.”

He was bewildered, just fucking lost, like a kitten at the bottom of a well. You could see it in the way he was standing. None of it made sense to him. Most likely he’d learned all the Assembly’s catch-phrases about the crime of power, and everybody’s equal, equal or die—and now here he was, king because he was pretty and had a pretty voice and the people needed someone to hate, only he couldn’t rule and probably wouldn’t’ve wanted to if he could, and now I was telling him that God had gone and hand-picked his predecessors—it was just fucked up. Almost as fucked up as the fact that we were probably going to kill each other.

“Thanks,” he said at last, not like he meant it but like he’d trained himself to say it when he heard something he didn’t like. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

He went—not the way he'd come, but over the bridge by the water wheel. The blossom-scent went with him, leaving me with the heat and the fishy-green river. All I could think was stupid, like one of the sayings of the *philosophes*, and it went something like this:

Kings used to be made by God. This one was made by men. And I don't know who I trust more.

* * *

Jaque was the only Assemblyman I knew in a personal way. He'd got himself voted up from Eustache about two years after Bastian died, so it wasn't like he was a regicide or anything, but he was still a nasty piece of shit. He liked to quote the *philosophes* and the Encyclopaedia, even though he didn't understand a word of them, and he dressed like nobody'd told him matching colors had been invented. Oh, and he hired a dumb kid to jump me in an alley once. That's how we'd gotten to know each other.

After his kid failed the job—and *really* failed it, I mean, took maybe a nick out of my ear and that's about it—Jaque had taken to dropping by my rooms and telling me how much of a stain I was on the robe of Liberty. *Etc, etc*, as Camden would say. Jaque was going to get himself lynched one of these days, but it wasn't worth my effort to pay a plebe to do it. Anyway,

his delightful little visits dropped out about the time they dusted off the crown for Sylvain.

So just imagine how pleased I was to come home and find him in my parlor with the flowers and the glass and the fucking stuffed birds.

“Where were you?” he prissed.

“I don’t owe you explanations,” I said. The Rivermill contract for young Varlow was itching me beneath my bodice, but I didn’t feel like showing it off to Jaque. “What are you doing here?”

Looking for a new job as the world’s ugliest gargoyle, judging from his face. “The Assembly requests that you keep your grubby warders away from the King.”

“And what does His Majesty say about this?”

“Nothing. He hasn’t been told.”

“Well.” I folded my arms across my chest. “The Assembly’s got a record of forgetting to do little things like that.”

“You’re not stupid, Livy. You know why we need him.”

“Oh, *I* know.” Damn this, but I wasn’t going to keep standing like a hire-girl in the middle of my own parlor. I sat down on the chaperone sofa and rested my elbows on my knees. “When *are* you going to kill us, anyway?”

“I don’t know what—” But he saw my face and quit that line in a hurry. “You’re already outside the law.”

And a stain on the robe of Liberty. Yeah, I remembered. “Come and talk to me when you have something to say. Now go teach the plebes how to play with their toys.”

He spat on the glass of the nearest display. “They *like* him, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And they like you.”

“Yeah. Your point?”

Two points, actually—his sharp little canine teeth, bared by the tug of his thin gray lips. “Which of you do you think they like more?”

That got me, but not the way he’d meant it. I let him get all the way to the door before I threw my dart.

“They shouldn’t have to choose, you know.”

Some *philosophe* had said that, that children shouldn’t have to choose between the nourishing parent and the loving one. I don’t know if Jaque understood me, but he slammed the door loud enough to shake the flowers in their glass.

* * *

If I wasn’t careful, it was going to become a routine.

I got up at dawn—typically to the sound of Gaude snoring on my sofa—and went down to Walischa’s Bakery, where they gave me a batch of day-old rolls for a quarter-penny each. I gave the rolls to the kids down by Philomel’s Park—some would

eat them, some would sell them to the shop-girls for a halfpenny. Sometimes I saved one for myself, but the heat did nasty things to my appetite. Halfway through Messidor I wasn't eating much more than fruit.

Then I checked in on my warders, making sure the pipes were working and the shops were paying and the kids had enough to eat. Sometimes I collected rent; other times I gave loans.

And I kept running into Sylvain.

I don't know who tipped him off, or else how he guessed, that he could find me down in Olimpia. I don't even know if it was me he was looking for. But he showed up like a wine stain, in all the weirdest places. Philomel's Park, where I was handing out rolls. Saint Banbury's Cemetery, where I was checking up on a warder who'd taken a job as a gravedigger. Even the jewelry shop where I'd stopped to buy a hairpin that didn't have anything at all to do with being Boss Livy.

Like I said, I don't know if it was because of me. He talked to everybody—bought rolls from the kids, flirted with the shop-girls, even left hyacinths and delphinium on the graves at Saint Banbury's. He wasn't acting like the Assembly's toy. He was acting like a ward boss.

But not a boss like Gaude, who did what she had to and kept Acacey in her clumsy hands but wouldn't go an inch

farther, and not like Camden, who once had a woman shot because she couldn't pay rent—and not even a boss like me, who argued with Gaude and got frustrated with the Varlows' accent and sometimes bought ruby hairpins with rent money. He managed the people perfectly and didn't even seem aware that he was doing it.

"What did you want to be?" I asked one day as we walked through the hedge maze in the park. I didn't like mazes but he did, and besides, it was the only path that wasn't hot enough to melt my shoes. "Before you became king, I mean."

"I don't know," he said. "I never really thought about it. It wasn't as if—" He broke off with a soft laugh, like pebbles rolling against each other. "It wasn't as if I had options. I'm an orphan, you know—no kind of family at all. The ward boss found jobs for me, but nothing...pleasant. And it wasn't like I had any kind of skills. I liked to think." He smiled so brilliantly it hurt. "But I was never any good at it."

"Philosophe."

"No." He said it gently, but there was an edge to it. "Poor boys don't become philosophers."

"No, they just become kings."

He laughed at that. We turned a corner and found ourselves in the center of the maze, where a gazebo covered in blue moss looked like a pillar holding up the sky. We sat on the

bench inside and tossed pebbles into the green lily-ponds. It was real easy, times like that, to forget that we were going to kill each other.

* * *

Camden sent me a letter on 28 Messidor.

Darling Livy, it said in pretty sprawly letters, it has not escaped my attention that His Majesty is still a fucking pain in our collective neck. How much longer are you going to wait to remedy this situation?

Yeah, you can bet on the answer.

Too fucking long.

* * *

So I opened the door, and there was Gaude looking like a hot and sticky pastry, and I was just thinking *now where have I heard this one before* when I saw that she was crying.

“Shit, Gaude, what is it?” I stepped back to let her in—she’d claimed the parlor, after all—but she didn’t move. “Camden wanting to see me again? Without you trying to jump him at every available opportunity?”

I swear I didn’t see her fist move. All of a sudden there was this wet crunch, and my face was stabbing pain and a sheet of blood was sticky across my lips. I caught myself against the door frame and shook there as Gaude pulled out a yellow handkerchief and wiped the blood from her knuckles.

“Camden is in jail,” she said, in the flattest voice I’d ever heard from her. “And your precious fucking little king is going to hang him.”

“No,” I said. Not because I didn’t believe it, but because I had to say something.

Gaude’s fist came up again, but half-heartedly, and this time I dodged it. “Yes,” she said, again and again. “Yes, yes, *yes*. And it’s your fucking fault, Livy. You’re a fucking coward and it’s *all your fault!*”

“I’ll talk to the King,” I said quickly. “It’s the Assembly that’s pulling this, not him. He’s not going to hang Camden. He knows Eustache needs a boss.”

“He doesn’t know *nothing* about bosses, you fucking bitch. Why the fuck didn’t you kill him? Why the *fuck—*”

I slapped her, because she was asking for it. It sobered her up some. “I’m going now,” I said, and wiped my lips with my sleeve. “Keep your fat ass in this room and don’t open the door for anybody until I get home. Do you hear me?”

“Yeah, I hear you,” Gaude said.

“Good,” I said. Not that it was but, well, let’s just say I ain’t stupid. I know when a house is on fire, and just then the flames were about to make a leap up to the roof.

* * *

Bribing your way into prison is a bad idea. I mean, really bad, like hand-feeding a rabid dog. It's just too easy to close the door once it's open, and with you on the wrong side of it. And there's a reason the Assembly pays its guards like sin.

And it is the Assembly that pays them, so it would be an even worse idea to drop by with a personal note from the King. Which left me two options; either I shoot the guards—problematic in the extreme—or Camden experiences a religious conversion and calls for a Confessor.

Bless me, Saint Lalage patron of ward bosses, for I have fucked up awfully.

I'd got a friend—well, more like an acquaintance, but I needed her help and that made her a friend—who spent two or three years in a seminary before they caught her selling cherry flowers, as they say in Acacey. She got thrown out, but they let her keep the robe and hat and collar, and she let me borrow those no problem. I mean, she was curious as hell, but I couldn't help that.

So there I was, sweating the starch out of the collar and hoping my hair didn't flop out of the hat, because Confessors are supposed to cut back on worldly indulgences and apparently hair counts double, and here was this guard who was just about the biggest prick since the secretary in Hôtel Camus, and I was quite certain nothing worse could happen

without getting a cannon involved somehow, when in popped Speaker Jaque.

“Shit,” I said, real prayerfully.

“I have been ordered to prepare a report on the prisoner,” he said. I noticed he was careful not to say who’d ordered him, which I guess was smart, because the guard was definitely in the Assembly’s bag but Confessors used to hang on to the kings, and for all Jaque knew they’d taken up the old habit. And I guess the prickly guard felt like his game was up, because he said real grudgingly how the Confessor might as well accompany the Speaker to deal with the Boss—you could tell it rankled, having all those people in one sentence be a lot more powerful than him.

So Jaque and I went down the prison corridor, and I kept my head down and didn’t say much more than a word, and it looked like everything was going to be just peachy wonderful when Jaque blurted out, “Are ear injuries like that common among Confessors, Boss Livy?”

I said something very un-Confessor-like and punched him in the nose.

My hits aren’t as strong as Gaude’s, but it was more than enough to take down ugly little Jaque. He crumpled like a handkerchief and I bailed for Camden’s cell, which I at least had a key to now. Behind me Jaque was cursing like a sailor’s

granny and howling for the guard, but quiet enough that I didn't think anyone heard.

The lock was rusty, which would've made it great to pick but really was shit for the poor key, and by the time I got the door open Camden looked about ready to rush me. His clothes were torn and a little bloody, and I didn't like to think what it'd taken to make his arm hang like that, but his face said he was more than ready to kill somebody if that's what it took to get out of there.

"Shit, Camden, it's me," I said. He didn't really relax, but at least he looked less ready to kill somebody. "I'm going to bust you out, but I had a bit of a run-in with Speaker Jaque and —"

And I never got to finish that sentence because all of a sudden I had a pistol between my shoulder blades. The prickly guard seemed to have dug up about fifty prickly friends and they were all aiming at me. Like I said, I'm not a gambler, but those aren't exactly what you'd call close odds.

"Congratulations, Boss," somebody said. It might've been the first prick, but once you get into it they all really sound the same. "Looks like you've got yourself a cellmate."

Bless me, Saint Lalage patron of ward bosses, for I have fucked up awfully.

* * *

“Next time I want a king dead,” Camden said, “I’m going to hire a plebe lynch mob and leave you down in Olimpia where you belong.”

Nice going, Camden. Pretend like there’ll be a next time. Everything’s easier if you don’t admit you know the truth.

“The sheer brilliance of it all,” he continued, “is that they don’t even need to hold a trial. The King can just snap his fingers and have us dead.”

“He won’t,” I said, just for the sake of arguing. “He knows me.”

“Not as Boss Livy, I’ll bet. And besides, do you really think they’re going to give him a choice?”

“But it’s *murder*.” I slammed my fists into the wall of the cell. It hurt, but not as bad as I wanted it to. “The Assembly’s going to kill us, and then they’re going to kill the King. And they’ll hand-pick another scapegoat and the whole damn cycle will keep repeating—”

“Shut up, Livy. They’re not going to kill the King because *you’re* going to do that.”

Well, he couldn’t tell me to shut up and then pull out the carpet like that. “Shit, Camden, how?”

His face told me I was a shithead to have to ask, but we were both crammed in that hot little cell and bleeding nastily and, well, once you get into it like that it takes more than an

ugly face to hurt your feelings. Camden tossed his hair like a barmaid and leaned back against the wall. “You’ll demand to see the King. Say the guards are forcing themselves on you or something and you need to get out.”

I raised my eyebrows. I mean, I’m no expert on how guards think, but if I was going to force myself on one of us, Camden was real easy the prettier one. “Alright, supposing that ridiculous plan works, do you really think the Assembly’s going to say shucky darn, looks like the King’s dead and now we can’t kill the bosses? They aren’t *that* stupid.”

“No, they’re that smart. Do you know how good a pardon looks to the plebes?”

He probably wanted to say more, but he made a too vigorous gesture and had to swallow this creepy little scream as it opened one of the gashes on his shoulders. I stopped being mad at him long enough to clean up the blood, and then long enough to think about what he’d said.

And in the end, when one of the pricks opened the door to see what all the fuss was about, I said I wanted to see the King.

* * *

Turns out Camden was smarter than I gave him credit for. There’s this law on the books that basically everybody’d forgotten about, and it says that any condemned prisoner “of adequate rank” can get an audience with the King if they holler

for it. So I hollered good and hard, and everybody got to concluding that a ward boss counted towards adequate rank, and they whisked me on up to the Assembly rooms so fast I didn't have a chance to kiss Camden goodbye. Not that I would've, but if things got knotty enough I'd probably never see him again, and it would've been nice to at least work in a handshake.

The Assembly rooms were flashy, but it was still the opening blow of Thermidor and they weren't any cooler than the prison. The walls were sage green, pretty but kind of stuffy, and the pictures were all these real dark portraits of fat men and women in heavy dark clothes. And I got to memorize just about every inch of them; just because the Assembly's going to follow some dusty old book law doesn't mean they're going to be fast about it.

I was sitting in an undersized armchair—leather, too, which does some pretty twisted stuff in Thermidor—when the King finally showed up, and I nearly flew into his arms before I remembered that he didn't know Boss Livy and it would be a bad time to let on to who I was. And no, I don't know why I thought that, why I thought it mattered what the King thought of Livia. I'm just a shithead, I guess.

Sylvain stared at me for a good few seconds before getting out of the doorway so a small tribe of Assemblymen could come

in. You could tell what they were thinking, and it was somewhere along the line of oh shit, please don't let him know and like this bitch because a royal pardon's going to throw one nasty wrench into the machine.

It was funny in its own way, how everthing'd be fine if only Sylvain stopped making the people happy. But that was like hoping we'd all wake up one day and find the sky a pretty shade of green. Sylvain was the kind of king everybody wanted back when they'd hung Bastian; now we had Sylvain, and I'd've given anything to be dealing with Parsifal the Flesh-Eater.

Sylvain turned to the Assemblymen and said, his voice like hot coals, "Why has this woman been arrested?"

"Impersonating a Confessor," I offered, just to see what the Speakers would do. Jaque wasn't among them, and that suited me just fine.

One of them—I think she was Gaude's age, but the wig made it hard to tell—spat on the rug at my feet. "Damn Confessors," she said—a real Assembly-like statement. "She's a ward boss, Livy of Olimpia."

Sylvain didn't look at me, just tilted his head like what the Speaker'd said was in the right language but didn't make any sense. Ma'am Varlow made that motion a lot. "I wasn't aware that either was a capital crime."

“Ward bosses exploit the people for money and political power,” someone else said. “They hold every official and unofficial position in the city.”

“We don’t have the Assembly yet,” I said, because we didn’t. They all twitched a little.

“I don’t care if they’re making a bid for the crown,” Sylvain said. He looked at me over his shoulder, just for a second, and turned back to the speakers. “I told you at my coronation that I refused to order executions.”

Well, there was an unexpected twist. I breathed a little easier for all of a second before the woman who’d spat at me dropped out the trapdoor.

“Yes, well, the people don’t know that, do they?”

“You can hang her,” Sylvain said, his voice a little quieter than before. “Just don’t put my name on it.”

“Yes, you cowards, let’s see you kill me on your own.” I sat back in my armchair, smooth as a queen. “Let’s see how the plebes like it when you hang the only people who care about them. Think they’ll feel bad when they find out your little toy king didn’t wind up to your orders?”

“Oh,” somebody said. You could tell it was involuntary, like they hadn’t thought I could put all those pieces together for myself.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” a man by the window said. He reminded me of Camden but red where Camden was gold. Little wisps of red hair stuck out from under his wig, and his cuffs were trimmed with red lace, like he’d slit his wrists and was slowly bleeding to death. “His Majesty is perfectly capable of following orders.”

I jumped up and took a step forward. Sylvain took a step back, and we were right on a level, and he looked at me out of the corner of his eye and froze. My heart just sank. There was a paper knife on the desk behind me, and I knew I could reach it in time, wondered if the Assembly would let me go if I just *threatened* to kill their scapegoat—

“I’m not afraid of you,” Sylvain said, and his voice stopped my thinking like a brick wall, it was that hard. “You can lock me away in that dungeon for as long as you like, I’m not going to sign a death warrant.”

“Yes, but no one’s going to look twice at the warrant for a ward boss. They’ll never know whose signature it really is.”

They had us trapped. I did the only thing I could.

I pointed out the window behind them and screamed bloody-murder.

Damn cheap trick, but it works surprisingly good. They were all distracted for about three seconds, just long enough

for me to grab the knife from the table and shove it down my bodice.

“Sylvain,” I hissed. “Take me to your rooms.”

He looked from the window to me, and smiled in a sort of vague congratulations. Nice job, Livy, you tricked the shitheads. Now came the hard part.

A bead of sweat dripped down my neck, followed the blade of the knife in my bodice all the way down to my stomach. And sat there, blue-cold in the heat.

* * *

The Assemblymen were pissed. Pissed that they'd fallen for my stupid trick, and pissed that Sylvain was acting like a king when they'd just told him not to. But they'd made the rules, and the rules said that if the King wanted to have a girl in his rooms alone it was his prerogative to do so. They'd probably hoped that particular rule would set him hell-bent on rape and wickedness but, well, you take what you can get. And right now the best they could hope for was that we'd smother each other with the pillows.

So they escorted us up to his bedchamber in the Hôtel Camus and stationed a fucking *pack* of guards at the door, and Sylvain and I stood on the other side and tried to act like it wasn't the most fucking awkward thing in the world. I mean, they didn't actually *think* the King had just been overcome with

lust for a woman several years his senior, but they didn't know why he'd brought me here and that made them the kind of uncomfortable that just seems to seep into everything around it.

So there we were, standing in the doorway of his gorgeous bedroom with its purple wallpaper and eggshell-blue couches and deep cobalt curtains, and there was the paper knife against my skin like a slab of ice, and I think I'd finally reached the point where I knew Camden was right. I was going to hang, along with Camden and half the ward bosses in the city, unless Sylvain wasn't there for the Assembly to pin its death warrants to. Of course, they might also arrest me for killing the King, but at least then I could claim revolutionary fervor or something in my defense.

Oh, yes, there were a lot of reasons to kill a King.

"Livia..."

I put a finger across his lips. "Sylvain, we don't have much time. I just want to ask you one thing."

"Anything. Livia, Livy, I'm so sorry—"

"Why did you invite me to visit you?"

He looked at me blankly, took my hand away from his lips and stared at it as if the answer was hidden there, like the palm readers in Acacey used to say. I moved my other hand to the

opening at my collar, so my fingers were just inches from the knife.

“At the horse festival on 1 Messidor,” I said. “I asked you your name and you wouldn’t tell me, just invited me to visit you. It must have been the first time you saw me, so why—”

“It wasn’t the first time I saw you,” he said.

I raised my eyebrows like Camden. “It wasn’t?”

“No. I saw you from this window, standing beneath the lamppost. A lot of people came those first few days, but you—you were always there. You acted so strangely when you knew I was watching, but when you didn’t...” He shrugged. “I followed you to Olimpia one time. It was late and everyone else had already gone. You stopped at an apothecary on the way home and bought a package of licorice, then brought it to one of the tenements and told the landlord to give it to all the children. Then you were gone, and I asked the landlord what your name was. He said Boss Livy.”

“Shit,” I said. He’d known who I was all along.

“I was surprised that you kept up the act,” he said. “Swooning whenever I looked at you and all that. But then, when I found you at the Rivermill, you were acting like yourself. And I admired you, really admired you, for the way you bought food for the children and checked in on your warders’ employers and all those other things. I knew you were

a ward boss. But you were acting the way I imagined a king should act.”

“Sylvain,” I whispered. There were fucking tears in my eyes but he was still holding my hand, and I didn’t want to break that grip to wipe them away.

“I’m sorry, Livy,” he said. “I didn’t want to embarrass you. I just wanted you to know—”

But I couldn’t take anymore. I pulled my hand away and kissed him, not a lover’s kiss but a hard, cruel, angry kiss that drew blood. I hated so much. I hated Camden for what he’d asked me to do, and I hated the Assembly for making it necessary, and I hated Sylvain for not deserving it. I hated myself, too, more than the rest of them combined.

But I took the knife out of my bodice, and I drove it up into his chest.

He made a little noise against my lips and shoved me away, so hard that I struck my head on the wall and fell crumpled up on the floor. Blood dripped down his pure white shirt, and there was so much of it, so much that I couldn’t see the blue room anymore, just all that red blood.

Sylvain pulled the knife out of him—so much blood, but it hadn’t really gone that deep, just the tip was dripping and dark—and he threw it at the floor in front of me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and it actually got out, even though my throat felt like it was choking full of blood. “I’m so fucking sorry, but it was the only way. They’re going to make you kill us so that the people hate you, and that’s stupid and fucked up because the people *know* how good you are, they *know* how much you care for them, and I’m just so fucking sorry I could choke.”

He said nothing, just went over to the windows and ripped off a strip of curtain. He pressed it over the wound and stood there, looking out onto the street, while the blood soaked into the fabric. But it was dark blue fabric, and the blood hardly showed against it.

“Those people need us,” I said. “If it was just me I would’ve knotted the noose myself, honest, but half my warders are immigrants and all of them are poor, and they do what they can but the Assembly won’t listen to them unless they have the ward bosses to back them. And I know that doesn’t change anything and I’m still a fucking monster—”

“No,” he said. His voice was strong, not even burbling, and when he lifted the curtain from his chest I saw that the blood was drying and brown, and the wound on his chest had already started to clot. “You missed, Livy.”

He came across the room and knelt in front of me and ran his fingers through my hair, brushing the ear that Jaque’s kid

had nicked those years ago. “You’ve never killed a man with a knife, have you? It’s not like pulling a trigger. That’s something you learn when your ward boss is weak and you don’t have any skills. They teach you to kill people.” He kicked the knife away from us, and it was like the motion just ripped a sob from his chest. “And if you’re good enough at that, the Assembly figures you might be enough of a monster to be king.”

I held him and let him sob into my shoulder. Now that the curtain was torn, a cool breeze wafted in through the window—the window that was also a door. And there I was holding him, holding him like he was the only precious thing in the world, and he was clinging to me like the orphan he was, and both of us knew all too well how soon we had to let go.

* * *

The Assembly pardoned Camden and me, of course. Said the King had flipped his head, tried to condemn these two beloved leaders, and some of the plebes believed them and hated Sylvain, but most of them called it a pack of lies and kept right on hating the Assembly. Which was good insofar as it was right, but it didn’t change the fact that the Assembly was spewing shit about Sylvain and he wasn’t there to stop them.

And that was something else I didn’t like, how nobody seemed to wonder where the King had gone. I mean, the Assembly had *asked*—it’s kind of a no-brainer when you come

into a room full of blood and one less person than you'd locked in there—but even they didn't seem like they cared. Next thing you know, they're spinning stories to explain the whole mess and that's that.

So I was angry, but I got around it enough to look after my warders and kick Gaude and her flowers out of my parlor and even visit Camden once or twice. I didn't tell him what Sylvain had told me about what his ward boss made him do—though I knew Camden would just die from it, that here he was trying to make a ward boss into an assassin when her hit had actually been in the trade. Yeah, real funny. I think I was starting to understand irony.

Autumn kind of peaked its head into the middle of Thermidor, like now that the King was gone there was no reason for summer to stick around. I was fine with that. For a while, it suited my mood.

* * *

And no, I really don't know where Sylvain went when he stepped through his window-door and out into the blue. But sometimes I order a batch of day-old rolls from Walischa's Bakery and old Papa Walischa says take 'em, they've already been paid for. Sometimes I check in on a tenement and find that someone's already been there with medicine and new clothes and books for the kids. And sometimes when I walk

through Saint Banbury's Cemetery I see bundles of hyacinth on the graves, and they are gorgeous and blue as the big summer sky.

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Megan Arkenberg is a student in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her work has appeared in Ideomancer, Clarkesworld, Strange Horizons, and Fantasy Magazine, among other places. She procrastinates by editing the fantasy e-zine Mirror Dance.

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TRANSITIONS OF TRUTH AND TEARS

by David G. Blake

“Are you losing perspective, Garran?”

Garran altered his stance, the rough sanctuary floor chafing his bare feet, and considered the question. The answer was not a simple yes or no, and he knew it was foolish to respond hastily to a Rahamen; they valued truth above all else.

Two years had passed since they sent him to the North. The He’Rahamen, She Who Is All, had handpicked a small village for the infiltration, and perhaps *that* marked where she had erred. He knew these people by name, knew their children, their grandchildren. Kemille, with her dark hair that always managed to cast the most beguiling shadows along the contours of her face; Old Eb, who even with a withered leg hobbled into the village daily to give treats to the children. They were not the *evil* he had imagined while surrounded by the comforts of home.

Looming before him, the Rahamen *shifted* seamlessly—the smell of freshly peeled oranges always followed a shift—and flowed her misty hand down Garran’s face, caressing his cheek like a humid breeze that held the threat of a storm. She was

now uncomfortably close, eyes solidifying into icy blue fissures that drained the warmth from the room. That was the nature of the Rahamen. They knew what it took to coax truth from an adherent.

“I have certain...reservations,” Garran admitted. During the past two years, his preconceived notions had deteriorated into ruins, casting shadows that helped hide and nurture his growing doubt. How could he continue if it meant bringing harm to those he had come to respect?

“These *reservations*, do they involve doubting the wisdom of the He’Rahamen?”

Garran met the Rahamen’s unnerving gaze and refused to look away as he recited the words of the Holy Writ. “Bring me your wise...he who would dispute. His wisdom shall be as the babble of a fool before the He’Rahamen.”

“You dare quote scripture to me, Wrecker?” the Rahamen asked. “You have grown vain. You doubt the wisdom of the He’Rahamen, but worse...you have forgotten her *sorrow*.”

He fell to a knee and placed his palm flat against his forehead in supplication. “I would never—”

“Silence,” the Rahamen interjected. “It is the ruling of this One that you shall relive the Great Sorrow. So it is willed, so shall it be.”

Her command for silence was not all that kept him from pleading for leniency; part of him knew he deserved the punishment for allowing his doubt to fester like an untreated lesion.

The vapor on his face, remnants of the Rahamen's caress, heated to painful temperature. It slithered at a scalding crawl and probed moist fingers into his eyes, burrowing its way inward. The world disappeared in a boiling waterfall of colors, melting away into a throbbing blackness.

* * *

The lash of a whip against his bare buttocks jerked Garran from the darkness; for a brief glimpse of time, he was himself, and then he was Beliath, Son of the He'Rahamen.

Beliath struggled to cover his nakedness. The men who loomed over him had ripped off his robes and soiled them with spit and urine. He could smell his own feces smeared down his thighs, and the dirt beneath him was wet with his vomit and blood. The gash on his scalp bled freely, clouding his mind with the weakness of blood loss. His throat was raw from pleading for them to stop, and he had long since quit making any noise save for grunts and groans.

"Where is your holy mother now, boy?" the man with the scarred face and biting whip slurred, pausing to drink from his wineskin before thrusting a booted foot into Beliath's ribs.

“Will she not step down from her throne high in the heavens *even to save her only son?*”

“Perhaps she is preoccupied,” the youngest man said—he had hungry eyes, which had sparkled promisingly when first the men ripped Beliath’s robes free. He leered at his companions and thrust his hips back and forth in the air. “You know,” he continued, “*preoccupied.*”

The third man laughed; it made Beliath feel like he had been chewing shards of steel. “What was it you said? Oh, yes, I remember, ‘I come as a herald for She Who Is All. I bear the mark of her promise in my blood’.” He knelt and dipped his finger in the blood pooling around Beliath’s head. “This looks as red as my own. I see no mark.” He stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked it clean. “And I taste no mark.”

Beliath worked his tongue around broken teeth, spitting free a mouthful of blood. “I meant no harm.”

The third man’s eyes gleamed with cunning and cruelty. “I care not for your intent. Your kind is unwelcome here, and I will see to it that your memory serves as an unforgettable reminder.” He stood and placed a calloused hand on the youngest man’s shoulder. “Kill him.”

The man ran an eager hand through his dark hair. “Can I *have* him first?”

“I do not care what you do with him, so long as he is not breathing once you are done.”

Beliath strained to crawl away as the man came for him, but his injuries were too severe, and his struggles only excited the man further.

He pushed his thoughts away from the violation—oddly, the sour smell of alcohol that dripped from the rapid breaths against the nape of his neck proved to be the hardest thing to ignore—and fought to hold to consciousness so that he might yet win his life.

A short time later, the young man whispered in Beliath's ear. “Now that I am done with you, I will find your *holy mother* and do the same to her.”

The heat of steel seared into Beliath's back and erupted from his stomach, pinning him to the soiled dirt. Numbness seeped outward from the wound. With the last of his strength, Beliath grabbed the man's arm and pulled him close. “I forgive you,” he said.

The young man pulled away and jerked his sword free of Beliath's spine. Clear water bubbled forth from the hole the sword had gouged into the dirt, spreading and washing away the blood; it even poured from Beliath's fatal wound. The three men watched in amazement as the water spurted, and then the cruel and cunning man began to laugh.

* * *

Garran woke with a scream and scurried on all fours to the corner of the sanctuary to vomit. He remembered *everything*. Worse, he had recognized the leader of the three men.

The Rahamen's voice tinkled behind him like the call of a distant brook. "Do you understand why the He'Rahamen mourns?"

"The man...I recognized him," Garran said. He coughed more bile upon the floor, his mind scorched by the last moments of Beliath's life. "He is the founder of Vihal, their capital. I saw a painting of him for sale in the borough marketplace. He is a *hero* to these people."

The Rahamen nodded. "He founded the city around the endless wellspring. Do you know why it has never stopped flowing? It is the tears of the He'Rahamen, and she has not stopped crying."

Garran felt warm water trickle down his face, and for a fearful instant, he thought he was going to experience the Great Sorrow again, but then he realized it was his tears. "I was taught about the Great Sorrow, but *I did not know*."

"That is why you are here, Wrecker. The He'Rahamen has decided it is time to stop mourning; soon, she will cry no more."

"I doubted her. I am not worthy."

“Do you doubt her still?”

“No!”

“Then do not question her wisdom in choosing *you* for this honor.”

Garran wiped clean his soiled lips and once more assumed a position of kneeling supplication. “What must I do?”

The Rahamen flowed to a position above his kneeling form; Garran breathed deeply of the smell of peeled oranges. “Travel to Vihal. You are no longer a stranger in these lands and will be welcomed. Draw water from the well and allow it to pass your lips. Once you have partaken of the He’Rahamen’s tears, the nature of the Wrecker will be revealed.”

Garran leaned forward until his forehead touched the floor. The memories squirmed over him like hungry maggots, making him feel filthy and unworthy, but he dared not question the wisdom of the He’Rahamen again. “It will be as you have said.”

“Go with a blessing, Garran,” she said; then, with a whisper of wind and the faint smell of smoke, she disappeared.

Garran locked the sanctuary and traveled through the tunnel to his house. He replaced the tapestry hiding the entrance and released a breath he had not realized he was holding. The threat of discovery darkened his thoughts, but no

one in the village even *talked* of his people; he wondered if they knew his kind existed.

The morning sunlight streamed through a window and dried the tears that remained on his face, and he felt the bite of doubt once more. Who was he to question the He’Rahamen? She had known his name before conception. She had numbered the stars as she lit them. He gasped and prayed for forgiveness, for he realized she knew he doubted her *even now*. It occurred to him—as though she immediately answered his prayer—that she *still chose him*, despite knowing all of his doubts. He treasured that knowledge as a comfort; for he knew, he would not fail her.

He prepared a hot bath, tossing in an extra handful of hot-rocks, and permitted himself the luxury of a thorough cleansing. If he were to do the will of the He’Rahamen, he would do it clean in both mind and body. The steam eased the tension in his neck, relaxing his muscles and clearing his lungs. The memories of the Great Sorrow washed away with the dirt and sweat, but a filthy smear of doubt remained, no matter how hard he scrubbed.

* * *

His home was not far from Vihal and travelers often packed the main road, going both to and from the capital. Garran blended in as he walked, trailing an inconspicuous

distance behind a band of merchants; close enough to be mistaken as part of their group by random passersby, but not close enough to draw their attention or ire.

The hour walk to Vihal left Garran both hungry and thirsty. He bought a wedge of cheese and a hunk of bread from a cart set up outside the city and enjoyed the impromptu dinner before heading for the main gates. He would quench his thirst at the endless fountain and not before—a vow made along the way to grant favor from the He’Rahamen. Several guards stood at attention near the tall iron gates, one of whom he recognized from his village. The man smiled, revealing a mouthful of teeth an unhealthy hue of yellow, and gestured toward him.

“Garran, my friend, what brings you to Vihal?”

If the man so much as *suspected* the truth, he would thrust steel through Garran, friend or no friend. For a mad instant, Garran entertained the idea of telling him the truth, but he fought against his weakness of faith and put on his friendliest smile instead. It was not *that* hard to do; after all, it was truly a beautiful day.

“I thought I would purchase some additional hot-rocks,” Garran said. He leaned in closer and gave the guard a conspiratorial wink. “Plus, I might find something for Kemille.”

The guard laughed and shook his head in mock despair. “My friend, if you are thinking of bedding her before you wed her, I am afraid you are humping the wrong leg.”

“My father used to tell me, ‘All humps are not created equal’.”

The guard bellowed out a laugh in response. “Your father was a wise man, Garran, a wise, wise man.”

“That he was...that he was.”

“Go on, then, but give the old leg a hump or two for me, eh?”

Garran laughed uproariously just as the guard had, offered a heartfelt goodbye, and made his way through the gates. After two years of preparation, the act seemed shamefully simple. He was in the capital, though; the birthing place of sorrow. There *was* a sense of eager nervousness, but more so than that, there was a sense of profound sadness. He summoned his faith and his courage and used them to build a wall around his troubling thoughts. He was a Wrecker, *the Wrecker*, and it was time he started acting the part.

He stopped in the entertainers’ quadrant and watched a juggler at work—the flashing knives swished through the air, whistling a tune that perfectly matched the routine—for a polite amount of time before asking for directions; he raised his voice

to be heard over the shouts of entertainers and bystanders alike. “Excuse me, which way to the fountain?”

The knives all started to point ahead. “Forward, friend, all roads lead to the Fountain.”

The trip inward through the city seemed to take as long as the trip *to* the city. There were more jugglers, endless stands offering steaming hunks of meat and blistering hot pies, stages for boisterous actors, bards, and storytellers, and sectioned arenas for fighting barehanded and with weapons. The crowd stretched as far as the eye could see, none of them paying the least bit of attention to Garran, except maybe the few he shoved aside in order to make headway toward the fountain.

There were buildings of all shapes and sizes, the colored flags that identified them snapping in the wind: red for weaponsmiths, white for doctors, purple for tailors, brown for cobblers, and many other colors for a myriad of professions. A few flags within sight even had symbols instead of solid colors, and Garran noticed several shady characters patrolling the crowds, matching symbols adorning their cloaks, while some wore bands of various colors around their upper arms. He steered clear of such men.

He spotted the fountain long before he reached its base. Water spurted twenty-odd feet into the air, sprung from a stone wineskin held by a life-sized statue of the founder of

Vihal...one of the murderers of Beliath, Son of the He'Rahamen. Garran repeated that fact in his head as he pushed through the last throng of people, a part of him both amazed and horrified that no one had stopped him yet; a much deeper part shamed that *he* had not stopped on his own.

The statue stood nearly seven feet high. He did not recall the man being that tall in his vision, though it was hard to judge height from a prone position and in the throes of pain. The eyes did not seem cruel and cunning either but rather kind and wise. It was an unsettling variance. The man had likely monitored the sculpting of the statue, of course, which would account for the added height and the softness of his eyes. Men with cruel and cunning eyes, however, rarely were ashamed of them.

Here in the womb of sorrow, the walls he had built around his doubt cracked and crumbled. What kind of Wrecker was he?

Before he could consider the question, an old man approached with a golden cup in his hand.

“Come to taste from the Fountain of Vihal?” the old man asked. His voice had a hint of melody about it, as though he had rehearsed the greeting and that which followed. “For only a sliver of silver, I can fulfill such a desire. You will never be the same, friend, I can guarantee *that*.”

Garran considered refusing the offer, but then he smelled freshly peeled oranges and something inside him *stilled*. He nodded to the old man and handed him the appropriate amount of silver. Inwardly, he began to pray; he had never felt closer to the He'Rahmen than he did standing there with her tears misting down around him.

The old man placed the cup into the outstretched hand of the statue. Water flowed up the arm and into the cup, filling it nearly to the top before it died down. He kissed the cup and offered it to Garran. All noise vibrated to an unintelligible hum just below the beat of Garran's heart. He raised the cup to his lips—the water smelled of lilac and tasted of sweetened milk. He swallowed. Everything around him slowed.

Garran had never been so cold. His stomach was a block of ice, and the numbness that seeped outward felt terribly like the wound that had killed Beliath. The chill flowed from him, endless like the fountain, and he could hear the last sobs of the He'Rahmen as they tapered off into angry silence. There would be no more tears.

The old man shuddered. A layer of frost crackled over his eyelashes. The statue vibrated. The water spluttered into jagged shards of ice that *stuck* in the hardened air above. The snaps and cracks of spreading ice panicked the people, but they could never run fast enough to escape the Wrecker. The cold anger of

the He'Rahamen claimed them all; some in midflight; some cowered in a corner; others hunkered over loved ones, doing their best to protect them right until the very end.

Garran was a Wrecker, a wellspring of vengeance, and the screams of the dying ruptured what little hold he had left over his doubts. He had been a tool, *a weapon*. Had the vision even showed true? The Rahamen valued truth above all else, but he suspected their *truth* had been warped by the hatred of the He'Rahamen. He tried to scream his outrage at the betrayal, but ice froze its way through the air and took his voice. It claimed him as it had claimed all the others, and it was only then that he remembered the words of his mother:

“Mother, how does one know the difference between right and wrong?” Garran had asked. He had been a child, no older than six; it would be but a few short months before the Rahamen would come for him.

She answered with a sadness he had not understood...not until now, much too late. “If you question whether a thing is wrong or not, it likely is.”

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David G. Blake lives in Pennsylvania with his girlfriend and their chocolate lab. When he isn't writing, reading, taking his girlfriend and/or lab for a walk, he can generally be found at a poker table. His work is forthcoming in Daily Science Fiction and recently appeared in Bards and Sages Quarterly.

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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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