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[“Recapitulation in Steam,” by Margaret Ronald](#)

[“Mamafield,” by Corie Ralston](#)

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RECAPITULATION IN STEAM

by Margaret Ronald

Someone was whistling the Lament from Amicaldo's *Dying Queen*. Izzy turned his face to the sound and winced as something rough grazed his cheek.

"He's up," a man said nearby.

"Zen?" Izzy mumbled. "Zen, the secondary line didn't get checked...." He sat up, pulling a heavy, damp cloth from his eyes, and squinted at the two men standing over him.

The older gave him a searching, worried look. "How's tha? Tha looks burnt as Quint here after a sunny day," he added, nodding to the big pale man beside him.

"I'm fine," Izzy said, swinging his feet off the cot and trying to blink away the persistent pinkish cast to his vision. "The compressor coils. That's where the leak was, wasn't it?" He remembered climbing down into the main ore distillation chamber, going to the secondary vapor line on a hunch, hearing a tremulous hiss....

This place wasn't the distillation chamber, and it certainly wasn't any part of the thaumic steam processing plant. The wide, high-ceilinged room seemed more of a gymnasium or

congregation hall, chilly in the way of such spaces, large enough to hold two or three of the distillation chambers. But whatever its original purpose, it had been repurposed to something resembling a cut-rate barracks: two dozen cots, flimsy cloth walls hung up as boundaries, even tables set as if for a charity dinner.

A boom shook the floor, sending plaster dust drifting down, and Izzy turned to see a four-legged trundler settle across the main doors, blocking them. *That's a riot control automaton*, he thought, *from the Royal Society detachment guards. But Zen said this town was too small for a regular Society presence...*

"Zen," he whispered, looking for one darker face like his own among the Northern workers, one particular blue dress—

There. Standing at the far edge of the hall, still in the "official first visit" dress that she claimed to hate, was Zenobia. She'd donned goggles, though; and that heavy toolbelt, the one that usually came out after the first visit, now pulled her skirt askew. "Zen!" he called, and she looked up, clipboard in hand. Instead of smiling, though, she turned to the man beside her and swapped clipboards. "Zen, what's the situation?"

"The situation?" She pulled her goggles down so that they hung around her neck, setting free a new round of frizz in her hair. The man beside her gave Izzy a nervous glance, then

departed, clipboard under his arm. Zen crossed the floor to him, her shoes echoing against the tiles. “The situation is—”

She stopped, looking past him, and a man’s shrill scream echoed through the hall. Izzy spun to see a man in shirtsleeves stumble back from the cots, holding what looked like flares in either hand. But when he turned, there were no flares—his hands were glowing, burning with an eerie brilliance that consumed nothing. The man scraped at his fingers, trying to peel off the thaumic fire, red shadows flickering over his terrified face, and screamed again. Two Society guards hurried to his side and dragged him away by the elbows, careful not to touch the fire.

Zen exhaled slowly. “The situation is just what we were sent to prevent,” she said, her unruffled calm jarring after such a display. “A massive vapor leak between the ore compressor and the distillation coil. Infusion vectors everywhere—there was so much thaumic vapor in the room it’s a wonder you, anyone, made it out alive. That man’s the least of it; I’ve shut the whole plant down until we can begin repairs.”

A clerk staggered up to her, groaning under the weight of a Pearson and Stoddard Portative Heating Unit. Zen pointed to the center of the cordoned-off space, and he lurched away to drop the heater on the floor.

Izzy exhaled, glancing after the Society guards and the poor infused worker. “Right. Well, it can’t be helped now. You set up the testing procedures for the men caught in the blast—judging by that demonstration, it looks like we’ve already got dangerous levels of infusion—and I’ll take a look at the compressor to see what needs to be done.”

“No, Izzy. You won’t.” Zen sighed, handed off the clipboard to another clerk and ran both hands over her head, temporarily smoothing back her tight curls. “Don’t you remember? You caught the vapor blast full in the face. You’re in quarantine too.”

Disbelief fought with embarrassment, and Izzy found himself speechless.

Zen’s brows drew together. “Looks like you got away with only a mild burn,” she said, raising one hand to his face. “It must sting.”

“It’s fine—Zen, quarantine? I can’t be in quarantine, I don’t have time—” He stopped. “I have tickets for the opera.”

The heating unit started up with a sinus-trembling whine, and Zen shook her head. “It’ll have to wait. Unless,” she added, settling her goggles back into place and taking up her clipboard, “you can prove that you can’t work magic.”

* * *

Arguments didn't work—this was Zen, after all, and while Izzy might be the head of the inspection team, she was the backbone. It didn't help that she was right. Thaumic quarantine wasn't like disease quarantine; the cordon wasn't in place to prevent an outbreak, since only direct exposure could cause infusion. Instead, it was for the direct safety of others: you couldn't let people out of quarantine until you could be sure that they were not a danger to their friends and family. Even in the first days of practical thaumics, when the ore compression system had just been invented, people knew not to expose themselves to infusion unless they wanted to end up like the legendarily insane alchemages.

"It's depressing, though," Izzy complained over the Society-provided dinner. "I mean, you'd think we'd come far enough that we could control the effect thaumic infusions have on people."

"There's no point," Quint told him around a mouthful of peas. The big man wouldn't need thaumic wonderworking to break Izzy's spine, and the way he looked at everybody made it seem like he was measuring the right amount of force to do just that. It didn't help that he'd hung a derisive nickname on Izzy for the waistcoat he'd been wearing. "Sides, Weskit, this en't so bad. So we get a little time off, so what?"

“It’s bad economics,” Izzy said, and Quint rolled his eyes. “One leak, and the Society’s stuck paying for this, this two-week vacation.” He picked at his food, trying to ignore the persistent whine from the heater. “I’m supposed to be presenting a paper on a related subject in a month,” he muttered. “Lower Kingdom Thaumic Perception and Decontamination Protocol... now I might have to reconsider my thesis.”

“Ooo, a *paper*, Weskit.”

“Let eh alone, Quint.” Frank, the old man who’d seen to Izzy when he first woke up, leaned over and snatched up a roll from Quint’s plate. Frank’s skin was the color and texture of weathered bronze, and he’d already polished off two plates of the dull food. “Eh’s trying.”

Quint shook his head. “Why bother? Papers don’t make a difference—t’ore makes machines go, t’ore makes men mad.”

“Not always,” the processing plant’s clerk, Peabody, said from the far end of the table. The little man had been the one to escort Izzy to the secondary compressor, and though he hadn’t been as close to the leak, he’d been close enough. “According to history, the alchemages were sometimes able to balance the infusion between power and madness.”

Izzy looked up at that. “Yes! Like in *Tutivillus*—you know the Amicaldo opera?”

Quint snorted. Peabody shook his head, still carefully separating every scrap of green from his potatoes. “If you mean that pseudonymous dreck people are always caterwauling in the streets, yes,” he said with a curled lip, raising his voice to carry over the drone from the heater. “Personally, I prefer my music a bit more cerebral and devoid of manufactured mystery. This ‘Amicaldo’ wouldn’t be more than a hack if the Capitol Opera hadn’t tried to make such a big deal out of his identity.”

“Manufactured—” Izzy sighed and turned to Frank. “You know Amicaldo’s work. You were whistling the Beggar’s Aria before.”

“Was I, now?” His face wrinkled into a smile like a gnarled tree root, then contorted as a wracking wet cough shook him. Quint thumped him on the back until he could answer. “Aye, was, suppose,” he wheezed at last. “Tha’s right. Tutiwhatsit, ‘s the one with the old man, the one what was a magic and retired, ay?”

“Yes! And he always balanced the thaumic infusions so that he never lost control, only he knew if he did it once more he’d go mad—” Izzy hummed the Tower’s Reprieve theme, from the scene where Tutivillus gave up any chance of his own sanity in order to save the village that had sheltered him and the girl who had come to love him. Frank hesitated, then joined

in after a moment with a “dee da dee dee” instead of words. Quint grimaced and took his plate back to the washup tub.

Izzy savored his memory of the music, remembering the anguish of that moment, the way the orchestra had seemed to cower away from the tenor’s voice. After the show, he’d stayed in line at the box office waiting to buy the last available tickets for a repeat performance... the tickets that were now useless in his hotel room. “I was supposed to go see that, two nights from now.”

Frank picked up his plate. “Don’t tha worry. I’ve worked here ought forty-some years, and been through more of these than can count. Tha’ll get through, or tha’ll break and go to tox, and then tha’ll be out and clean.” He patted Izzy on the shoulder, leaning on him a little more as he got to his feet. ‘Sides, ‘s better food than my landlady can cook, eh?” He chuckled, the laugh turning into another coughing fit, and headed to the washup.

Izzy poked at the last of his food, then winced as the heater’s drone rose into yet another squeal. He reached for his watch, then realized he’d left it in the hotel with the tickets, and sighed.

* * *

They slept on cots lined up in two rows, with sheets pinned up between for a modicum of privacy. Izzy stayed up writing

out what he remembered of the accident and listing potential fixes for the compressor coil, but put out the lantern when Quint muttered something about extinguishing it with “Weskit’s” face. He’d run out of his scrap paper, anyway.

Between the snores from every side, the constant whine of the malfunctioning heater, and the chill resulting from that malfunction, he didn’t expect to sleep. But exhaustion had a stronger grip on him than he realized, and without quite realizing it, he sank into sleep—until a brilliant green flare washed over him, jolting him awake. Forgetting he wasn’t in a hotel bed, he jerked upright and rolled off the cot.

“Peace,” Frank’s voice said somewhere to his left. “Peace, ‘s over now.”

“What? What’s over?” Izzy pushed himself up, trying to see. A flickering light like the reflection of moonlight on the ocean cascaded over the hall, and through it shadows darted like knife-edged fish—Society guards, he realized a little late, moving between him and the light. A gentle roar and boom heralded the trundler automaton’s actions: settling down again, after whatever it had done to contain someone.

“Nehemiah—yer don’t know him, he’s from the maintenance div—he had a nightmare,” Quint said from the other side of him. Izzy turned to look, but the cloth wall was still and opaque. Somehow he doubted Quint had even

bothered to sit up. “Bad one. They found him two inches above ‘s bed and glowing. Got to him before he did any damage, but he’s off to detox.”

“He’ll be all right?” Izzy had read through thaumic decontamination procedures, of course, but they were a different thing on the page.

“Wouldn’t know,” Frank said cheerfully. “I’ve ‘scaped it so far.”

“Lucky yer,” Quint rumbled from the far side of the cloth. “Man wasn’t meant to be that clean, ‘s all I’ll say. Always afraid they’ll decide it’s quicker just to run us all through ‘t, just in case.”

“They won’t.” That was the main reason he and the other inspection teams had jobs: prevention was better than decontamination, certainly from a cost-benefit standpoint. Antithaum was devilishly expensive to manufacture, and while the Society kept a reserve, they were stingy with it unless a clear danger was present. “Maybe I should fake it, so I can get out of here sooner.”

Quint laughed again, that derisive chuckle Izzy was starting to hate. “Didn’t know yeh liked the hosepipe, Weskit.”

Frank made a “ssst!” noise, and the cloth wall on his side billowed. “If tha’s serious, tha’s a fool. Go to sleep—’s better come morning.”

Izzy sighed and sat back on his cot. Quint was already rumbling in something close to a snore, and the heater's screech seemed even louder after that disruption. Izzy lay staring at the recesses of the ceiling, all possibility of sleep gone, then finally sighed and rummaged through his clothes for the vise grip and clamp he always carried. Thus equipped, he got up and made his way to the damnable heater.

* * *

"Oh, Isidore." Zenobia stood over him in what he'd jokingly referred to as her "industry clothes," the same blue waistcoat, only now over a men's shirt and trousers. "What are you *doing*?"

Izzy looked up, blinking, from the makeshift workbench he'd constructed out of two chairs and a plank. The left side of his face itched from where he'd fallen asleep against the plank, and he rubbed it absently. "Oh. Morning, Zen. I figured out why this thing made so much noise." He held up the offending part. "Rotator was out of alignment. Should work fine now, though the feedback vent is a little unstable."

She sighed and took the broken rotator. "One, you shouldn't even have those tools. Two, what on earth made you decide to stay up all night fixing it?"

Izzy started to protest that he hadn't been up *all* night, but she took his hand and pulled him up to his feet. "I couldn't sleep," he admitted.

Zen gazed at him for a long moment, then shook her head. "Well, since you're up, we might as well start with you."

She led him into one of the smaller rooms off the great hall, took a sample of his blood, and then to his surprise did not hand him off to the Society guardsmen. Standard procedure involved one-on-one testing; Izzy knew that much, although he was now wishing he'd learned more beforehand. What he wasn't expecting was that Zen would undertake his testing personally.

"All right, Izzy," she said, setting an oil lamp and a mug on the table between them. The mug steamed and smelled of bitterleaf tea; the sort of thing she drank in the evenings when they were on assignment together. The scent brought back memories of late train rides with Zen in the seat across from him, a hotflask in her hand and the file spread out across her lap, and abruptly Izzy felt very homesick. "You know the drill for first-level test procedures. Light the lamp."

"That's it? Purely voluntary?"

"At this stage, and unless the blood test shows anomalies, yes." She pulled her goggles up, then nodded to someone outside the door. Abruptly the overhead light flickered and

went out, leaving them in the meager light through the grill in the door—then, as someone draped a cloth over that, complete darkness. “But we do give you incentive to light it.”

“Zen, I don’t even know where it is.”

There was a clunk and a slosh as Zen moved her mug. Something brushed the back of his hand, and he jumped before realizing it was Zen, guiding his hands to the center of the table and arranging his fingers around the base of the lamp. “There. Give it a try, at least.”

He concentrated on the wick of the lamp, the oil inside, trying to think sparky thoughts. Nothing. He ran through the chemical formulas for combustion in his head, tried to convert them into something dynamic, but if whatever thaumic residue was left in him had the power to light a lamp, then it wasn’t understanding chemical formulas. It didn’t help that the touch of Zen’s callused fingers on his was uncomfortably distracting. “You can see,” he said finally.

“Werglass lenses. Don’t think about me. Think about the lamp.”

Easy for her to say. “For the love of... Zen, this is pointless. I have twelve different fixes for the compressor coil, but I need to see the actual equipment before I can pinpoint which will be most effective. I need to be back at my work, not stuck playing cards and—and holding hands in the dark.” She laughed, no

more than a breath, not unkindly. “You could fudge the records a little, couldn’t you?”

Zen drew her hands away as if he’d hurt her. “No. Not here, certainly. Not since Villie Bardeen caught a nasty infusion at High Point and went home and immolated her family.”

Izzy looked up, searching for her face even in the dark. “That happened here? I thought the Bardeen incident took place further north.”

“We *are* in the north, Izzy. It was in the file,” she added, only the lightest note of rebuke in her voice. “You never do read those ahead of time.”

“Well, there’s always plenty of time in the hotel on our down hours. I mean, what else am I going to do?”

“What else, indeed. Now, light the damn lamp, will you, Izzy?”

* * *

Three hours of darkness resulted in nothing but a headache and a worrying awareness of how, once they were back in the light, the collar of Zen’s shirt exposed the fine lines of her clavicle. She took his tools, but in a burst of either pity or encouragement, gave him a sheaf of fresh paper so that he wouldn’t be reduced to drawing plans for the new coils on old napkins.

The card game was still going by the time he returned, and this time he accepted Frank's offer to join. The old man was not the best partner for a game, though, since he had the habit of continually whistling, especially when he got good cards. After a few hands, though, Izzy thought he could see the pattern in it, and began whistling back: a few lines of *The Man in the Tower* for a run of cards, the Swan Boy's plea if he needed more help, Beata's surprisingly peppy death song for a hand that was no good whatsoever. Frank, after a moment's consternation, revealed his few remaining teeth in a grin and responded in kind.

Peabody finally crumpled the last sheet of whatever he was working on. "Will you two stop assaulting my ears? You're worse than street musicians!"

Quint's shoulders shook with another of those threatening chuckles. "They haven't yet wiped us out, so they can tabletalk all they like."

"Tabletalk? More like gutter talk, with those lowbrow ditties."

"I take offense to that," Izzy said, turning in his seat. "Amicaldo's operas are hardly lowbrow. Just because they're popular—"

"They're popular because they require almost no thought to follow. They're just the same stories that the yellow novels

regurgitate every dozen years, the same melodrama and inaccuracies.” Peabody adjusted his glasses and pressed two fingers to the space between his brows as if to keep in a headache. “People listen because the Capitol Opera made such a big deal out of Amicaldo’s supposed pseudonymity, and because they’re the equivalent of sugar pap in pretty wrappings. They’ve got only one advantage as far as I can tell; they are very good at culling the stupidest of the lower class.”

Izzy dropped his cards and started to stand, but Frank shot one hand across the table and caught his wrist. “s always like this,” he whispered to Izzy.

“He’s not wrong,” Quint added, scooping up the fallen cards and reassembling them into a fresh stack. “Always some poor idiot hears the songs, listens to the stories a little too hard, thinks that all’d be well if he was an alchemage. We had one picking through the dross last month, remember? Always think all’s needed is a lot of ore or a drink of distillation. Lucky for their families that they just die from it.”

“But you can hardly say that’s Amicaldo’s fault—I mean, the histories are all there anyway, and they all say how high the death rate was among alchemages, so it doesn’t stand—”

Frank squeezed his wrist, hard. “Let go, lad.”

Izzy glanced back at the old man, who gazed down at the cards as if they’d tell his future. Slowly, Izzy sank back into his

chair. “It does make it seem more romantic,” he admitted. “The old days, before the condensing process was invented. When all you could do with thaumic ore was hand it over to the alchemages and hope they’d decide to protect your home.”

“Romance, eh.” Quint snorted. “Got enough romance with my Bonnie. Don’t need to yodel about it.” He dealt out a fresh hand, the cards skimming across like sparks from an ore crusher. “No. Way I see it, this is the good life. What, t’ore made alchemages strong? Nice for them, not nice for them as got in their way. This—” he gestured to the room, taking in not just the factory but the Society guards, the men coming and going for another set of tests, the cots and the emergency setup, “—this turns t’ore into light, heat, clothes, airships. Take this any day over angry madmen blowing up mountains.” He picked up his cards, then glanced at Izzy, that cruel smile surfacing again. “Go on and sing about it all yeh like, Weskit. Still won’t win the next hand.”

He was right, about the hand at least. And Frank remained silent, at least till dinner and his next aria started up.

* * *

Another day passed, another day of pages and pages of diagrams that wouldn’t mean anything if he couldn’t look at the faulty vapor line, although he’d come up with a few potential

ideas for a streamlined coil that could bypass the entire problem.

And someone kept stealing his paper.

Another night passed listening to Quint snore, followed by another day of failing to light the lamp and utterly failing to convince Zen to either let him go or put him through decontamination procedures. “It’d end your career,” she pointed out, quite accurately. “Even the Society doesn’t keep on people who waste thousands on unnecessary procedures.”

The whole argument was carried out in darkness, Izzy still holding the useless lamp, Zen watching him through her werglass. Even without the light, he could guess at her expression. “Look,” she went on, “for some of the workers here, this might be a good thing. I mean, look at your friend with the playing cards—the little one, the one who’s always whistling. He’s getting actual medical care this way, and I don’t just mean the blood tests. It’s more than workers in these plants usually get.”

“Then we need to change the procedures. Make it cheaper to run a mass decontamination, step up antithaum production.”

“You were going to speak against that! Your whole paper on the Lower Kingdoms—you’re the one who’s always going on

about the romance of the old days! I'd have thought you'd relish the chance to see infusion firsthand."

"I wasn't in quarantine then! At least move me to the second-level tests—I'm not getting anywhere with this damned lamp."

"You don't want that, Izzy. You really don't."

The whole thing was made worse—well, worse in some ways—by Zen herself. Technically, he was used to her presence; they'd worked together for close to a year. But usually when the two of them were in close quarters, one or the other of them was under some apparatus, and somehow in these dark hours it was harder to think of her as the friend with whom he'd talked practical thaumics and worked on monographs for the Society.

In the dark, with her hands on his, she was something else, something born half of her voice and half of his own mazed perception. He tried to keep his thoughts on thaumic infusion or, when that failed, Amicaldo's oeuvre, just to keep from thinking about her, how he could have not noticed any of this before....

Over dinner, he and Frank talked more Amicaldo—or, well, Izzy talked Amicaldo, and though Frank was a little reluctant to discuss it, he could whistle any of the arias, or even the incidental music, with only a word or two of prompting. "If

this goes on too long,” Izzy told him, only half-joking, “the two of us could probably put on a show.”

Frank grinned but shook his head. “’s beyond me, lad. Only know tunes, not t’stores. ‘s what’s important, end of day. Only t’music.” He took a deep breath, or tried to, coughing for a full ten seconds before spitting an unpleasantly dark splotch into his empty supper bowl. “’s like t’alchemages. Ey thought ey controlled it. Didn’t. Didn’t know what was important. Not what t’magic did, but that it was. Tha ken?”

“I... think so,” Izzy said after a moment, watching how Frank’s face looked only a little less gray than it had when the quarantine began. “It’d explain why Amicaldo only uses plots that come straight out of the penny histories. But I’d argue there’s still a powerful quality to the libretti—”

Frank shook his head again and opened his mouth to argue, but his eyes widened, and he scooted back. Izzy turned in his chair—just in time to see the back of the mess tent explode.

He stood up, knocking his chair to the ground, and Frank fell forward onto the table, coughing. A crackle of lightning shuddered from one end of the hall to the other, and over the resulting concussion came Peabody’s voice, raised in petulant fury. “—told you, told you three times already that I preferred my foods separate, and *still* you incompetent toads—”

A hand picked Izzy up by the scruff of the neck, and he yelped. The tent shuddered again, and he caught a glimpse of Peabody, silhouetted against the flames that now consumed the back of the tent. "Shut it, Weskit," Quint muttered, and knocked the table over. "Wondered how long it'd take that one to break." He dragged Izzy behind it to join Frank just as a second bolt crackled over the Society guards. "He caught a lot of t'steam."

They huddled together behind the table. After a moment, Izzy realized Frank was humming to himself, a frantic tune that he couldn't quite put a name to. He knew the rest of the tune, though, and began to hum the harmony, winking at Frank. Frank started, his rheumy eyes going wide, then continued, staring at Izzy as if his head had just sprouted a viola.

"Balls. Leave t'me to save t'songbirds," Quint muttered, then stopped as Izzy started to lean out from behind the table. "Don't!"

Izzy ignored him, peering out behind the charred table. Two Society guards lay on the ground between him and the remains of the mess tent, one so close that Izzy could have touched his outflung hand. Dark stains spread across their uniforms, and the closer one kept trying to breathe with a noise like broken sticks cracking. At the edge of the wreckage,

Peabody regarded them as if they were no more than figures on a chart. He raised his gaze to meet Izzy's.

Cold washed over Izzy, like the inverse of thaumic steam, prickling and biting. *Not what t'magic did, but what it was*, he thought, and here in Peabody's eyes was one shard of what it was. But Peabody still thought he controlled it. And if he did, then Izzy could use that—

Izzy jumped up and ran—not away, not the sensible direction, but to the heater and what meager cover it provided. Peabody followed, pointing as if to select him for a task, and the same crackle of lightning gathered around him, louder than before.

Izzy ducked behind the heater just before the bolt hit, enough time for him to hit the feedback dial. The vent thrummed to life, pulling in Peabody's attack as if it were a lightning feeder from the roof of the Society. Then with a screech of broken bearings, the mass of power churning in the heater rebounded and refocused, turning outward.

The resulting blast, electricity and thaumic backlash combined, swarmed over Peabody like a cloud of snakes. He staggered back, his expression never changing—not even as three Society guards tackled him from behind and brought him to the ground.

Quint rose from behind the table, staring, then laughed—a genuine laugh rather than his usual menacing rumble. “Oy, Weskit! Nice work!” he called, and slapped Izzy on the shoulder so hard he stumbled forward.

“Nice work,” Izzy echoed, staring at Peabody and the guards. *He caught a lot of the steam. A lot. But not as much as I did.*

How long until I break?

* * *

“It was the way he looked,” Izzy said to Zen the next day. “I’ve never seen anyone look like that, not caring what he destroyed so long as he did.”

“I imagine it was,” Zen said.

“See, that’s what Amicaldo understands,” he went on, turning the lamp between his hands. “That was the whole source of the Field Afire scene in *Tutivillus*. I can’t believe it took me so long to connect that scene with thaumic contamination outbreaks, rather than actual madness. I think there might even be an echo of the elixir leitmotif. I’ll have to hear it again to be sure.”

Zen was silent, tracing one finger back and forth on the table. She hadn’t bothered to switch the lights off this time.

“Do you know that no one’s yet figured out his real identity? Amicaldo, I mean. And it’s not because the Capitol

Opera's hiding anything—they don't know it either, they just get the scores. The *Lighthouse* gossip column's convinced that he's really an automaton, producing music in secret, but I think he's more likely one of the Society high-levels. Or possibly a member of the royal family—”

“I don't care,” Zen said.

Izzy stumbled to a stop. “What?”

Zen rubbed her forehead. “I said I don't care, Izzy. I don't care who Amicaldo really is, I don't care why he chooses those stories, and I don't care about the opera.”

“What—but you loved them! You were so excited in coming with me to Tutivillus, you'd even scheduled the extra day—”

“It wasn't the opera.” She looked away, biting her lip, and at that Izzy, too, had to look away. “I couldn't care two pins for the opera; it just mattered that I'd get to spend some more time with you.”

If his train of thought derailed before, now it had gone right off a bridge. Izzy stared at her, the tangle of thoughts—how much he'd missed Zen, the cold nights on his cot, the opera, the way her shoulders moved under the cloth of her shirt—snarling themselves hopelessly tighter.

“This—this is part of procedure,” he said finally. “This is a second-level stress test, isn't it? You pull out what will affect

the subject most, right, and that's what you knew would get to me."

"Oh, God damn it, Izzy." Zen pushed her chair away and got up, turning her back on him. "You *would* say that, wouldn't you?" Her shoulders shook once, and she stood straighter, facing the door. "I can't do this any more. You're well past first-level infusion, the blood tests show it. Only I hoped—" She stopped and took a deep breath. "I'm handing you over to the Society for second-level work."

"Zen—" He stood unsteadily, as if the floor might crumble under him.

"I'm sorry. I hope you get out soon." She put one hand on the door, still not quite looking at him. "I miss you, Izzy."

"Zen! Zen, wait—" By the time he'd made it around the table, though, the Society guard was there, preventing him from going further.

The hall was quieter that night, partly from the destruction of the day before, partly because there were fewer in quarantine now. The silence just let Izzy keep going over Zen's words. It didn't help that someone had stolen all of his papers—probably to keep track of the card game tallies.

And Frank would not stop whistling the same damned tune from the day before, the Amicaldo chorus that Izzy couldn't quite place. Worse, he kept whistling the wrong

sequence. "You've got it wrong," he finally snapped after lights out.

Frank paused. "Have I?"

"Yes. It's up a tri-tone, and *then* the eighth-note run. Like this." He demonstrated.

There was another long silence from the other side of the cloth. "Well," Frank said finally. "Well, so that's how 't sounds. Wondered, I did." There was a long pause, punctuated only by Frank's wheezing breath and the scratch of a pen on paper. "Well. Tha'd know better than I."

Izzy flung one arm over his eyes. "It's not like this in the Lower Kingdoms," he muttered. "They don't have the thaumic ore there, they don't have the history of alchemages...."

"Then what do ey have?" Frank asked, and Izzy flinched at the kindness of the question.

"Geothaums. Naturally occurring vapor vents. They believed it was all one unity of magic, just coming to the surface in different places. That's why they didn't have the alchemage wars; if you wanted to work magic, you had to make a pilgrimage to the geothaums, live in the steam, then travel home... by the time you made it home, either you'd expended it all or you had only what you needed."

"Did ey now," Frank said thoughtfully. "'s some trick, to hide it away like that."

“It meant they didn’t have so many crazy people setting everything on fire.” He sighed. “But it meant they didn’t have as much magic, either. So they were fair game for the conquerors.”

“Eh, not so different, for all that ey’re far off.” Frank paused. “Could tha do it? Squirrel it all away, like Borzi the Thief used to do with ‘s wooden arm? Keep it so hid tha’d forget tha had it?”

Izzy chuckled at the reference to Borzi; he hadn’t seen that opera in ages, but the wooden-arm gag had made him laugh so hard... even Zen had laughed, her eyes alight in the dim theater... and the darkness of the testing room... “I don’t know,” he said, driving away that memory. “Apparently they think I can, since they’re still keeping me here.”

“Maybe. But to do it that way... could be, once t’ thaum had been kept in so long, ‘d change, be not so bad when it came out.”

“So said the old lady, eating the hot pepper,” Quint rumbled from the other side. “Why don’t you pack up and go live with those Low Kings, if they got it so right?”

“I didn’t say—that’s not—”

“Then don’t say owt, Weskit. A man’s gotta sleep, and not with yer two warbling.”

* * *

They came for him at what passed for dawn the next morning, two Society guards dragging him off his cot and down the hall before he could do more than squawk in protest. Quint yelled something after him, but Izzy could no more understand it than he could stop the guards.

The cell where they put him hadn't been built for that purpose. It was an old storage locker, stripped bare, the stains on the floor stinking of grease and cat urine. They chucked him in the corner and were back out the door before he could even get to his feet, locking the door behind them.

"Hey! You can't do this—this isn't in the quarantine protocols!" He hammered on the door. "Someone get Zenobia Wilson, she's in charge here! This is against Society rules, and, and against the law, and against jurist practice—"

Nothing. Not even a breath of an answer. They'd chucked him down here and left, as if he were no more than a defective part. And, frankly, he didn't know if it *was* part of second-level testing. "Zen," he called, more softly this time. "Zen, I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything, just let me out. I'll wait the two weeks. I'm sorry."

Still no answer. And none for the next few hours. What was even worse was that the tune Frank had been humming, that stupid unplaceable Amicaldo, had gotten lodged in his head.

At noon—or after, he had started to lose track of time—someone threw a half a loaf through the window. There wasn't even a laugh from outside, no sadist of a jailer amused by tormenting him. Just someone doing his—or her—job.

He revised that opinion once the banging started. It seemed like machinery, but a machine would have some regularity, while this was an arrhythmic clang, loud enough to rattle his teeth and never quite consistent enough to let him ignore it.

And the music in his head just *would not stop*.

More time passed, long enough that he had to search for a grate in the corner and hope it didn't lead anywhere but the sewers, long enough for him to find the werglass eye set high in the same corner. He turned his back on it, uncomfortable with the idea of anyone watching him. Especially Zen.

Zen. This wasn't her fault, but she had handed him over to them as easily as if he were a project to be passed off. Even if it wasn't her fault, she let it happen, she knew it would happen. *Sorry, my arse.*

He struck the wall by his head, making a counterpoint to the banging. This wasn't even his job. If he'd had a chance to do his God-damned job, this wouldn't have happened. And now, now they'd chucked him in a cell, in conditions that the entire jurisprudence branch of the Society would have condemned,

only this didn't count because thaumic leaks were so God-damned dangerous, because they were afraid *he* might be dangerous—

“Maybe I am,” he said aloud, and the music in his head swelled in response, becoming a wordless chorus. He turned to the werglass eye, staring it down, daring whoever was watching to look back at him. “Maybe I am.”

The banging paused, long enough for the silence to ring in his ears, then started up again. Drawing on memories of the Amicaldo operas, the old stories, the accidents he'd seen and the memory of Peabody's blank stare, Izzy turned to face the door. *Dangerous, am I. I'll see just how dangerous I am, I'll get out of here and show them why you do not lock someone up like this, and then... then I'll find Zen.*

He chuckled, the sound unnaturally loud in the empty room, and raised his hands, fanning them out as if to throw the shadow of a bird on the wall. The chorus in his head rose to a climax, a burning harmony that dwarfed any he'd ever heard, and he called on whatever the vapor had given him, called it to come forth through him.

The door didn't move.

The door didn't burst into flame, either.

In fact, nothing happened but the music in his head receding, complete and resolved. Izzy lowered his hands slowly,

the anger draining off him and leaving him cold and sweat-soaked.

Nothing. He'd broken, and he'd attacked, and there was nothing in him to attack with. No infusion at all.

He wasn't Tutivillus after all; he was Fumato, the clown, the charlatan. Ignoring the banging, he curled in the corner and pressed his hands against his eyes until the sparks stopped.

* * *

Someone—maybe Zen—had arranged for a cot and a basin of hot water for him the next morning, and though he felt as if his bones had aged a dozen years, he managed to wash off and bring himself back to some semblance of normality. A pair of guards, possibly the same ones who'd dragged him away, escorted him back to the main hall.

Quint took one look at him as he arrived at the cordon and let out a long, low whistle. "Yer had a rough time of it."

"I know." He picked up the papers from his cot, mentally thanking whoever'd given them back. "It didn't do any good."

"They must have figured yeh were hiding it. I'd always thought that was what they tested for most." He shuffled the cards again and laid them out in clock-face solitaire. "But see, yeh'll get out now. Me, I've got a temper, I'm happy to show them that, so they see I can't hide a thing."

Get out now. Sodden and useless and too late for the opera. Not that it even mattered any more. He stacked up his papers and straightened up as a familiar figure emerged from beside the quiescent trundler automaton. “Thanks, for what it’s worth.”

Quint grinned. “Just get t’coils fixed, Weskit. Want t’get back to work, me, and if yer half as good with ‘em as with t’cards, we’ll not have a break like that again.”

It took Izzy a moment to realize this was actually a vote of confidence, but he nodded. “Thanks. Where’s Frank?”

Quint’s hands stilled on the cards. “Ah,” he said, not looking up.

“Izzy!” Zen hurried up to him. For a moment Izzy saw her through the same filter that had descended over his vision in the cell, the haze of anger and desire that had made her just a thing to crave.

But this was only Zen, though, his friend, a real person. Someone with whom to talk practical thaumics and mock new papers and share bitterleaf tea on train rides. Not a thing. Zen. His friend, and if he chose to believe what she’d said, maybe... but that could wait.

“Izzy, I’m so sorry,” she said, and for just a moment he thought it was an apology for the time in the cell, before remembering his other friend. Frank.

* * *

Frank's last request—written out by Zen, at his asking, and signed with a straggling X—had been for Izzy to take care of his belongings. Zen brought him in a rented carriage to the boarding house, driving as carefully as if he was made of glass. Which, he supposed, he was.

“You’ll be all right?” she asked, hopping down from the driver’s seat. “I’ll find a place to stable this, but if you think you’ll be a while I can come back—”

“I’ll be all right,” he echoed, not looking at her.

The little room where Frank had lived for the past forty years was scrupulously clean, the bed made up neat and straight, the next day’s clothes folded on the chair. Izzy carefully put them away in the dresser, as if he were packing up for another assignment. A pipe and tobacco rested on the table, along with a pen and inkwell, the ink nearly dry.

Izzy touched the pen, noting its worn nib, then frowned. Frank had signed the last request with an X, even as the fog in his lungs had taken his last breath. And he’d never written anything—even when their names were taken every night, he had Quint or Izzy sign for him, claiming that his chickenscratches weren’t readable.

But there had been the sound of a pen from the far side of the cloth, night after night....

Aside from the furniture and the faded patchwork quilt, there was little color to the room, save for a number of newspaper advertisements pasted up across from the window. They weren't pictures, though; most were simple offerings of the Amicaldo broadsheets; a few were scraps of music themselves. Pinned next to each, in a long line going all the way from one wall with the next, was a line of Quarantine Verification Certificates, the oldest so faded he could barely read the date, the newest maybe eight months old.

So many... and so many times in quarantine, but never into decontamination. Izzy stared at them, then at the pages below. Each certificate corresponded with a page of scribbled music.

Like trophies. Or examples. Or warnings.

Could tha do it? Keep it so hid tha'd forget tha had it?

It hadn't been a rhetorical question.

Izzy set down the file of pages he'd written out in quarantine, then, shakily, turned one over. Here were the diagrams he'd worked out, the new plans, the notes on how to fix the compressor coil... and interleaved among them, shuffled in at the last moment from all the stolen paper, were straggling staves of music.

“Amicaldo,” Izzy said softly. Only Amicaldo had never existed. Not really. It had been Frank... and Frank had only composed after quarantine.

Could be, once t’ thaum had been kept in so long, ‘d change, be not so bad when it came out.

He turned over the page, reading the score... and here, here was the spot where Frank had gone back and changed it. Where Izzy had insisted he’d gotten it wrong. An ascending tri-tone, followed by the solo voice breaking away... Faintly, in the back of his mind, he heard the music again, this time separated out into parts. There were no words as yet, but this... this was an opera, an unfinished opera.

He turned the pages back over. Yes. Frank had written in a title, a name out of the history books. King Renard, who’d died in a last stand against his own alchemages, the last of the magician-kings.

But after all, it wasn’t the story that mattered. Only the music.

So that’s how ‘t sounds. Wondered, I did.

The door creaked open. Zen hesitated at the threshold, still in her work clothes, the same as he remembered from train journeys and long days. “I got worried,” she said. “If you need me to come back....”

“No,” he said, packing up the pages, adding the ones from Frank’s desk, written on the backs of broadsheets or memos or grocery bags. There was enough here for a last work, a last masterpiece, even, but it was unfinished. And Frank had kept working, kept hoping for one last accident, one last exposure. “No, this will be fine. Just help me take these down, and we can be off.”

She looked at him askance. “You’re sure? I mean... there’s another production of *Tutivillus*, and if you really wanted I could probably get us in.”

“No need,” he said, met her eyes, and smiled. “There’ll be another opera.”

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Margaret Ronald’s fiction has appeared in such venues as Fantasy Magazine, Strange Horizons, Realms of Fantasy, and Clarkesworld Magazine. Her stories have appeared four times in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, including [“A Serpent in the Gears”](#) in BCS #34 and [“The Guilt Child”](#) in BCS #52, set in the same world as “Recapitulation in Steam.” Soul Hunt, the third

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MAMAFIELD

by Corie Ralston

Mama holds us close, long roots circled deep.

Safe with me, she sprays. Her scents hang just a moment
then float thin with breeze.

I'm at edge of mamacircle, so I see him best. *Leaver*, I
breathe.

Don't say the name, Mama warns.

He's just a black speck under far trees, so I open all eyes
upstalk to see better.

The speck moves into full sun, and I see he has strong
roots furrowing earth and a big full sunhead.

We pull close in to mamacenter.

Why's he back? Sister Third asks.

Where'd he go? Brother Second sprays.

Why'd he leave? a new bud asks. She hasn't heard the
story.

Mama stays quiet. She scents sadness and fear.

My roots find a rock deep down and grip it tight. I only
know Leaver through storytime. Evil Leaver. Betrayer. He talks
to birds. He leaves Mama. But now he's back.

* * *

Leaver takes his time. His roots dig strong, raise long high furrows. His stalk sways forward, back, forward.

Sunsoak time is over. Bug scents fade. Still he closes in. I see sky lights when he's close enough to scent.

Hello. Like he hasn't been gone so long. Like he didn't hurt Mama so bad.

We hold scents tight.

His sunhead is wide, leaves browned at the tips, like he's soaked too long.

He moves closer. New bud squeezes stalk eyes shut.

But Leaver doesn't scent angry or mean. He scents excitement.

Long trip, he scents, and then he sprays something new. I don't know what it means. It hints adventure.

So many new soils, he sprays. *I'll story.*

Mama won't let him story, no chance, I think.

High steep hills full of stone, he scents. *Water rushing in rivers impossible to cross.*

Why then? Mama's scents are ringed with tension.

The wonder! His scent is thick. *The huge wide land. Beautiful deep soils, perfect for seeds.*

No one leaves mamafield, Mama scents. *No one leaves Mama.*

Mamafield depletes, Leaver scents.

What he says is true. I can feel it at the edge of mamacircle. The soil is better further out. More food, more worms.

Mamafield is always home, she scents. She makes Leaver sound wrong.

Will run out someday.

Someday is never.

Someday is sooner than tomorrow.

You spoke to birds! I've never smelled such anger from Mama.

Leaver doesn't answer. He migrates his eyes away, starts digging outcircle.

You leave! Mama sprays thick in the air. *You leave now.*

We pull roots away from Leaver. He pulls outcircle and even further. He moves until I can't scent him anymore. Sun dips below edge of mamafield, so I close stalk eyes. Maybe he stops, maybe he goes.

What is his story? We crowd close, fill the dirt of his passage. *What did he do?*

He leaves home. He leaves mamacenter.

But we know there's more to the story.

He talks to birds.

Everyone is so still I can smell the hopping of a night bug.

Tell, whispers new bud. Tell, tell.

I feel Mama's roots around my own, guarding, protecting.

Even from start, even when a bud, Leaver moves further from Mama than Mama wants. Leaver digs deeper, Leaver argues when Mama says sleep. Leaver argues when Mama says soak. Then, one day, birds attack.

My new leaves curl inward at talk of birds.

Evil birds, Mama scents. Birds dive down straight from sun, dig claws into stalk, pull seeds from fruit. Fruits broken open and bleeding. All those seeds. All gone.

My sunhead shrinks down.

All those seeds, all dead. The sad from Mama is so thick. But Leaver, he talks to evil birds. We all breathe it in: disbelief, anger, outrage.

How does he talk, Mama?

He talks with vibrating leaves, pushing air. She scents disgust. Leaver is so low, so vulgar.

And then he abandons. I give him his name: Leaver. And I have you beautiful, good children, my last seeds. You do not leave. You do not betray.

Leaver must go! Second sprays.

Send him back to his bird friends. Third scents pure anger.

You tell him, Mama scents to me. You are oldest, first seed.

* * *

I finally scent Leaver at far edge of mamafield, past where I have ever dug. I don't feel safe so far outcircle, but he's traveled alone for years. He's been so far outside we wouldn't even scent his death. And that's what he deserves.

The sun is full gone, so I move slowly, keep eyes closed. No need to waste energy for Leaver. I feel nightcat brush my stalk and I hold still until it's gone.

When I get close, Leaver scents before I can tell him Mama says leave.

I find field, he sprays. Perfect beautiful field. Earth soft and deep without stones. Worms plenty.

Why do you talk to birds? I scent angry. Birds are enemies.

First I follow birds because I try to get seeds back for Mama.

Talk with vibrating leaves. I make sure to attach disgust to the scents.

How else?

Mama is right. Leaver is evil, like birds. Impossible to win argument with Leaver.

Birds don't understand, Leaver scents. I vibrate leaves to push air. But birds don't talk back.

You don't get seeds back, I scent.

I follow birds. I follow and follow. I travel over many hills. I grow weak, my stalk thin, no time for soaking. But I lose them, the birds. They fly too fast.

Birds are evil, I scent.

One day I find new bud, he scents. New bud from seed. Seed dropped from birds. This new bud is our brother.

Not possible. Now he lies. Brothers and sisters grow only with Mama.

But Leaver goes on. His scent is true. He is my new brother. I help him out of shade into full sun.

Why is new brother not here?

World is big, he scents. Many fields.

I don't understand. And then I do.

Other mamafields? I scent.

Little brother follows me. We find another mamafield.

Other Mamas. I do not believe. There is only one Mama.

You know what else?

I don't want to know what else, but he goes on.

Anyone can flower.

It's too much. It's too wild, too strange. How can it be true? Everyone can flower? Seeds can travel far and become new buds without Mama.

You can flower, he scents.

No one flowers but Mama.

You could make flowers and collect pollen.

No.

But something inside me scents: yes.

You could make new buds.

No.

I think about little flowers. I think about the sweet smell of pollen and how it sticks to my leaves. I've dreamed of little flowers along my stalk, but I've never told Mama.

Leaver sniffs for my reply, but I don't have one.

My own flowers, I think. My own seeds, my own buds.

Leaver pulls his inward roots in, his outward roots out.

Where do you go? I scent. I've forgotten for a moment, so strange are his stories.

I leave, he scents. *That's what Mama wants, true?*

It's night, I scent. But he keeps moving.

Wait.

He stops digging.

I'll talk to Mama. Maybe she wants to hear his crazy story. Mama will make sense of it. *I'll talk to Mama in morning.*

* * *

My eyes are open when the first good ray falls on world's edge. I want to go incircle, but still I wait until the grasses release their first scents.

I move in through my brothers and sisters, touching roots gently to wake.

What is it? Brother Fifth scents.

Does Leaver leave? scents Sister Fourth.

It's all right, I tell them. I talk with Mama.

Mama's eyes are open when I reach center. *Does Leaver leave?*

Soon, I scent.

That's what Leaver does, she scents. Because Leaver doesn't love Mama.

Leaver says some things. He says he follows birds that day. He sees birds drop seeds. He sees new brother. From dropped seed.

How many seeds destroyed that day? She doesn't wait for my answer. Fruit torn apart. Seeds drying and dying on mamafield. I can barely understand the words for the pain attached.

It's all right, Mama. I scent comfort. Leaver says new brother lives. Maybe other seeds live.

No brothers and sisters grow without Mama.

Leaver says new brother found new field.

No field without Mama.

I can go look. I don't tell her about other Mamas and how Leaver said anyone can flower. I think of traveling up and

down the far hills. I think of tasting new soils and seeing new skies.

I'm thinking of all those new smells so I don't realize at first that Mama has not answered.

What, Mama?

My own bud. My first alive seed! She's spilling anger and hurt like a new bud. You betray Mama.

No, Mama. Not betray.

You vibrate leaves in air now too?

No, no, I scent. But really I mean yes. Because I'm thinking about following birds and seeing new mamafields. I feel ashamed. But I want her to understand. Leaver says birds take fruit and drop seeds and seeds become new brothers and sisters.

You believe Leaver?

Leaver has seen and smelled.

You defend Leaver. You defend birds. Birds kill my seeds. You don't love Mama.

I do love Mama. This is truth. I love Mama and I love my brothers and sisters.

If you love Mama you will not go. You will not believe Leaver.

The scents are deep with challenge. This is where I tell her I will never leave. That I will dig in the mamafield until I am

old and all my leaves are long and wide and have soaked in all their sun and my roots can no longer dig. Until my stalk shrivels and my eyes shut fast. And then my brothers and sisters will push me into the shade trees and I will sink slowly back into the earth and all my pieces will become dirt.

But that is not what I want. I want to look over the far hills before I become soil. I want to see the rivers and the stone mountains and dig in the fields that Leaver has found. Maybe I even want to vibrate my leaves and try to make talk that birds can understand.

My hesitation speaks. I have not said please Mama forgive me. I have not said Mama I will never leave you.

Her hurt and anger hang thick around me.

I know what she'll spray at storytime. That I betray her, that I talk with birds. That evil Leaver tricked me to leave. And when the birds come again, she will say it is because me and Leaver told them to.

I want Mama to love me, I want her to say everything is all right. I want her to understand. I almost say I'll stay just so she'll stop the anger and hurt scents. Instead, I send roots out and pull myself away from Mama.

All my sisters and brothers give me path. They won't let their roots touch mine.

When I reach the edge of the circle I keep going. Leaver is further out than before, but he is still. He is waiting for me.

I move and move until I'm outcircle. All around me is wide unworked dirt. It's more difficult to furrow. But the soil is richer here. Even just a little ways out from the mamafield there are plants I have never scented before.

I feel so lonely for Mama. But I also feel strength inside me, new and free. Someday I'll find new mamafields. Someday I'll pollen. The sun is full out. My path is clear.

I feel the flowers inside me, waiting to bloom.

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Corie Ralston's writing has been found in Strange Horizons, Clarkesworld, and Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, among others. She has a full time job as a staff scientist at Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory and is also the managing director for the Speculative Literature Foundation. In general, she works too much, daydreams too little, and always wishes she had more time. She can be found at www.sff.net/people/cyralston/ and on Facebook.

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COVER ART

“Into the Unknown,” by Kerem Beyit



Kerem Beyit is a freelance artist born in Ankara, Turkey. He started drawing in his early childhood with the influence of comic books, and he trained himself from great fantasy artists like Frank Frazetta and Gerald Brom. He has won Master and Excellence Awards from Exposé 7, and his artwork has been used for covers of European editions of fantasy novels by Tad Williams and George R.R. Martin. Visit his website and gallery at www.theartofkerembeyit.com.

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