



# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online  
Magazine of  
Literary  
Adventure  
Fantasy

Issue #65 • Mar. 24, 2011

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# LOVE, RESURRECTED

by Cat Rambo

General Aife Crofadottir was acknowledged the greatest military mind of her generation—perhaps even her century. No wonder then that the sorcerer Balthus recruited her early in her career, setting her to rally armies of Beasts and magically-equipped soldiers, planning campaign after campaign, until finally he stood the ruler of a vast expanse of the continent's northeastern corner. Once fertile lands, once countries, now only uncontested, devastated territories.

Three years after her death, she still labored in his service.

\* \* \*

Aife stood at the window of Balthus's tower, looking out over the desolate countryside. Age and blight had stooped the apple trees dominating the view, and sticky webs clustered in the vees of the knobby branches. The dry grass tried to hold onto the dust, but here, as everywhere, drought and ash and the silty remnant of magic choked away all life. The chalky-white stones surrounding the dry well gleamed in the hostile sunlight.

Decades of sorcerous battle had warped the land. It was dead in patches, or so plagued by ghosts that no living soul could walk it and remain sane.

She rested her fingertips on the windowsill and contemplated her hand. The skin was gray and withered but still functioned. Sooner or later, Aife thought, it would rot away, despite Balthus's preservative spells. What would happen then? Right now she could pass for a living but very ill person, could wrap herself in a cloak and whisper, make some claim to human company. What would happen when her bones began to show through?

Behind her, Balthus said, "You will become a skeleton, but one that walks and talks by magic means. The mere sight of you will strike fear in any heart. What a war leader you will be then, my darling!"

He touched her shoulder, closer than she had thought him. "You will make a beautiful skeleton. All clean-lined ivory. I will commission you a crown, gilt and amber, with the warhawk that shows you general."

She was weary of him reading her mind.

At the thought, he removed his hand. "Is that what has concerned you lately? But I must know your mind, Aife, must be able to glimpse your plans in order to work to aid them."

“Every creature in your employ,” she said, words thick. “I know, you must know them all.”

He let the room’s silence gather, then ventured, “Perhaps....”

“Perhaps?”

She turned away from the window to contemplate him. She might be a monster, but he was little more: yellowed skin stretched drum-tight over his bones. His long, wispy hair was tied back with an embroidered ribbon the wrong color for the crimson robes he wore.

Blotches and scars marked his hands, the relics of past experiments. An olive-green patch covered the heel of one hand, an irregular oval resembling old mold or lichen.

He returned the gaze, eyes as glassy as an opium addict’s. What spells had he laid on himself, throughout the years? She wondered if he saw her as she truly was now. Or did he let the memory of her slip over it like a mask, making him see her when the blood still coursed through her veins, instead of the slow seepage it engaged in now, as though begrudging her body its energy.

“I will make you a charm,” he said. His voice was almost pleading. “One that keeps your thoughts hidden. No other man, woman, or Beast in my employ has that privilege. But I will give it to you.”

And with that promise, she gave him her hand, her gray and withered hand, and let him lead her to bed.

But again, she did not know whether he kissed her or the memory of what she had been to him.

\* \* \*

He kept his promise. The next day, beside her on the pillow he had left at dawn, a silver chain coiled, holding a dark gem, darker than death or the loss of memory.

She put it around her neck and went to do his business.

\* \* \*

Since her transformation, all living things shied away from her. She had become accustomed to that. But the Beasts accepted her more than the humans did. Most of them were creatures Balthus had created, sometimes by putting living things together to make something new, like the swan-winged woman that acted as scout and courier, or the great Catoblepas, blended of ox and wild pig and turtle and something Balthus would not name, whose breath withered whatever it struck. More often he transformed what he was given: stretching, pulling, augmenting, till something was created that the world had never seen before. If it showed promise that he could use it, he left it alive.

She did not seek the Beasts' company deliberately, but rather, as a cat does, she would sit in a room where they were

gathered, not part of the conversation, but letting it swirl around her. There but not there. It reminded her of long-ago barracks chatter, the taunts and gibes and affectionate mockery of fellow soldiers.

This day she sat in the corner near the fire, careful not to get too close, lest a spark singe her without her knowing, because her skin was dead now and only reported a little when pain struck it. Near her was the swan-woman, who they called Lytta, and the Minotaur who guarded the stables, and a man-wolf who had once been one of her finest soldiers. He was the only one who had looked at her when she entered, his eyes glinting sly green in the firelight as he half-nodded. She had not returned the gesture.

“They say the Falcon is making inroads near Barbaruile,” Lytta said to the wolf-man, who had refused any name other than “Wolf.”

That news interested Aife. She had pursued the bandit chief who called himself the Falcon for almost a year now and found him a more than adequate challenge.

“What does he fight for?” the Minotaur demanded, his voice as heavy as a sack of gravel. “He leaves things worse than they are, with no sorcerer to look out over the land.”

“He must have magic of his own,” Lytta said. “Look at how he has escaped capture, again and again.”

“They say it is no magic,” Wolf said, “but rather something that dispels magic.”

Aife had spent much time contemplating the same question. What was the source of the Falcon’s success? Spies sent to gather information never returned. Were never heard from again. Subverted or killed? She hoped, for their sake, that it had been the latter. When Balthus finally captured the Falcon—it was inevitable—he would take him and all his allies and make new things of them, things that they would not enjoy being.

Any more than she enjoyed the life he had given her.

\* \* \*

When she had first opened her eyes after her death, all she saw was Balthus’s face, like the full moon in the sky above her. She had shuddered then, not understanding why she continued to breathe breathed.

She remembered dying. She remembered the cannonball slamming into her, the broken knitting needles of her ribs, bright stitches of pain weaving her a garment. Reeling back on unsteady legs—something in her spine was wrong, was numb. Slipping away, like retreating into sleep, defeated but not unhappily by dreams. It had been so restful.

She realized she no longer had to breathe.

“What have you done?” she tried to say, but Balthus’s hand pressed her back implacably on the bed.

“Rest, my dear,” he said. “You were too valuable to me to be laid beneath the earth.”

Her heart, she realized, had not been revived with the rest of her.

\* \* \*

When Balthus had first recruited Aife, she had stood straight as a spear, muscular but tall, carrying herself like a willow tree. She kept her hair short then, in the manner of foot soldiers, even though she had risen much further in the ranks than that. Her only scar was a burn along her left fore-arm where it had been caught by quick-fire in a southern sea battle against raiders.

They had heard of Balthus, of course. His demesne bordered the petty kingdom in whose service she battled. Rumors initially said he was a mage, but the stories had grown until they named what he really was: sorcerer, the sort that battled perpetually on these shores. The devastation had not yet spread across the continent. She had thought she could keep the kingdom safe for its Queen-Regent.

But in a single night, everything changed.

When she awoke that morning, the first thing she noticed was the silence. Then the smell of blood.



She alone was alive. She went through the castle, opening door after door to look in, seeing a gaping wound like a second mouth on each throat, the pool of spilled blood, the flies already gathering. In the Queen's chamber, grief nearly brought her to her knees. She had promised to protect the woman who lay there. Now all that was alive in this place was her. Why had she been spared? Had she been merely overlooked, or was there some reason?

Finally she had entered the throne room, expecting that no one there. A red-robed man sat alive on the gilded chair, watching her approach.

"Your fame has spread, Aife. Aife of the deadly sword and clever plan. I have come to collect you. Will you serve me, or must I coerce you?"

His eyes were deceptively kind; her mind numb. Her fingers curled around the hilt of the dagger at her waist, felt the ridges of the leather wrapping on the pommel. But what use was steel against a sorcerer?

At the time she agreed, she'd thought to catch him off guard, kill him when he was unwary. She watched for opportunities, made her plans. She could not hope to escape alive after slaying him, but it would be worth it, to avenge her Queen. She waited patiently.

But a year passed, then another, and she found herself enjoying planning his campaigns, being able to use magics, technologies, of the sort her Queen never could have wielded. She had never been able to play at war on such a scale. Her victories pleased her. Made her even more famous.

Wolf had come to her then, sought her out, not as a lover but as a follower, and had been captured by Balthus. Brought to her, he had sworn to whatever changes the sorcerer thought might make him a more efficient soldier. The potion Balthus gave him twisted and elongated his skull, pulled his jaw forward, endowed it with canines the size of her thumb.

All the while he had stared into her eyes, trusting her.

By then it all seemed normal.

She'd been seduced by her pleasure in the puzzles Balthus had set her. How to coax an enemy from a walled tower. How to keep supplies from the coast from reaching their destination. As though the mental chessboard had been expanded, the rules not changed but become more complex. Challenge after worthy challenge, and she overcame them all.

And so when, the next night, he had kissed her, she had not resisted. She was not a virgin. Nor was she the only person to find themselves in his bed. She thought he would miss her companionship. Perhaps it would keep her safe; perhaps he'd

hesitate to slay someone who'd touched him, cradled him. Loved him.

Had she known she would become so dear to him that he'd impose this existence on her, she would have tried to kill him that first moment in that echoing, empty throne room, even knowing it meant her death.

\* \* \*

This half-life dragged at her. She felt *weary* all the time, a chilled-bone sluggishness of motion that belied the quickness of her thoughts. It was not painful to breathe, but it was tiring, and she began to eschew it when alone and unworried about frightening the living.

She touched the silver chain at her throat. Was it real or some trick? A trinket that did nothing but give her peace of mind? She thought, though, that he would deal squarely with her. Of all his creations, she was the most *his*.

In the chambers she inhabited, she unrolled the massive map that showed Balthus's territory and spread it on the table. She used a copper coin to mark each site where a raid had occurred and studied them, trying to puzzle out the pattern by which the Falcon determined his targets. There was always a pattern, even when people were trying to avoid it.

The Falcon seemed to be working north, but in the past he'd doubled back on occasion, hit a previous target or

something near it. When would he do it again? What prompted the decision each time?

Discover that and she'd have him.

\* \* \*

She had always walked among her troops, late at night, getting a feel for their worries, their fears. She could do that no longer. She frightened them too much.

So now she relied on her three troop leaders, all uneasy-looking men Balthus had recruited from the Southern Isles. One told her he had come thinking this war-torn continent would provide easy pickings for a man of war. Then once here, he had realized, as had the others, the importance of placing himself under a sorcerer's command. There was no other way to survive.

Unless you were the Falcon, it seemed. Was it true, was he a sorcerer himself?

If so, only Balthus could catch him.

But her employer— her lover, her resurrector—seemed more preoccupied with the waters to the north and skirmishes with the Pot-King, who might actually be the Pot-King's son, according to one set of rumors.

"A minor bandit," Balthus said dismissively.

"A troublesome one," she said. "He burned your granary at Vendish."

A bold move, but a strategic one. Hungry troops were inefficient troops, whether Human or Beast.

Balthus shrugged. “Is that not why I have you, for matters of this sort?”

\* \* \*

Her fearsome nature had its advantages. She could not move easily among her soldiers, but she could walk the land around the castle. No creature would trouble her; no predator would sniff her and think of food. No ghost would attack her, knowing her somewhat closer than kindred.

Sometimes Wolf trailed her, never speaking but always guarding. It was a comfort, even if unnecessary, to feel him in the shadows, a guardian presence at her back.

She did not take a torch. Her eyes were well-adjusted to the darkness—indeed, most times she preferred it.

In a glade, she found a doe and her fawn, part of the herd of Riddling Deer Balthus had loosed on the orchard. They lay in a drift of fresh green grass. Red poppies bloomed around them, rare vegetation in this scorched land.

The doe’s eyes were dark as forest pools. Her nostrils flared and her head jerked, testing the air, as Aife approached. But the wind reassured her; she settled back.

The fawn spoke—how had Balthus managed that? The Deer were his unique creation. He had wanted oracles, had not realized how enigmatic and troublesome they would prove.

“Inside you is your worst enemy,” it said.

She did not move, but looked at the fawn, hoping for additional details.

They were not forthcoming. But perhaps —

A branch snapped under Wolf’s foot in the underbrush. The wind changed. Jack-knife sudden, doe and fawn were on their feet.

They flickered away into the night, taking with them the answers she sought.

\* \* \*

She came back to her quarters, smelling of grass and thyme, knowing the boundaries were unchallenged except by the Deer’s troublesome words. She unslung her heavy cape, velvet folds as soft as a baby’s earlobe. Her boots were black leather with gilt buckles. She undid them one by one and slipped the footwear off by the fire before padding over to the table to contemplate the Falcon’s patterns anew.

A black-barred feather lay on her map.

She picked it up with some difficulty. Cold made her fingers stiff.

Who would have dared to leave it here? The Falcon had some ally—perhaps even allies, for she reckoned him her equal in cunning, in planning out each move in a long game, and she would have never betrayed just one ally, unwilling to lose the advantage it gave her, unless she had others in place.

Twirling the feather, she watched its dance. She would use it as her test of the amulet. Surely if Balthus plucked it from her thoughts, it would spur him to some action.

But he did nothing when he saw her the next morning. Instead she laid the feather beside the map and continued her study of the Falcon's appearances. She tracked the phases of the moon, the weather, anything that might prompt his decisions.

It seemed to Aife that in the last few months, such a pattern had emerged. But why, puzzlingly, had one recently appeared?

Still, she was there, in the village he had half-burned before, lying in wait, when he doubled back. She had sent the surviving townspeople away, filled the houses with archers and swordhands. In the remnants of the town hall, the Catoblepas crouched, waiting for her orders.

She chose the Mayor's house for her headquarters, finding it the best appointed for her needs. She told herself the

decision was not motivated by the way the man had flinched when she first rode in.

As expected, in the night the bandit band appeared, slinking in through the shadows, slipping into houses. Their deaths would be as quick and as silent as she could manage. She had ordered them killed; she had no need for anyone alive but the Falcon.

But she waited in vain, and the breath in the Catoblepas's lungs withered only the small grasses among the stones where it crouched. When her archers and soldiers came, they said the Falcon's men had been only illusory wraiths, melting through their steel.

At that, she expected the courier's arrival to bring word that the castle was under siege. It did. She had been outmaneuvered. It was not a customary sensation for her.

By the time she arrived, several dozen of Balthus's choicest Beasts were dead, and a full troop's worth of seasoned mercenaries who would be difficult to replace. Balthus uttered no reproach, but she felt the weight of his unspoken disapproval and disappointment. For the first time, she wondered if there were worse things than the life he had given her.

\* \* \*



In the months that followed, she found herself experiencing another uncustomary sensation: irritation. She played a game where her opponent had her outwitted at every turn, as though he could read her mind. As Balthus once had.

Her opponent taunted her. Every few days another feather appeared. Laid atop her pillow, on the tray beside her breakfast, drifting on the windowsill. A marker in her book, turned a few pages beyond where she had been reading.

She burned them in the fireplace but said nothing to Balthus.

*Inside you is your worst enemy.* What did that mean? The thought ate at her like a parasite. Was she at odds with herself? Was she overlooking the obvious, making mistakes she should have realized? She found herself outside her actions, watching them with a critical eye.

She faltered sometimes. The fine lines around Balthus's eyes meshed and deepened when he frowned at her, but he said nothing aloud.

But he wanted the Falcon captured, and soon. He was angry about the losses, the time that would be necessary to create more Beasts. For the first time he did not communicate his plans but expected her to guess them in a way that left her scrambling to catch up at times, trying to figure how to incorporate each creature he created. He did not consult her.

She could have used more winged Beasts, to replace lost scouts, but she did not dare request them.

\* \* \*

It shocked her when Balthus, finally making a move, caught the quarry she had sought so long. Little consolation that his victory came by cheating, not the sort of thing she would have ever embarked upon.

She could see why Balthus had moved with such efficiency, though. Was not all fair in war, as in love?

It was through an exchange of hostages, one of the sacred customs. By doing it, she thought to pay the Falcon tribute, let him see she respected him as an opponent, perhaps lure him into complacency. It was not until they had been dispatched that Balthus revealed that one had been a Siren, a woman created to entice, who would cast her magic over them.

“She even looked a little like you,” he said with a smile. Then added, “As you were, I mean.”

She made no reply aloud, but had he been able to read her thoughts, his smile might have faltered.

\* \* \*

Aife went to the cell where they kept the Falcon. She took two guards with her, trailing her as she made her way down spirals of stone. On the third landing, a torch burned beside his door.

Her hand spread like an elderly starfish on the door's surface as she leaned forward. She found herself trembling like a hound ready to be loosed on the scent.

He had been sitting on the bunk. He sprang up as her shadow crossed the rectangle of light on the stone floor, approached the door till he was inches away from the bars and the hood's edge shrouding her face, but not far enough. He recoiled as he saw her fully, recovered, stood still, but this time not as close.

She looked at him all the while. Rumors had not lied about his handsomeness. Slim and brown-skinned, his hair as black as ink, a few white strands at the temples somehow making it seem even darker.

Aife could have loved this man, long ago, in her soldier days, before the weight of death had settled on her shoulders. He was young and beautiful, so beautiful. So alive. She wanted him as she had not wanted anything for so long. She put a hand to the bars, looked at him, hoping to see the same recognition there.

Only horror and revulsion

She had thought her heart dead, but that was not true, else how could she feel it aching now?

Still, she had to question him. She took two guards in with her but motioned them back when they would have seized him. Leave him his dignity for now.

“How did you know what I was doing for so long?” she said.

He sneered. “Are you not a dead thing, to be commanded by magic, like all dead things that walk must be? I had my necromancer working for months, trying to find a way inside your mind. On the night of the year’s third moon, he succeeded.

“After that, all was clear to me. His magic let me take control of you from time to time. We could not risk it for long, though, so I used it to trouble you, making you lay down clues for yourself: a feather to stir your thoughts, send them in the wrong direction. And it worked, until your master chose to trust you no longer.”

Had Balthus realized what had happened? That closing her mind to him had opened it to other magical controllers? Surely he had not known it at first but only later, had used it to infiltrate the Falcon’s camp, to discover his plans in order to catch him?

“Your compatriots,” she said, “including any magickers with them, are dead. You are here in Balthus’s castle, and will

be wrung of information as a sponge is of water. Will you yield it up easily or will you force him to twist you hard?"

She watched him as he considered her words. She thought that it would be hard to kill him, but she'd do it nonetheless. She had killed pretty men before, and seen many of them used to coaxing their way from women die as quick and efficiently as the ugliest man.

Sometimes they were a little more theatrical about it all. He seemed like he would be the theatrical sort.

She touched the silver chain. She had refused jewelry for so long. It was something that made you a target, or gave enemies a chance to grab at it. And here it had happened, just as she had always feared. Her worst enemy had been in her head, and it was not herself.

She thought, though, that if she could have freed him, she might have. He was that pretty. It would have made her happy, to know that he lived somewhere, that he knew it was by her mercy. If only that was possible.

Footsteps, coming down the stairs. Who?

The Falcon twisted at the air with his hand. She felt the chain constrict around her throat, puppet fingers slipping into her brain.

"It seems my necromancer's magic lingers after all, after all," he said. "I suspected you could not resist coming close

enough that I could control you, even without his assistance. What shall I have you do? Kill your master seems the most obvious step, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps," Balthus said from where he stood on the stairwell.

Aife was pulled upward, her limbs someone else's, a loathsome intimacy that made bile burn in her throat. The guards were on their knees, choking, hands at their throats, trying to pry away invisible cords. She was thrust towards the door, trying to keep her arms out to maintain balance.

Balthus raised his hand, palm towards her. The green blotch had grown like a bracelet around his wrist. A blob of silvery liquid covered the center of his hand like the moon, pulling her forward, a mystical tide washing through her, making her heavy, restoring her to herself. She shuddered, shaking off the last of the netting over her senses.

"You are not one sixteenth as clever as you think you are, puppy," Balthus said .

"Enough to rid you of your most powerful tool!" the Falcon exclaimed. She twisted away as he flung something at her that dispersed in the air, a handful of motes. She felt it settling on her back and shoulders, saw red sparkling dust riding the breeze, falling on her gray skin and setting it smoldering wherever it landed.

Where was water, anywhere close at hand? The privy pot in the cell was dry. The guards were recovering, as she had, and so she discarded the thought of quenching anything in their blood.

Fire blazed along her skin, burning deep, too deep to extinguish. She staggered towards the door, where Balthus stood. His face was stricken. She saw herself, a fiery angel, reflected in his pupils, saw the thick velvet of the cloak gone lacy with flame. She opened her mouth to appeal to him and felt it fill with flaming dust, go hiss-flickering out, the heat stealing any chance at words.

Fire, and more fire, and then final darkness.

\* \* \*

Only to awake, agonized. Balthus's face above her yet again.

Was that all it would ever be, from now on?

She was bone now. Bone and some sort of spectral, invisible flesh that netted her limbs into order and gave her the power of sight. She moved her fingers and they clacked and clicked against the planes of her face as she tried to touch whatever held her together.

Opposite her a standing mirror, green-lit, presenting her rippled and obscured as though drowning. Her skull, wavering

in the reflection, capped with a tiara— a golden hawk, wings stretched out to cup the bone.

Wolf was there past the mirror, pressed against the wall of the chamber. Watching her with loyalty. Whatever she became, he would follow. It was reassurance. She would always be a leader, no matter what.

Truly a monster now. She would have to give up some of her illusions: the pretense of meals and cosmetics and clothing. What good would armor be, except to hang on her as though she was some sort of display rack?

“I have made you a present, my dearest,” Balthus said. His fingers stroked her skull, bumped along her teeth. He released her and stepped aside.

Undead, skin already graying. Ah, the fine dark hair, the silver strands like penmarks in reverse. The once-piercing eyes now blue and cloudy marbles.

Marbles full of hate and spite and helpless malice. Hers forever more, her handsome toy, given her by her master, perhaps to torment, perhaps from love and an impulse to please. Would she ever know his motives, would she ever understand if she was puppet or lover, source of amusement or font of something else?

Endless days stretched before her, in which she would never find the answer.



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## PLAYING FOR AMARANTE

by A.B. Treadwell

I first caught sight of Amarante in the sea of pale silk that glimmered in the low light of the concert hall like pearls underwater. She wore carmine.

Even from my poor vantage on stage, that color spoke its name. Would that it had also spoken—what? A premonition? A warning?

A carmine bodice, auburn hair caught up with combs of amber, and a rapt, transported stillness. She leaned forward from the second row, listening. My foot on the treadle slowed and stopped, my hands stilled against the glass rims. Ethereal tones from the armonica lingered, mingled, sustained themselves into haunting disquiet. The last reverberation died away.

The concert hall held its breath, and I held mine.

In the wash of rising silk and waistcoats and stunning, concussive applause, I caught one flutter of falling. The woman on the second row spilled into the aisle. A flash of carmine pooled on the floor.

I remember leaping from the bench. The applause trebled. I ran to the edge of the stage, but already I had lost her. The crowd closed over her without a ripple.

My instinct was to find her, she who was no one to me but a listener in a crowd of hundreds. Even then, before the threads of my life began to unravel, when my innocence was complete and my heart untroubled, I trembled at the intensity of my response.

I would have sworn on my life that I had never seen her before, but I startled nearly out of my skin when my own voice whispered in my ear that her name was—is—Amarante.

\* \* \*

My patroness the Comtesse Sophie de Grasse parades me through the concert hall foyer. Her skirts swish down the grand stairs, and her open bodice breathes perfume: essences of iris, jasmine, and orange blossom.

I open the coach door and lift her by a gloved hand. We sit facing one another. It would be a mistake to ask Sophie about the woman. The way she strokes my knee, I can tell her mind is on other things.

“I have a surprise for you,” she says. Her face is aglow this night, and she looks the age she pretends to be.

“Oh?”

“We have an invitation to dine with Madame Geoffrin.”

Even as a newcomer to Paris I have heard of Mme. Geoffrin. She is the most famous hostess in all of Europe. “At the Monday salon?”

“No!” Sophie pulls me closer. “Tonight!”

Now I understand the blush that glows from her cheeks and neckline. The most preeminent salon in Paris has rearranged its schedule for us.

“You are the guest of honor,” she says. Her eyes sparkle. “Joseph Haydn will be there! He’s here for one night—rumor has it the head of the Loge Olympique orchestra hopes to persuade him to write a Paris symphony—but Madame Geoffrin has taken great pains to make sure no one knows. He asked to meet the young virtuoso who’s turning Paris inside out. Can you believe it? This could be our gateway to Vienna!”

Vienna. Winter home of Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, builder of palaces with gold-plated halls, theaters dwarfed by murals of Apollo, and sponsor of the finest orchestra in the world. Suddenly Sophie’s dream of introducing me to Haydn’s patron seems dizzyingly real.

Her words penetrate too quickly. I am to play the armonica for Joseph Haydn. The most celebrated composer in Europe. Tonight. Sweat turns to ice on my skin.

The carriage jolts to a stop, and Sophie slides into my lap. She kisses me deeply. “Carry yourself like an artist.” She smooths the ruffles of my shirt.

I am dizzy with perfume and the rush that answers Sophie’s touch.

Vienna is a dream; meeting Haydn, delirium. Perhaps one day, to train under him and play alongside the best musicians in the world with Apollo’s reflected glory falling over us. In all my life, there will never be another chance.

I whisper a prayer in my mother’s rustic dialect.

The coachman opens our door, and we step out.

\* \* \*

The bellman announces us as “Monsieur Persée Durand and the Comtesse de Grasse.”

The inverted order of our names arrests me until Sophie gives me a nudge, and I remember that in this room, on this night, it is my name that matters.

The drawing room is draped with brocade and tassels in shades of sea foam. Niches hold potted orchids, gilded cages with rare birds, and chaise lounges where the silken curves of the old aristocracy brush against the rumpled waistcoats of the intelligentsia.

A great mirror hangs above a marble fireplace, doubling movement, guests, and light.

A woman with a long white braid draped over her shoulder sweeps toward us. “Welcome, Comtesse! Monsieur Durand, a pleasure.” She presses Sophie’s hand in both her own.

“Madame Geoffrin.” Sophie’s voice is breathless.

Our hostess, the most coveted contact in Paris, holds a hand to me. I kiss it.

Madame Geoffrin laughs. “What pretty manners! I see your hand in this one, Comtesse.”

Sophie smiles at me and links her arm in mine. “No, I’m afraid he came to me this way. I have only taught him bad habits.”

“But what a lovely bouquet your bad habits make, Comtesse.” Sophie and I turn to see a man in a well-cut dress coat sweep a dashing bow.

“Monsieur Franc La Ronge, philologist, playwright, philanderer, poet to the Hapsburg court.”

“Madame Geoffrin exaggerates. My poetry is doggerel.” La Ronge kisses Sophie’s hand. “How is your husband, Comtesse?”

Sophie colors prettily. “At home, poor man. Managing distillation. Perfume is a demanding mistress.”

“I would not want any other kind,” says La Ronge.

My head is spinning. This La Ronge fellow pens verse for the Empress. How many heads of state are but one degree away from the guests in this room?

Mme. Geoffrin touches my arm. "I have a place for you in the great room." She pulls me away, and I glance back only once at Sophie. She does not look for me.

Heads turn as I cross the room with Mme. Geoffrin. I pass faces as familiar as the profiles on currency. They stare because I am out of place, I think, but then a second thought sends bright hot needles across my skin. Perhaps they stare because they know exactly who I am.

The most beautiful and powerful men and women in all of Europe know my name.

The most beautiful save one. I search the room and find every shade but carmine.

"Madame Geoffrin," I venture. "Did you attend this evening? There was a woman in the second row. Did you see her fall?"

Mme. Geoffrin inclines her head toward me. "I was not in attendance, but surely my guests would have mentioned anything untoward. The second row, you say?"

"Yes. She wore carmine." For no reason at all, I blush.

"I will inquire discretely for you."

"Thank you, Madame."



Mme. Geoffrin leads me to a curtained alcove lined with low benches. Another great mirror catches the reflection from the other room. Below it sits an inlaid stand the size of a sewing table. The stand conceals the instrument, the armonica. A chair waits for me.

A man steps out of the shadows.

“Monsieur Haydn,” says Mme. Geoffrin.

Every hair on my head turns to glass.

“Monsieur Durand,” she says.

My hand shakes in his grip.

“A pleasure, Durand,” says Joseph Haydn. “Now, if you please, Madame Geoffrin, I cannot endure another moment’s wait. Show me the instrument.”

Mme. Geoffrin opens the case. The armonica flares in the candle light, graduated glass cups nested on a spindle.

“Ingenious,” says Haydn. “I had not envisioned it arranged horizontally.” Some of the rims are painted gold. “For the black keys?” he asks.

She nods and I can see she is proud of the instrument. It is a wonder. “Please, Monsieur Durand.” She invites me to sit.

I settle on the bench and arrange my hands. Mme. Geoffrin brings me a bowl of water, and I wet my fingers.

“It’s played like a piano,” I tell Haydn. “The sound is the same as that made by a damp finger drawn across the rim of a

water glass. See how the glasses spin when I pump the treadle below? Put your finger here.” I show him middle C.

Haydn dips his hand and presses his finger to the glass. A clear, high tone fills the room.

I make room for him on the bench, and he lays his hands on the rims. A jangled chord. He frowns and tries again. “Better,” I tell him.

Haydn picks out a simple tune, one of his own composition. I blush. This is Joseph Haydn. What am I thinking, correcting him?

By now, guests have trickled into the alcove. The music draws them. I glance up into the mirror looking for Sophie, but she must be in some other room. Perhaps she’s found some shadowed niche with La Ronge. I should not blame her. Opportunities come but once, and how can I feel abandoned when I have left her for Joseph Haydn?

Haydn finishes his tune and picks out a few more notes. “Ingenious. I’ve heard street performers play the glasses in London, but this instrument makes those look like toys.” He returns to middle C. “Such a disorienting timbre. Almost celestial, this sound. It lingers like a harp strung with starlight.”

Mme. Geoffrin brings her chair close to Haydn. “Dr. Mesmer lent it to us.” I follow her eyes to a man with a tight vest and a heavy German face. Surely it cannot be *the* Dr.

Mesmer, the famed animal magnetist, but then again, I remember where I am.

Mme. Geoffrin turns toward him. “Tell me, Dr. Mesmer, in your medical opinion, does the armonica drive its listeners insane?” She strokes her braid.

Mesmer leans forward. “My dear lady. Each discovery in this age of overheated imagination spawns a multitude of rumors. The proof or disproof can only come from experiment.”

Mme. Geoffrin widens her eyes theatrically, delighted. When she speaks, every word is warmed by her smile. “Then by your logic, we shall run our own experiment tonight. What do you think, my guests, shall we risk ourselves in the name of science?”

Voices cry out in playful assent.

“Will you play for us, Dr. Mesmer?” asks Mme. Geoffrin.

“No, what a waste. Let us hear the boy play,” says Dr. Mesmer.

Haydn relinquishes his seat.

All the emotion that hovered on Mesmer’s words descends onto me. I wet my fingers and settle my hands over the rims. Looking up into the mirror, I see all the guests from both rooms spilling into the alcove. Sophie is there. Sophie on La

Ronge's arm. My eyes jump to Haydn's frown. Mesmer's intense gaze. There is no safe place to look.

I close my eyes and play. And while I play, the music closes over me. I lose myself. But in the music, somehow a stray thought surfaces. Might the woman in carmine appear when I open my eyes? Amarante. My heart, for no reason, lodges in my throat.

Only as the song nears its end do I risk a glance at my audience. Haydn's eyes are closed. Sophie's cheeks glisten with tears. Mesmer watches me in the mirror.

But then I see a movement behind Mesmer's head. Is it she? For a moment I think it is a trick of the doubled mirrors, that I've caught a glimpse of myself reflected from the other room. But reflections do not wear strange clothes. The man stands in the back of the room. His eyes are closed, and his jacket is torn. His head is bleeding.

My hands go still against the rims.

The man with my face opens his eyes. They meet mine in the mirror. It isn't just that he looks like me. He *is* me. Confusion and recognition flash between us in the space of a heartbeat.

The last reverberation dies away.

The man with my face slumps to the floor.

No one sees him fall.

Haydn's hand is on my shoulder, and Sophie's lips brush my ear. "Rapturous, Persée."

Applause fills the room. My ears fill with the ocean roar of my pulse. The sensation of falling, a flash of carmine....

I lean past my mistress, past the wigs and upswept coiffures. The man is gone. No blood on the parquet floor. No proof that he ever existed.

\* \* \*

If ever I needed sobriety, it is this night. Sophie bids me adieu at Café Procope, a stone's throw from my drafty apartment. Even this late, the café is crowded. I slide past the women in low-cut dresses recruiting for the army.

My friends have a table in the back. Coffee cups and papers scrawled with diagrams cover its surface. Moreau and Laurent shout over one another, so far gone in their debate that they scarcely pause as I arrive. Saber smokes a cigarette.

"Durand." Saber kicks out a chair for me. He hails the waitress to bring fresh coffee. "Welcome back to the bourgeoisie."

I drop into the chair and bury my face in my hands. "If you were going insane, would you want to be self-aware?"

"Gibbering, drooling insane?"

"Visions of your own death. In this case, it looks as if I've been trampled by a carriage."

Saber props his feet on my leg. “I suppose foreknowledge might be helpful in the event you’d like to prevent your untimely death.”

Laurent holds up a hand to Moreau as he turns to me. “Self-awareness is a fundamental construct of man. Giving it up would imply loss of self-hood, *ipso facto*, insanity.”

“I disagree,” says Moreau, his face flushed and his eyes slightly out of focus. “Man’s natural state is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. Giving up unwanted knowledge would bring him closer to the ideal.”

Laurent cocks his head at me. “What’s making you insane? Is it the artificiality of civil society? The corruption of the aristocracy? I bet it’s a woman.”

“No,” says Moreau. “It’s his artistic temperament. All that *Sturm und Drang*.”

“There was a woman,” I say, because it is only here that I remember her. It is easier to speak of her than whatever it was that happened with the armonica.

My friends push their coffee cups aside.

“She sat in the second row.” Again I see her fall. Carmine spilling across the floor. An awful connection sparks. “My God.”

“What?” Laurent jars my elbow.

My mangled self, the woman falling.... “I think I saw her death.”

The three of them fall very quiet against the noise of the café.

Saber asks, “You saw a stranger’s death? A woman you’ve never seen before?”

“Amarante.”

Laurent leans forward. “Was she noble or bourgeoisie?” Saber and Moreau elbow him. “What? The last thing he needs is to get involved with two titled women.”

I see his point. Sophie would destroy her. She would drop me. I would lose Vienna.

“I don’t know,” I answer.

“Do you have reason to think these visions are more than your imagination?” asks Saber.

I turn my cup. I feel again the pressure of Mesmer’s eyes, the thrill of meeting Haydn, the stimulation I hold at arm’s length every moment I spend with Sophie. “No.”

But then, why does her name linger like perfume? Why did I hear my own voice whisper it in my ear? I shake my head to clear it.

All three of them relax. Moreau downs the last of his coffee. Laurent squeezes my shoulder. Saber swings his legs off my lap and finishes his cigarette.

“You spend too much time on music,” says Laurent. “Come sit with us more often.”

I shake my head. “My star is rising. It will be more music and worse company for me, I’m afraid.”

Saber rises with me. “Gentlemen,” he nods to the others. He drapes an arm across my shoulders and walks me out the door.

The night is warm, and humidity makes halos around the lamps. “I’ve thought about your question,” he says.

“Oh?”

He stops and lights another cigarette. Then he returns his arm to its usual place. “The self-aware are not insane.”

I match my steps to his. “Rationalists do not believe in visions.”

The end of his cigarette glows. “True. And your experience corresponds to the typical hysteria of an overheated mind. Nevertheless, I’m escorting you home.”

“Whatever for?”

“Let’s just say I appreciate the potential of carriages.”

\* \* \*

I rise early enough to spend the dregs of morning combing the streets of Paris. My plan is unformed, my steps, aimless. But my eyes roam the passers-by.



Who is she? A real woman in the crowd, a phantom, a vision?

With every turn of auburn hair, my breath catches. So many tragic faces. None of them hers. None of them wear carmine.

Her name came to me like armonica music on the wind.

I have never told Sophie, for fear she would end her patronage, but the songs I play come in snatches, in daydreams, like glimmers of gold beneath the sea. Fleeting. Uncontrolled. I have tried to capture them on paper. The songs slip through my hands. Only when I play can I remember.

I never studied the armonica. When first I laid my hands against the rims, the songs pulled me along. The songs that wander through me like zephyr-winds.

As now this woman wanders through my mind.

My rambles last too long, and I am nearly late for the evening's engagement. A coach is waiting. I hurry upstairs to brush out my jacket and tie my hair with a black ribbon. Sophie was in a strange mood last night, and I have no wish to rile her. The last musician who did so never played this city again.

The house is deep in Old Paris, where the avenues slide into the curves of the river. I sprint up the steps.

The hostess herself greets me at the door. “Welcome, Monsieur Durand. We have a special place for you.” The woman is kind. My smile is heartfelt.

A liveried servant leads me to a dining room lit with crystal and roses. I am seated across from Sophie, who beams at me. Beside her is Franc La Ronge.

The young woman on my right turns to me with eyes like stars. “Monsieur Durand, your music transports me.” Her dress is the rose of the table flowers, the perfect hue to accent her delicate blush. Matching roses adorn her hair. The hostess’s daughter.

“The pleasure is mine.” Politeness requires me to kiss her hand.

From my left, a tap on my arm draws my attention to an older woman with a fantastic coiffure crowned with pheasant feathers. It balances her décolletage. Her accent is Prussian. “Tell me, musician, do you dance as well as you play?”

Across the table Sophie’s smile has turned brittle.

Dinner becomes performance. Under Sophie’s eye, I elude the Prussian’s overtures and redirect the young hostess’s tender admiration. Across the table, Franc La Ronge whispers in Sophie’s ear.

At last the meal is ended. The hostess claps her hands and invites everyone to the music room. She pulls me aside.

“This armonica belonged to Marie Antoinette when she was a young princess in Vienna. Monsieur La Ronge was able to procure it for us.”

I gaze at the instrument. A piece of Vienna. An instrument made for royalty. I try not to caress it.

I take my seat facing the intimate audience. The guests drift in around me. The only sound is the rustle of petticoats. I have made my mind clear and calm, but my heart remembers her name. Amarante, will I see you tonight? My heart accelerates. It is all I can do to contain it within my chest.

My hands to the rims, my foot to the treadle, I play.

From the first note, I see her. Again, she sits in the second row. Shadowed eyes, that yearning posture. Her hands clench in her lap. She looks at no one else, only me. She searches my face, hopeful, anxious. Frightened.

I play the chorus three times just to watch her. With each repetition, I grow more anxious. Whatever she seeks, it is precious. I would take her hand, but of course that is impossible. Her need calls to me, and I want with all that is in me to answer.

For the first time, I allow our eyes to meet. I allow myself to hope, to anticipate—what?

Confusion and disbelief bloom in her face. I miss a note. She crumples forward with silent sobs.

If I have an immortal soul, a piece of it dies in this moment.

Petticoats rustle. I look up to see I am losing my audience. Sophie frowns at me. My notes have wandered. I pull together a last melodic flourish and still the rims.

Looking out into the room, I search the second row in awful expectation of crumpled carmine. Instead, I see the man with my face. He wears an unbalanced smile and powder-burns on his lips.

\* \* \*

Saber smokes and paces. "You've never been suicidal."

"No." I cross my arms and lean out the apartment window. "I dislike firearms."

"Did you see what kind it was?"

"I didn't see it at all."

Saber draws deeply on his cigarette and then tosses it into the street. "I think you should stop playing the instrument."

My head is shaking. "That's not an option."

Saber steps away from the window. He brings me a broadsheet. Squeezed between milliner's advertisements and notices of land for sale is a block headline:

PHYSICIAN USES ARMONICA TO CAUSE, CURE  
INSANITY, WAKE THE DEAD!

The short article that follows describes Dr. Mesmer's sojourn in Paris.

"You think I'm calling ghosts?"

"I think you need to speak with an expert. Either your mind is damaged and you need a cure, or your instrument is dangerous and you should stop playing it."

"Dangerous? How can you say that? Vienna draws closer with every performance!"

"Let Mesmer help you! We have his address." He thumps the paper.

"To stop playing would be madness."

He crosses his arms. "You've seen the woman again, haven't you?"

I do not answer.

"Tell me you're not falling in love with her. She's an apparition."

"She comes to me for some purpose." Heat rises in my face.

Am I in love with her? I want to see her again, even if she is an apparition, even if seeing her in pain hurts almost as not seeing her at all. Is this what love feels like?

"Why do you insist she's real?" Saber asks.

I search for a rational explanation for him, for myself. The closest I come is a half-truth. "Since I'm not dead, I can't be

seeing ghosts of myself. They must be visions. Why would one be a vision and not the other? If I find out who she is, perhaps I can save her life.”

What I will not say even to myself is that I cannot walk away from her. The intensity of my need to find her shakes me to my foundation. “Wouldn’t you want to help if you foresaw someone’s death?”

Saber turns away. He folds the news sheet like a handkerchief and tucks it into my breast pocket. He presses it there, his hand against my heart.

\* \* \*

I go to the river and find an artist. For fifty sous, he sketches a portrait from my description. I study his rendering of carmine dress and auburn hair. It is inexact, but it is the first step toward finding Amarante.

The marshals examine the portrait, but with so few facts, they assure me an investigation would be impossible. They direct me to the morgue.

The ornate halls of the waiting mortuary yawn into vaulted ceilings that echo with lost voices. It reminds me of an empty concert hall, alive with the memory of stirred air. Strings of bells run from the feet of corpses to the desks of attendants listening and waiting for signs of life. The further I walk, the

deeper fear sinks below my skin. The only music here is the stir of bells as I pass. I find no whisper of Amarante.

Outside, I lean against the stone façade. Warm, bright daylight throws its arms around me. I breathe like a drowned man. She must be alive. There's still time.

But time runs finite through the glass, and I must keep moving.

As I walk, I consider every option. If I hit one more dead end, I may have to resort to asking Sophie. If anyone knows every beautiful face in Paris, it is my patroness. Perhaps if I showed her the portrait, if I explained, she would trust me.

I want to believe, but I have seen how many faces Sophie wears. The strain is beginning to show around her eyes. The dream has drawn so near. She will not welcome complications.

I will try one more avenue, at least.

There is a dress shop on Rue de Ton. The proprietor remembers every gown she made this season. Not one among them was carmine.

"Try Mon Petit Chou," she tells me. "They specialize in exotics."

I memorize the address and step out into the street, and it is then the music comes to me. My armonica music. This time, it is so strong and achingly bittersweet it slides like a knife

between my ribs. My feet catch on cobbles. For a long moment, I fall.

The river closes over me. I'm drowning in song. The cold shock. Water fills my lungs. The song, the song. My lips move, but all I hear is music. It has never been this loud before.

Someone pulls me out.

Gasping on the cobbles, I try to drive the song from my mind. But then, it has never been mine to control. My memory twists back to Amarante's face.

Someone tells me I should go to the hospital.

I never thought the music could be dangerous until now.

Where does it come from?

The song works its barb deeper into my heart. I feel as if I am the instrument. A lifetime, a heartbeat, and it is over.

Someone checks my pockets and finds Mesmer's address. They lift me up into a coach.

\* \* \*

The coach jostles. Soon the tangled streets spread out into Old Paris. When we arrive, I check the house number. It is the home of the hostess from the last concert, and the driver assures me he has made no mistake.

The front door opens, and a maid pulls me in. "They are waiting for you, Monsieur Durand." She eyes my disarrayed clothes.



Questions stumble off my tongue, but half of them are answered at a glance.

The sitting room is full of women: the hostess, her admiring daughter, and Sophie. An armonica faces their semicircle.

I walk among them half-convinced I've slipped into a dream. Cold sweat beads my skin.

The hostess gives me both hands to kiss, but her eyes are worried. "I'm so glad you could come on short notice, Monsieur Durand."

I kiss the daughter's hand.

Sophie leans in as I brush her cheek. "Where have you been?"

"Forgive me. I must have missed your message."

Sophie's words are missed notes in an already-mangled refrain. "If you missed the message, then why are you here?"

I glance at the hostess's daughter and damn myself in Sophie's eyes.

"It's just a mistake," I whisper urgently. "I had the wrong address. I've been all day running errands, and I must have given the driver yesterday's address." But every word I say is a nail in my coffin.

Sophie reaches into her purse and hands me an envelope with Madame Geoffrin's seal. My heart sinks.

“Another assignation,” says Sophie.

I slip the letter from its envelope. It reads, *My inquiries returned negative.*

I want to show it to her, risk her jealousy and explain everything, but this is not the place. The glitter in her eye makes me wonder if she’s been taking belladonna.

“Monsieur Durand, would you care for refreshment before you play?” the hostess says.

Sweat trickles down my back. I loosen my cravat. “Water, please.”

I cannot look at Sophie’s over-dilated eyes. I cannot look at the hostess’s daughter. I fix my attention on the hostess. There is no chair for me, only the armonica bench.

I down the water and take my place. My body tenses. This time I know what I will see. Amarante hears what I play. Could it be she hears as I do, music from elsewhere caught on the wind? Does she hear it so strongly that it drowns out the sound of a team of horses, or crackle of fire or rush of the Seine? If that is true, every time I play, I put her life in danger.

“I cannot do this.” My voice is harsh, even to my ears. Hoarse. Ragged.

The daughter stiffens. Sophie’s cheeks redden.

The hostess rises and extends her hand. “Come,” she says, when I remain transfixed.

I push back the bench and hurry after her. We pause in the next room.

“You are overtired,” she says. “You’ll burn out if you keep this pace.”

I nod, and all I comprehend is gratitude. “Perhaps I can come next week and play a piano concert.”

The hostess hesitates. “Didn’t Sophie tell you? Next week you’ll be gone. Joseph Haydn has invited you to Vienna.”

Vienna. I press a hand to the wall to stop the world from tilting.

“Sit down, dear boy!”

“I have so much to do.” And then I remember. “I have to see Dr. Mesmer. Today, if possible. I had this house as his address. Do you know where he is?”

“Why, he’s gone to see dear friends in Versailles. But he’ll be back tonight to collect his things. It’s possible he might have a moment for you then.”

I almost cannot speak. “Please tell him it is urgent.”

“Of course. And congratulations on Vienna.”

But then I remember: I can never play again. Every song risks Amarante.

I swallow a laugh before it swallows me.

\* \* \*

That night I come to Mesmer's rooms through air as thick as sable. A maid takes me in through the back door. It would be best if no one knew of my treatment.

The room is bare except for the armonica. Mesmer's eyes are bright with interest. It is impossible to say which gives me more unease.

"They say it is possible for music to cross between worlds. Yours is the first case I will have the chance to study personally." He takes my hand and bids me sit while he makes passes over my body. One hand hovers over my head, my chest, my abdomen. He transfers to a low stool and passes his hands down my arms and legs and feet.

"I find no blockage," he tells me. He makes a second pass. "You have very strong animal magnetism. Perhaps that is what draws the ghosts."

The hairs on my skin rise. "Ghosts? Not visions?"

"The instrument has never induced visions."

I close my eyes. "But if what you say is true, I saw ghosts of myself."

He moves closer until his knees touch mine. "You do not think this is the only reality, this world we can see? Whole worlds emerge and collapse between one decision and the next." He gazes deeply into my eyes. Pressure on my thumbs sends convulsions up my arms. "Just let it happen."

A peculiar sensation rises from the base of my thumbs. I do not want to believe that Amarante is a ghost. How can it be true? Every time I play, she listens as if her heart is breaking. Could it be it is not the music that moves her, but helplessness? And have I been risking her life? What if, like me, she is alive, even though I see her ghost?

Mesmer moves his hands and my disorientation intensifies. Fluid moves beneath my skin. A tide rises up into my head and washes me cold. Mesmer's hands drop away.

"Now," he says, "to the instrument."

My eyes snap open. "No, Doctor. Not that."

He holds up one finger. "To cure madness, we must first provoke it."

My hands shake. "You said they were ghosts."

He guides me to the water, the treadle, the rims. "Call them, and we will see."

The tremors intensify. "I can't, I can't."

He presses my fingers to the glass.

We look up. I don't know if he sees them: Amarante weeping; behind her, row upon row of men with my face. Some are barely whiskered. Others are gaunt, weathered. Rich clothes, workmen's clothes, exotic clothes, rags. Face upon face, no two the same.

A new death for each man. But only one Amarante.

All of them, all of them, listening.

The door slams open behind us, and I hear the unmistakable sound of a pistol cocking.

We turn, the doctor and I. The moment holds the slowness of movement underwater.

Sophie holds the gun at arm's length as if she is afraid of it. It wavers in her two-handed grip. Her face is blotched, her eyes puffed. She steps forward and trains the barrel on me.

Mesmer raises both hands. "My dear, you are overwrought. Please, sit down."

"You made me look a fool," she says. "I gave you Vienna."

I look into her haunted eyes. Madness. Ah, yes. The instrument causes madness. I see my death reflected a thousand times.

The bullet buries itself in my heart.

\* \* \*

Like starlight on waves, the softest melody slides into my awareness. I rise and push through a throng of men with my face. I am bodiless. We are bodiless. The room holds the dim light of a study, but the air clings to my skin with the reek of an abattoir.

Hair rises along my scalp. So many deaths. What have I done? I slip through them as through a minefield. I feel their eyes, but each is naught but a fleeting brush.

My body tingles like a phantom limb. Even in death, I hear the haunting armonica music. I whisper a prayer in my mother's dialect and push through the shades of men I have killed to whatever lies at center.

I stop in confusion. An armonica.

A living man hunches over it. Matted hair and beard obscure his face. Water glasses filled to varying levels crowd every surface; dusty bottles of wine spill over drifts of sheet music; candles in waterfalls of wax flicker around the instrument and the unshaved man, all of them burned nearly out.

He sees me, the man who plays. Desolation waits in his eyes.

A strange, creeping recognition closes over me. I am he. He and I are shadows of the same life, variations on a theme. All around us are other shadows, other variations, choices we did not make. We all hear the music.

I do not understand, and then his song turns to the bittersweet melody that floated on the wind. Here is the composer. Here is the source of the music that drew me, must have drawn all of us, to the instrument.

Across the room, I see the man with powder-burned lips listening with closed eyes. Was it the composer's music that put the gun to his lips, or was it mine? How many of us play? How

many of us loosed our songs upon the world and tranced each other into madness?

No, not all. Not all went mad. Some of us called ghosts.

The melody changes. Sorrow so fresh and sharp I can scarcely bear it breaks across some of the other faces. I realize then that all of the others stare, not at the composer but at something behind the instrument.

Emptiness stares back from the composer's eyes.

A thought electrifies me. If we are here, where is Amarante?

I come slowly to see what lies beyond the composer. The smell of roses wafts over the scent of decay. A white coffin. Inside, a carmine dress and auburn hair caught up with combs of amber. Her face is transported stillness. A ring glimmers on her finger. Beneath her dress, the smallest, saddest swelling.

I feel myself scream, but if my voice makes a sound, it is not in this world. I fall to my knees beside her. She is real, in this world. Her cheek, so fresh—

When had I played? That first night I saw her fall, could that have been...?

The abyss opens inside me.

Through the emptiness of that moment, a thought percolates. The instrument causes death and madness, but I am not the only one who plays.



My eyes turn to the composer.

Bodiless, I cannot feel hate, but envy sinks down where my heart would be. She loved him. He loved her. But I am he, we are all of us one soul. One life, one shattered mirror.

In all possible worlds, I love her.

I press my head to her coffin.

Another man with my face pushes in beside me. His face is shocked confusion. A newcomer. The composer glances at him, and then down at Amarante. Across the composer's face, I see the hope of a thousand possible worlds shatter into inescapable self-condemnation. Something like a sob tears from his chest, but he never misses a note. He plays as if his heart would stop with the song.

The candles burn down.

Would I have made the choice he made? Knowing, as he must know, that every song takes a life?

What would I risk for one more moment?

I understand the man who reeves every world in search of what he lost.

He plays for Amarante.

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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](http://www.theartofkerembeyit.com).

*Beneath Ceaseless Skies*

ISSN: 1946-1046

Published by Firkin Press,  
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

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