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[“Dancing the Warrior, Pt. I,” by Marie Brennan](#)

[“The Fairy Gaol,” by Heather Fawcett](#)

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## DANCING THE WARRIOR, PT. I

by Marie Brennan

She was never happier than when she Danced the Warrior.

*Kick hard off the ground, back arched, arms in a hard curve; then bend to land. Drop low into a crouch, feeling the wind of Sareen's leap overhead. Then up, fast, to whirl around Thal, never mind the burning lungs and quivering calf muscles because all of that is a problem for later; right now, you are one with the Warrior, a body in motion, muscles and bone and blood, perfection.*

Until it ended, and Seniade came back to herself with a rush, heart pounding so hard it shook her entire body. Only then did she remember her surroundings: the pentagonal temple of Angrim, with the oculus above streaming light down into the sacred space, the statues of the Aspects standing sentinel along the five walls, and the audience gathered to watch the Dance. An audience that was now applauding, each clap echoing and redoubling in the great chamber, tribute to the glory they had just seen. To Dance the different faces of the Goddess, and to witness it, was an offering to her.

What came afterward was much duller. When Sen was cast in the central role for this Warrior Dance, she had been ecstatic. She'd never stopped to consider that taking a special role in a special performance meant standing in a receiving line afterward, to greet the important members of the audience.

She drew some satisfaction from hearing the Lord and Lady of Abern congratulate her on the Dance—even if she knew they were also congratulating themselves, for having invited the company from the Great Temple in Eriot to visit their court in Angrim. But the crowd of supposedly important people seemed endless, and she had to fight not to fidget with boredom. “May the beauty bring you closer to her,” she said, over and over again, pasting a gentle smile on her face. This, not the choreography, was the hard part. Sen knew her own abilities very well: she was strong, she was fast, and Dancing—movement of any kind—came to her as naturally as breathing. But acting as a sort of priestess to the people who watched her? That made her want to crawl under a table until they were gone. *Warrior, when will this be over?*

She sighed, looked up—and froze. The next woman in line was a witch.

The words of greeting stuck in her throat. They weren't the right words, anyway; priestesses, when forced to deal with witches, greeted them with “Blessings of the Goddess on the

unbalanced.” But Sen wasn’t a priestess; she was only a very junior Dancer, and in no position to be rude.

The witch didn’t seem to notice her paralysis. Taking Sen’s hand, she smiled and said, “I remember you, from the Warrior Dance. Such power and force—I’ve never seen anything like it, especially from one so young. What is your name? How old are you?”

Her melodious, trained tones sent a shiver up Sen’s back. That voice had magic in it; Sen had to remind herself that spells were in some other language, and sung besides. The questions were ordinary, nothing more. But the woman, with her witch-red hair braided high on her head, had a severe, intense look, like a hawk searching for prey. Sen barely managed to say, “Seniade. I’m twelve.” Her mind flailed for the right honorific to address a witch, but failed to turn it up.

The woman didn’t seem to mind. “Simply incredible. You move like the Warrior herself. I would have expected to see a young Dancer like you in a Maiden role instead.”

Young Dancers mostly didn’t get roles at all, when they began performing at the age of ten. They only did group Dances, or decorated someone else’s solo: sisters of the Bride, ghosts to haunt the Crone. Sen shifted uncomfortably. “I’m not as good with the other Aspects.”

“Oh?”

All these questions were holding up the line, other people waiting impatiently behind the witch. But that melodious voice compelled an answer, even without resorting to magic. “They don’t... speak to me the way the Warrior does.”

It was the simplest explanation she could give. When it came to technical skill, Sen was better than anyone her age, as good as some years older. But those perfect moments never came when she Danced in honor of the other Aspects: that crystalline clarity, sharp as the edge of the Warrior’s blade.

“Fascinating,” the witch murmured, studying her as if she were an exotic bird, never seen before. “You serve her above all.”

With the memory of that performance still humming along her tired muscles, the reply rose to Sen’s lips, without need for thought. “I would dedicate myself to her forever, if I could.”

Another faint smile touched the witch’s mouth. “It would please the Warrior, I’m sure.” With a bow, she moved on.

\* \* \*

The memory of her own words stayed with Sen long after the company returned to Eriot. The teachers noticed; she grew restless in practice, impatient with anything that wasn’t the Warrior’s Dance. Not wanting to disappoint them, Sen worked even harder than before—but again and again, as the year

faded into winter and then warmed once more, she found herself in the Warrior's shrine.

Most of that Aspect's statues depicted her with a weapon, but here she wore only a breastband and loose breeches, the costume of a Dancer. The muscles of her body were sculpted into breathtaking perfection—the sort of perfection Sen aspired to, and might someday hope to reach.

On her knees before that statue one late spring day after she turned thirteen, Sen wondered. *Is it wrong, to feel like I'm meant for more? Or for less: one Aspect, not all five. And for myself, not for those who watch me.* Guilt gnawed at her heart. *However well I Dance, I'm not a good Dancer. And I don't know that I ever will be.*

*But what am I, if not a Dancer?*

Thal found her there shortly afterward. “Sorry to interrupt—but Criel wants to see you.”

The company mistress. Sen's pulse quickened. “Did she say why?”

Thal shook his head. Junior Dancers often ran messages, but rarely got explanations. Reflexively, Sen glanced over her shoulder at the statue of the Warrior. Had the Goddess decided to answer her cry?

The statue gave no reply.

Criel's office was flooded with warm sunlight, gilding her whitening hair. She had to be in her fifties, at least; she'd retired from regular teaching shortly after Sen's parents sold her to the Temple eight years ago. Nowadays she Danced only Crone roles, and those rarely. But there was still an elegance to her every movement as she led Sen to kneel upon cushions by the window.

Once settled, she studied Sen with an unreadable expression. Finally she spoke. "Are you happy in the Temple, Seniade?"

"Mistress?" Sen blinked in confusion.

"Children come to us at five," Criel said softly, looking out the window. "Too young to choose. It's necessary, of course; the training must begin early. But it means that not everyone has the calling. To be a Dancer is to be more than a body in motion; you become a conduit between the people and the Goddess. And I know you struggle with that, sometimes."

To hear her own doubts echoed back to her was terrifying. Quickly, Sen said, "I'll try harder. I'm happy here, I swear—especially when I'm—"

She stopped herself before the words could come out. It wasn't possible, that Criel could be thinking of sending her away. Surely a connection to the Warrior was enough. The rest would come with time. She just had to try harder.

Before Sen could say this, Criel rose, restlessly, and moved a few steps away. “What do you know of Hunters?”

It was unexpected enough to stop the panic growing in Sen’s gut. Steadying her breathing, she answered promptly. “They’re old Warrior cults, or they were. Now they’re, um....”

“Mercenaries,” Criel said, when Sen hesitated. Then she frowned and shook her head. “No, that sounds too common. Too derogatory. Call them individual warriors, who can be hired as bodyguards, spies, assassins, investigators—many things, depending on their school.”

It wasn’t uncertainty that had made Sen pause. She knew very well what Hunters did. Two years ago a cheap book had found its way into the Dancers’ dormitory, tales stuffed full of Hunters’ exploits; their independence and daring made them romantic figures for storytellers, whether as heroes or villains. Long after the rest of the Dancers had tired of the book and moved on to other things, Sen kept re-reading it. Even now, the battered volume sat in the bottom corner of her cabinet, carefully wrapped in a shirt.

Criel said, “If you wish it—you have a chance to join them.”

The company mistress waited, then waited some more; then she turned and peered down, concerned. “Seniade? Did you hear me?”



She had. And she didn't believe it. This was a hallucination; Sareen hadn't leapt high enough in practice this morning and her foot had clipped Sen in the head. Surely she'd misheard Criel, her brains jarred loose by—

Awkward as a marionette, Sen nodded.

"It's a chance only," Criel said. "There are no guarantees. But the Grandmaster of Silverfire has agreed to see you. Their training starts at ten—you would be entering late—but you have the physical conditioning. If I bring you to him, he may let you in. And—" She hesitated, then knelt once more on the cushion across from Sen. "You have a gift, Seniade. I would never have given that role to one so young, but your strength and grace are nothing short of astonishing. You are blessed by the Warrior. And if you have a chance to serve her more directly... I will let you try, if you wish it. With regret for our loss."

Go to Silverfire. Become a Hunter. Leave behind everything she knew, the only home she truly remembered—in exchange for something she knew only through tales.

"If... if I go there—"

"If the Grandmaster refuses you, then we'll return here," Criel said. "But if you are accepted into Silverfire, then you cannot return. A Dancer's consecration, once broken, cannot be restored."

She wouldn't risk anything by going, then. Only embarrassment, if her fellow Dancers ever heard she'd tried and failed.

And she would not fail. The mere thought was inconceivable. Beyond any doubt, this was a gift from the Warrior—which meant Sen had made her decision already, in the pentagonal temple of Angrim, after that perfect Dance.

Sen bowed low to the floor. The words rushed out, as if by speaking them faster she could bring the future to her *now*. “Thank you, Mistress. I will go.”

\* \* \*

Sen's first sight of Silverfire was the tower. It jutted up from the horizon, at first hardly more than a speck, then gradually resolving into a definite structure. Behind it lay a dark smear: woods, she thought. Closer by, a wall stood athwart the road, with a squat guard-post keeping watch. A *short* wall, Sen saw as she and Criel drew closer, not in height but in length. It ended not far away. Only an idiot would sneak into a Hunter school, she supposed—but then why have a wall in the first place? To give the trainees something to practice on, maybe.

A Hunter emerged from the guard-post as they drew near. Sen devoured every detail, trying not to stare. He wore the familiar uniform—full, loose breeches, wide sash, short jacket—

but in a dusty, unremarkable grey rather than the black of the tales. No mask, either. His right arm hung in a sling; that was probably why he was here and not out on the road. According to Criel, Silverfire Hunters were itinerant, taking commissions from anyone with enough money to hire them, rather than accepting long-term contracts like some other schools did.

Sen liked the sound of that. Going where she was needed, not tied down to one employer's whims. It seemed more likely to lead to the kind of grand deeds that would honor the Warrior's name.

Criel produced a letter, and the Hunter, after reading it, jerked his thumb toward the buildings and gave them directions in a brief, bored tone. His eyes, though, showed more interest than his voice let on.

Sen couldn't hide her own. Beyond the wall lay a sprawl of buildings and open areas: obstacle course, paddock, and that was definitely a forest behind. The stable they went to was small, clearly just for visitors; Sen spotted a larger one in the distance. A girl a little older than her took their horses. She wore grubby, mismatched breeches and shirt. Was she a Hunter trainee? Sen couldn't tell.

Their destination was the building at the base of the tower, a blocky, two-story thing overlooking an empty ring of packed dirt. After the bright sunlight, the interior was blindingly dim.

Sen heard a voice before she saw its owner: an old, one-eyed man whose scarred face wasn't improved by his scowl. Once Criel gave him the letter, he rang a small bell, in a pattern that had to be a code. After a moment, a single ring came from upstairs. "Go on," the man said. "He's expecting you."

Her heart beating so hard she was surprised nobody commented on it, Sen followed Criel up the stairs.

After that scarred old Hunter downstairs—not to mention the tales in her book—Sen expected the Grandmaster of Silverfire to be a white-haired elder with a long beard. Instead she found a lean man younger than Criel. His eyes were blue, his voice was mild, and it would have been very easy to mistake him for a nice man. The sharpness of his gaze, though, made Sen shiver. There was steel inside him, and he was letting her see it.

"You're the Dancer," he said to her after the greetings were done. Criel he ignored.

Not trusting her voice, Sen nodded.

"And you think you can be a Hunter, or you wouldn't have come here." He circled her, smooth as one of the Temple cats. "I've been told you have a gift."

The silence stretched out, until Sen realized she was supposed to answer. How? If she bragged about her talents, he might think her arrogant; if she played them down, he might

decide she was a waste of time. “I don’t know about that, sir,” she said at last. “Maybe. I’ve got eight years of training.”

“*Dancer* training.”

Which wasn’t the same, of course. “I worked hard for it, sir. I’ll work hard for this, too.”

“Hmm.” He circled her again. Criel opened her mouth to speak, but stopped at a brief gesture from the Grandmaster. The company mistress clearly didn’t matter to him, except as the woman who currently owned Sen’s apprenticeship, and he trusted his own judgment more than hers. Sen swallowed and held her ground.

—then jumped, at a knock on the door. The Grandmaster smiled, reminding her even more of the Temple cats—particularly a certain grey tom, who liked to toy with his prey. “Let’s see how you do.”

At his call, a boy entered the room and saluted. A trainee, Sen knew immediately; his brown, practical clothing bore a faint resemblance to the uniforms of his elders. “Kerestel here will be your partner,” the Grandmaster said. Of course; the boy wouldn’t get a Hunter’s name until he graduated. She wondered what he would choose. What *she* would choose, when that day came. Excitement fluttered in her throat.

Only after she had followed the others back down the stairs and outside to the ring of beaten dirt did she wonder: her partner for *what*?

“You may warm up first,” the Grandmaster said, as Kerestel began swinging his arms to loosen them.

Sen’s heart sank like a rock. Her partner for *fighting*. Criel had warned her all the way from Eriot that this invitation wasn’t acceptance; the Grandmaster would evaluate her, and only *then* decide. And this, it seemed, was to be her evaluation.

The boy seemed about her age, which would put him around his third year of training. But they weren’t equals—not anything *like* equals. Sen had thought her test would be a class, like Dancers had every morning, where the teacher could observe her for an hour or so. Not a fight, with no warning and no instruction, against someone by far her senior in training.

What was the Grandmaster looking for? Did he expect her to *win*?

Habit alone propelled her into the familiar, comforting patterns of stretching: backbend, calf stretches, various splits, getting through it all as quickly as she could lest the Grandmaster think she was stalling. Her muscles responded easily, even to the abbreviated warm-up. *All right, so it isn’t fair. You still have to try.* Covertly, she watched Kerestel. He was about her size, and wiry. Couldn’t judge his speed, not yet.

He would expect her to be cautious, uncertain. Her best bet was to surprise him.

A single clap from the Grandmaster brought them both upright. Kerestel sank into a loose, ready stance; for lack of any better guide, Sen copied him and settled her breathing. *Forget the people watching. Forget fear, and how much depends on the next few moments. Forget everything but the Warrior, who sent you here.*

In that mild, deceptive voice, the Grandmaster said, “Begin.”

Sen rushed the boy.

His blue eyes flew wide in shock. Sen flung her arm out, hoping to tackle him to the ground, but Kerestel leapt to the side; her hand only caught his jacket, and before she could do anything with that he sent a fist flickering toward her head, so she had to release him and leap back. Sen cursed inwardly. She’d missed her chance, and now he knew to be wary.

The Grandmaster said nothing, so they began to circle each other. Sen’s attention was split, trying to avoid him and learn from him, all at the same time. Body angled away, hands up like— She leapt back from a sudden flurry of punches, staying out of range. But not too far out of range, or she wouldn’t be close enough to hit *him*. What was the best distance?

Not *that* close. She'd been watching his hands so much she missed the feet, and now one slammed into her gut. She grunted and staggered back a step. Only a little pain, and still the Grandmaster said nothing, so apparently that didn't count as failure. What would? Kerestel beating her to the ground, until she no longer fought back? Sen bit down on a frown. If so, he'd have to hit a *lot* harder.

She hadn't really seen the kick, but tried to copy it anyway, pivoting so her leg shot out to the side. Kerestel stepped in, grabbed it, wrenched it upward; there was a second moment of comical surprise as her leg went up without resistance, Sen not overbalancing as he clearly expected her to. But she couldn't hit him from there, either. Trying to did make him drop her leg, at least, and then they were back to circling, Sen this time more wary of trying kicks.

Punching wasn't much better, though. Kerestel almost caught her arm; twisting away brought her too close, so they ended up body-to-body, and then his hand delivered a stinging slap to the side of her head. Still no word from the Grandmaster, so Sen shook it off and kept going.

Or tried to. Kerestel took the offensive now, driving her back, chasing her down the ring, giving her no chance to attack. Behind her, drawing ever closer, lay the fence. If Kerestel



trapped her against that, Sen feared the Grandmaster would declare the fight over and render his verdict—against her.

What was he looking for, anyway? For her to win? It would never happen. She couldn't beat this boy. They said combat was the Warrior's true Dance, but it wasn't like any Dance Sen had ever known. They'd given her no chance to learn it, and now she didn't know what the Grandmaster expected her to do.

She charged again, straight into the punches, trying a second time to knock Kerestel down. His fist hit home, not with much force—she was too close—but then he twisted and threw her to the ground. Sen rolled with it, a familiar motion at last, and by the time she came to her feet her mind was clear.

*Pick your own goal, and go after it.* Sen clenched her teeth. *All right. I'll hit him once before I'm done—or damn myself to the Void, trying.*

Which meant luring Kerestel into doing something for her.

She left her hands low, an invitation for him to attack. He did, and she retreated. Back the way they'd come, and now Sen was mostly concerned with staying out of reach until her opportunity came. There—Kerestel punched right, then left, then kicked. A pattern he'd repeated several times before. And when his foot came down—

Sen moved almost before the second punch began, dodging to the outside, well clear of the kick that would hit only

empty air. Kerestel overturned, as before, his weight a little forward. Desperately, Sen punched, but he was already twisting away—her opportunity vanishing before her eyes—

With a yell, she copied his kick of a moment before, and her foot slammed into his ribs.

It *hurt*, like someone had stepped on the arch of her foot. And she wasn't used to meeting resistance like that; Sen staggered, much more off-balance than Kerestel had been a moment before, and then something hooked behind her knee and a palm smacked her chest, and she went down into the dirt, hard enough to drive all the air from her lungs. She tried to get up, but her body wasn't responding, and then she realized there had been no follow-up attack.

Wheezing for air, she rolled onto her side—and found the Grandmaster had stepped within the fence.

By sheer force of will, Sen forced herself upright. She hadn't won; that much was clear. If that had been his test, then she'd failed, and this had all been a waste of everybody's time. But Sen had this much victory, at least: she, a Temple Dancer, had managed to hit a Hunter trainee in a fight. Surely the Warrior would be proud of that.

She couldn't look at Kerestel, at Criel, at anything other than the Grandmaster's feet. The silence stretched out, harpstring-tight. And then the Grandmaster spoke, his mild

voice betraying nothing more than it had before. “You may stay.”

Sen heard the words, but they were meaningless sound, echoing around the empty space where her brain used to be. Her eyes sought out Criel, who nodded, reading in them some message, even if Sen couldn’t think enough to form one. The company mistress entered the ring, and Sen knelt, reflexively. Two gentle hands came to rest on her hair, sent wild by the fight; then she heard more words, and these had meaning.

“For eight years your body has served the Goddess in the Dance. I release you from that obligation, and give you into the keeping of Silverfire.” Criel’s voice wavered. “The Warrior has blessed you, Seniade. May she watch over you.”

Then the hands were gone, and Sen knelt in the dust, a Temple Dancer no more.

A Hunter trainee.

A servant of the Warrior.

\* \* \*

After Kerestel had carried out the Grandmaster’s orders—taking the new girl to have her hair cut short, supplying her with practice uniforms and showing her the refectory, the bathing-chambers, her cell in the dormitory, and all the rest of it—he went back to the office at the base of the tower. Also per orders.

By then, the older trainees were back from their endurance ride, and open practice was underway in the yard where Kerestel and the girl had sparred. The Grandmaster was on the balcony, watching them. He abandoned that post when Kerestel came in, though, and settled back into his chair. “What do you think of her?”

Kerestel blinked. “Sir?”

“Your new year-mate. Give me your evaluation, based on your match.”

The man had watched the whole thing; he didn’t need *Kerestel’s* opinion. This was a test, obviously. But why? “What that old woman said—is the girl a Temple Dancer, sir?” The Grandmaster made no reply. “She moves like one, I guess,” Kerestel said; he’d never seen them perform. “Very graceful.”

But the Grandmaster hadn’t let her into Silverfire for grace. Why *had* he let her in? The other trainees were going to hate it, and maybe some of the masters, too. *He wants to know if I saw what he saw*, Kerestel realized. *And whether anybody else is likely to.*

He started with the obvious. “She’s strong, sir, and wickedly fast. Flexible, too—lots more than some of us, though I don’t know how much good that’ll do her in fighting.” What was less obvious? “She learned quick, too—copied the things

she saw me do, kept her guard up after the first few mistakes, found a pretty good distance and stuck to it. And....”

Kerestel hesitated. But there was no point in being embarrassed; the Grandmaster got regular reports from the training masters. “Sir, Talon’s been yelling at me for months to stop over-turning on roundhouse kicks. I don’t think it was luck, her taking advantage of that; I think she *saw* it—in the middle of the fight—and figured out how to use it.” Sort of. She’d kicked him with the arch of her foot, not the ball, and it must have hurt like fury. But as soon as she stopped pointing her toes and learned how to put real force behind it, that kick would be a monster.

How in the Warrior’s name had she managed to spot his flaw? Unless somebody had been teaching her already—but no, if she had any experience, she wouldn’t have made all those mistakes.

“Thank you, trainee,” the Grandmaster said after a moment. “You may go.”

Back to class, where the rumors would already be spreading. Silverfires worked at all kinds of jobs, spying not excepted; news got around fast. “Thank you, sir,” Kerestel said, and went to tell the others the truth—what little of it as he knew.

\* \* \*

The whispers started before Sen sat down at the third-year table in the refectory. Before she even got *to* the refectory. Probably before she left the tiny, austere room that had so abruptly become her new home.

Whispers, and stares. Not friendly ones. Trainees both older and younger regarded her with frank curiosity, half-turning from their speculative huddles to watch her; some of them looked faintly annoyed. But the thirteen-year-olds, the trainees who were supposed to be her year-mates....

Someone grabbed a pinch of her hair and yanked painfully. It broke Sen's resolve to pretend she didn't notice anything around her; she twisted to find a boy her age scowling at her in disgust.

"Warrior's teeth, it is true. They let a *Dancer* in here."

Her hand rose before she could stop it, running over her newly-shorn hair. It ruffled soft and alien against her fingers—far too short, now, for a Dancer's sleek knot. But still dyed black, and that marked her for what she was. What she had been. "I'm not a Dancer any more."

Several trainees snorted. Sen wanted to turn away, ignore them all, but these were her year-mates; like it or not, she had to live with them. Trying for politeness, she stood and gave the gathering crowd a little bow. The boy she'd fought, Kerestel,

was at the far edge, looking uncomfortable. “I’m Seniade,” she said.

The boy who’d pulled her hair flung his hand up when another tried to speak. “Don’t bother answering her,” he growled. “She won’t be here long enough for names to matter.”

“The Grandmaster let me in,” Sen told him, nettled. “You don’t get to overrule him, do you?”

“You think getting in means it’s all over? That all you have to do is wait seven years and you’ll earn your name?” The boy stepped in close. He was taller than her by a couple of inches, and used it. “We *fight* to stay here. The room you’re in belonged to another trainee, who failed out earlier this year. And you don’t get to go home, you know; once Silverfire takes you, they *keep* you. In whatever job you’re fit for.” His smile made Sen’s gut clench tight. “You’re going to end up shoveling out the stables.”

Like the girl who had taken the horses, earlier today. Was she a failed trainee?

Sen opened her mouth, not sure what she was going to say—but movement at the other end of the room stopped her. A dais there overlooked the ten student tables, and men and women were entering to take their seats. These, Sen knew from Kerestel’s introduction, were the Silverfire masters. Their entrance made the trainees scramble into position, lining the

benches along their tables, with guilty expressions that suggested they should have been waiting quietly when the masters came in. Only when the last sound faded did the man at the center—not the Grandmaster—bow his head and say, “We thank the Warrior for this blessing, the food to keep our bodies strong.”

His perfunctory words appeared to be the only blessing they bothered with; everyone sat when he was done. Hunter schools might have begun as Warrior cults, but that was a long time ago. Aside from the small shrine Kerestel had shown her—very small, honoring only the Goddess’s fiercest Aspect—there was little sign that they remembered their religious origins. Sen, for one, was determined not to forget, but she wondered if she should still pray to the other Aspects. Just because she served only one now didn’t mean she should ignore the others.

She settled for closing her eyes and reciting a quick mental benediction, on the grounds that it couldn’t hurt. By the time she looked around, the masters had gone to a side table, covered with platters of food. When the last of their number was done filling her plate, the eldest trainees rose. Sen couldn’t help but notice how few of them there were: a scant handful, compared with the mass of children at the farthest table. They moved with the same lethal grace as the masters, a grace



similar to and yet different from that of Dancers. Their bodies were weapons, not works of art. And yet it *was* art, of a sort.

Serving went in order of seniority. When Sen followed the rest of her table—hanging back to save them the trouble of elbowing her to the rear—she found, to her dismay, that the platters had been thoroughly demolished. The few shreds of meat left behind by the older trainees were snatched up before she could get near them, and many of the fruits and greens were gone, too. If nobody brought more, practically the only thing left for the youngest trainees would be the heaping bowls of rice.

She hesitated, one hand on an apple. Glancing over her shoulder was a mistake; now she saw murder in the eyes of the younger ones, who hadn't much seemed to care about her before. *She* hadn't spent two years eating plain rice, earning her way up to better food. Who was she, to take this for herself?

The boy's words echoed in her ears. *We fight to stay here.* With all the hostility around her, Sen would have to fight harder than anyone else. She couldn't do that if she was weak from lack of food. And if she left the apple there, it would only go to the bullies in the next year, the ones who shoved their way past the others.

She took the apple.

But it sat like lead in her stomach, as everyone ate in silence. That book of tales hadn't said anything about this. Not surprising, really; Hunter schools didn't exactly share their secrets with outsiders. But if this boy was telling the truth—and he was far too gleeful to be lying—

Then that fight against Kerestel had only been the first test. And if she failed any of them, there was nowhere to go. A Dancer's consecration, once broken, could not be restored.

Sen gritted her teeth, swallowing down a mouthful of rice. *Then the answer's simple. You just have to succeed.*

*Warrior—give me the strength to do it.*

\* \* \*

The unarmed combat salle made her truly understand, for the first time, that the home she'd known for most of her life was gone forever. It was an open, airy room with windows just beneath the high ceiling to let in the light, and the wood of the floor had been worn smooth by countless years of feet. Aside from the strange equipment—piles of padding, wooden contraptions whose purpose Sen couldn't guess—it was enough like the rehearsal halls of the Temple that homesickness hit her like a blow.

The man waiting inside was nothing like the company teachers, though. His thick body was much more heavily muscled than any Dancer's, and scars formed twisted ropes

along his bare arms. More than anyone but the Grandmaster, this man held Sen's future in his hands.

The boy who'd refused to give his name last night hissed into her ear, "Talon will eat you alive." Then he fell silent as the trainees lined up and bowed.

*Talon.* Hunter names were rarely soft, but this one put a shiver down her spine.

"Warm up," he barked, and that was the only command he gave for some time; the trainees immediately began what was obviously a well-rehearsed sequence of exercises, while the master circled the room. This, Sen could do. She relaxed into the movements, pleased to see that her flexibility equaled or bettered that of the other trainees. Her satisfaction faded quickly, though, when they got to strength exercises. Other Dance traditions used the arms for more acrobatic moves, but the Great Temple's style was more about lower body strength. Sen's arms shook before they were even halfway through the push-ups.

And Talon saw it. She heard the quiet huff of his scorn—but no amount of gritting her teeth could make her arms firm up. Grimly, she did what she could, and drew in a breath of relief when the warm-up was done.

Until the master spoke again. “Pair up. Ninth pattern. And if your partner doesn’t block enough, then for the love of the Warrior, *hit them*. New girl, over here.”

Was this better or worse than him sending her to stumble along behind the others? They were performing something like choreography, a pre-set pattern of strikes and blocks, watching her out of the corners of their eyes. Sen tried to put them from her mind and focus on the master.

“Do you know anything yet?” he asked bluntly.

No use in lying; he would discover it soon enough. “Only what I picked up from Kerestel, when we fought.”

Another huff of breath. “And Jaguar put you in the third year. Well. I guess we start with the basics.”

To her relief, the basics turned out to be within her reach. If what the other trainees were doing was choreography, then what Talon showed her now were the steps, the component parts from which other things would later be built. Maybe it *was* a Dance, after all.

But not like the one she knew. Talon would demonstrate a thing, once, then make her repeat it again and again while he circled her and smacked errant bits of her body into place. The right positions weren’t hard; the problem lay in remembering to *stay* there. Every time her attention moved on, things drifted back to where eight years of habit had accustomed them to be.

Her feet turned out, her shoulders pressed back, her butt tucked tight under her spine. Talon began to grunt every time he corrected her, and the sound got more irritated as she went on. Tension knotted Sen's muscles, making her more awkward. She nearly jumped out of her skin when he suddenly roared, "What are you staring at?"

This was directed at the other trainees, who went back to their neglected patterns with guilty energy. Talon scowled at them, then back at her, and shook his head. "Can't spend all my time on you. Practice what I've shown you. Until you have that, no point in teaching you any patterns. Get to work." And he stalked off to correct the other trainees.

Perversely, his neglect made her more afraid. Followers of the Warrior or not, there was more to being a Hunter than just fighting; in the days to come, she would be learning politics, medicine, how to survive on the road, and more. But fighting was the core of it, and that blade cut both ways. Her physical talents had gotten her in here, but her old habits could get her thrown out just as fast.

She watched the trainees out of the corner of her eye, trying to get a sense of what the steps should look like. Weight downward, into the ground. Body sideways, but not twisted *too* far. Economical motions, moving in as straight a line as possible. Kerestel, if she was any judge, was one of the better

ones out there. It made her feel a little better about how their fight had gone. She would have lost to any of these people, but at least she'd lost to somebody *good*.

The boy from before caught her watching and glared at her. Sen turned her attention back to her own movement. The sooner she proved her dedication to the Warrior, the happier they would all be.

\* \* \*

Kerestel guessed what the whispers were about even before Rolier sidled over to him in the stable. "You going to join us?" the boy asked.

"For what?" Kerestel asked, as if playing stupid would do any good.

"On the ride. We're going to jump her."

No need to ask who "her" was. Seniade. The new girl. The Dancer. At the rate they were calling her that, it would end up being her Hunter's name—assuming she survived that long. Which she might not, depending on what Rolier and the others had in mind.

"The masters won't like it," he said, checking the girth strap on the gelding he'd been assigned today. That was another thing Seniade had no idea how to do; apparently Dancers hardly ever rode anywhere, for fear of warping their

legs. She sat in her saddle well enough, but Anchor, the stable-master, was having to teach her how to put that saddle *on*.

Rolier spat into the straw. “Masters turn a blind eye, if we’re not obvious about it. That’s why we’re holding off until we get to the creek.”

It was true, unfortunately; so long as trainees kept their scuffles semi-private, it was considered part of their training. But it was hardly fair to jump the girl when she’d barely been at Silverfire a week.

He thought about telling someone, but dismissed it a heartbeat later. That would only make things worse for her—and guarantee that *he* would find himself surrounded by his year-mates when nobody else was looking.

He couldn’t bring himself to join in, though. Hoping to discourage Rolier, he said, “The *Grandmaster* won’t like it. He’s giving her a chance, at least, and if you break her neck—”

Rolier snorted in contempt. “Won’t have to do that. People quit, you know. We’ll bloody her up a bit, and she’ll go crying back to her Temple.”

Kerestel wondered if she could. Even if the Grandmaster released her... the way that old woman had spoken, he bet Seniade had left them for good. The girl had to be crazy, leaving a nice peaceful life like that for *this*. Had she not known how it would be? Or did she just not care?

Shaking his head, he said, "I'm not going to risk it. Not this soon." Not ever—but he couldn't tell Rolier that. One-on-one fights, to settle some kind of score, didn't bother him. This kind of mob, though....

He'd said all he dared. Or so he told himself, until the saddling was done and the trainees lined up for their daily ride. Then an impulse seized him, as his horse passed Seniade's. Quietly, pitching the words only for her ears, he muttered, "Watch yourself out there."

Judging by her stiff glare, she heard it as a threat. But at least she was warned now. Hoping it did some good, Kerestel kned his mount forward. If he rode fast enough, he could be out of earshot before they caught her.

\* \* \*

There was no hiding what had happened to her, of course. Everybody could see the black eyes, the split lip. Her clothing hid the rest of the bruises, though, and Sen was determined not to let any pain show.

She hadn't stood a chance. "We thought you could use a little sparring practice," Rolier had said—and then they waded in, six of them, with others keeping watch. Six, Sen judged, was about as many as could usefully attack her at once. More, and they would have tripped over each other. She did what little she could, but before long they had her on the ground, and then it



was mostly a matter of protecting her head and waiting for them to be done.

No point in complaining to anyone. It would only show weakness, make people question her right to stay. *The only solution*, she thought grimly, *is to get better. So they can't do that to you anymore.*

So after the evening meal, when the trainees were free to work on whatever needed improvement, she slipped away from the others and through the compound. In theory she could go to the unarmed combat salle; in reality, she didn't dare. Her practice would have to be private.

Sen caught sight of a thick shadow in the dusk up ahead, familiar even after this short time, and drew back against a wall. Talon was the last person in the world she wanted to see—or be seen by—right now. Only when he was gone did she hurry onward.

She'd seen a small clearing in the woods during their ride, before the other trainees jumped her. The space was open and flat, and so long as nobody was sent on a night ride, she should be able to work here undisturbed.

It should have brought peace, as practice in the Temple always had. Breathing through the pain of bruises and wrenched muscles, she performed the basics, one after another, and even tried to copy one of the patterns she'd seen the others

doing. But it wasn't pain that made her stop, biting hard on one knuckle to keep from crying.

*I made a mistake.* And she could never take it back.

This wasn't a Dance. It was empty movement, nothing more. No meaning in it. No transcendence. Sen knew what that glory felt like, and she could not imagine ever finding it here.

She would not cry. She *would not*. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, centering herself, banishing the tears. And then she began to pray.

She didn't know how Hunters prayed. Probably the way she'd seen people do in Angrim, pricking their fingers to leave a small blood-offering on the railing before the Warrior's statue. There was no statue here, and Dancers didn't offer blood. They prayed instead with their bodies.

Spontaneous movement, following the impulses in her heart. She felt the strength in her muscles, the smooth rotation and unfolding of her joints; she played with the poise and tension of balance, holding an unstable position until at last gravity rushed in and carried her onward. Sharp twists, powerful leaps—movements suited to the Warrior.

It felt *right*. This was what she knew; this was what she was good at. And it brought understanding, as clearly as if the Warrior had spoken in her ear.

*Idiot.*

Sen halted, staring into the shadows beneath the trees. Of *course* there was no transcendence in what Talon had taught her. There hadn't been any in Dancing, either, when she was five and barely knew how to point her toes. Transcendence came when she drew close to the Warrior, and the Warrior was *perfection*.

*Right now, you're so far from perfect, you can't even see it from here.*

But she knew the path that led there. She'd walked it before, in the Temple. Discipline. Practice. Rooting out her weaknesses until nothing remained of them. Perfection lay beyond human ability—but in reaching for it, she might find that lost glory.

“What Talon's shown you is the Warrior's Dance,” she whispered to the night air. “You just aren't Dancer enough—*Hunter* enough—to feel it. Not yet.”

Her fierce smile cracked open the split in her lip and sent a trickle of blood down her chin. “So no more weakness. You can't afford it. They might throw you out tomorrow. And if not tomorrow, the day after that. ‘Good enough’ isn't good enough; you have to be perfect. And it starts now.”

The hairs on the back of her neck rose, as if someone was watching her. Sen twisted about, eyes raking the darkness

beneath the trees, but she saw nothing. *Maybe it was the Warrior.*

If so, the Goddess was waiting for her to get to work.

Licking the blood from her lip, Sen began to practice her blocks.

\* \* \*

Her year-mates seemed surprised to find her in the refectory the next morning. Clearly they'd expected her to go crying to the Grandmaster, begging to be released.

The other trainees didn't matter, though. Sen had woken up with that realization clear in her mind. Oh, they were hazards; they could try and set her up to fail, as they'd done yesterday. But what she'd said to Rolier that first day was true: they didn't get to decide whether she stayed or went. Only the masters did.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Talon's patience had begun to fray.

After her first day under his eye, he'd mostly left her to practice the basics on her own, occasionally wandering by to offer a laconic bit of correction but spending the bulk of his time on her year-mates. The arrangement had suited Sen just fine. Today, however, he stationed himself in her corner as soon as the warm-up was done and said, "Show me what you have."

What she had was nowhere near good enough for him. “Toes *forward*, not sideways—Void it, you’ll break your ankle doing that, the instant you have to retreat on rough ground. Guard up. Up *more*. No, don’t tuck your ass under. What part of ‘move in a straight line’ don’t you understand? The more you flail around, the more your enemy will see you coming. Now hit my hand. Yes, hit it; I’m not afraid of you. A skinny thing like you isn’t going to hurt me, not until you get some muscle on you. Stop floating, already—put some weight behind it!”

Her year-mates were frankly staring, and this time Talon let them. Until she finished the basics, and he barked to the room at large, “Patterns! First five. Whoever does the worst on each one will run five laps around the compound. If that’s any of *you* lot, it’ll be ten instead, for being such a Void-damned disgrace that the new girl can best you.”

The meaning of his words took a moment to sink in. “That’s right, my little kitten,” Talon said, grinning at her. “Get out there on the floor. I want to see how badly you can botch this.”

*Choreography. It’s just choreography.* And a test she was set up to fail. He hadn’t taught her the patterns yet; what little she knew came from observing the others. Clenching her bruised jaw, she positioned herself behind Kerestel and copied his opening stance.

It could have been worse. The first five patterns were quite basic, and there was a logic to the way the moves progressed. One block, followed by three strikes. Turn and repeat to the other side. They were built on a simple octagonal orientation, a far cry from the elaborately ranging movement of the Dance she'd performed in Angrim. But that didn't mean her execution was anywhere near satisfactory—as Talon pointed out in vivid and venomous detail.

As expected, she was the worst at all five. “Twenty-five laps around the compound,” Talon said with satisfaction, while Sen gasped for air. “You need them, too. I’ve seen Dancers, little girl. They’re impressive, for about two minutes at a time—but a Hunter needs endurance. You’ve got to be able to ride all day, and kill ten men at the end of it. And they won’t stop to let you catch your breath.” His eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me you can’t do it.”

The threat in his words was plenty clear. “Not a problem, sir,” Sen insisted, and forced her legs into a run. As fast a run as she could manage, though she slowed once she got away from his gaze. She didn’t know the distance around the compound, but twenty-five repetitions of it was going to be brutal at any pace. Trying to settle her breathing, she added running to the mental list she had made during breakfast, of the extra work she needed.

Running—and a partner. Going over the basics did her no good if she just kept practicing bad habits. She needed someone to serve as her model.

Kerestel was good. He hadn't been one of the six who attacked her, either. Had he kept watch for those who did? She didn't think so. His words in the stable might even have been a warning.

Well, if she was wrong, the worst he could do was beat her up again. And she could learn from that, too.

\* \* \*

He didn't beat her up. But he wasn't as much use as she had hoped, either; she could snatch only brief spans of extra time with him, during the day, in the rare moments when the trainees weren't otherwise occupied.

"I need sleep," he insisted when she tried to talk him into working at night or before dawn. "And so do you."

*No, I don't.* Her body tried to argue otherwise, of course. Waking up grew harder ever day, weariness dragging at her, as if somebody had sneaked in and tied weights to her limbs while she slept. In truth, the weights came when she was awake: she had begged iron ingots from the school's blacksmith, to help her get stronger. Push-ups, pre-dawn runs, practice with Kerestel—it was exhausting beyond anything Sen had ever put herself through, and she knew she couldn't do it forever.

But she didn't have to. Just until she found the Dance within this movement. Once she had that, she could back off to something more like a sane pace. Until then... *Warrior, give me strength.*

At least she was making progress, if not nearly fast enough. Kerestel showed her all the patterns they'd learned so far, and after that, Talon couldn't yell at her for not knowing the sequences. He yelled about other things, instead. "There's no *strength* in that—especially not with your weak excuse for arms! Have you been eating *anything*? The Crone herself hits harder than you do. Power comes from your core, from your other arm, not from your shoulder. Any idiot in a tavern can hit from the shoulder, and usually does." Sen ground her teeth together until she thought she might crack one and focused on her core, the sudden *twist* uncoiling from her gut and back, momentum whipping out through her fist. "Hah. Next time, try to aim."

Day after day; she soon lost count of how many. Each day was a victory, but never *the* victory. She wasn't as good as the others—nowhere near—and until she was—

Sen kicked herself mentally. *The others don't matter. Ignore them. Ignore everyone and everything—Talon, Rolier, the stares, the whispers, the weakness of your body. The Warrior is there, waiting. You just have to reach her.*



Kerestel did what he could, though he wasn't an advanced trainee, let alone a master. "You're striking with the edge of your hand, see?" He demonstrated on the air. "You want your palm flat, nice and stiff. Fingers back a little. You should try it against one of the wooden dummies; you'll need to toughen up your hands."

Because a Dancer's hands were soft, delicate, not like the sinewed claws of a Hunter. She'd seen what Talon's hands were like. More things to practice; the list kept getting longer. She wondered if she could sneak one of the dummies into her room. *A tree will work just as well.*

For now, there were barrels, stacked against the back of the store-house they'd slipped behind for their secret practice. Sen hit one, experimentally, and nearly bit through her lip. *Mother's tits*— She'd learned a lot of new curses since coming to Silverfire, and made frequent use of them. *Did I do that wrong?* No, it was right—or at least it was like Kerestel had shown—the problem was just her usual weakness. But she could get rid of that.

"What's with your head?"

She turned to find Kerestel squinting at her. Sen ran one hand over her hair, wondering if there was something wrong with it. It felt normal. Still far too short, but grown out a little from the severe cut she'd gotten after her arrival at Silverfire.

Ah. “The dye’s probably growing out.”

His curiosity faded into surprise. “Your hair’s dyed?”

“Did you think all Dancers were born with black hair? They do it to make us look more uniform.”

“Huh,” he said, as if that had never occurred to him. “What color is it, really?”

Sen opened her mouth to answer—and then every muscle in her body drew wire-tight. Stammering, buying time, she said, “I—I don’t really remember—it’s been dyed since I was five—”

But he was coming forward, and it wouldn’t help if she shoved him away; it would only delay the inevitable, because she hadn’t thought to bring dye with her from Eriot. She had hardly given it any thought at all, not since she was five and her parents sold her to the Temple—but she remembered the days before that very well....

Kerestel was there, reaching out, parting her close-cropped hair so he could see the roots better. “It looks red.”

She heard him say the words; then she felt the shift in his body as he realized what he’d said.

Sen stepped back, out of his reach. She could see the questions growing in Kerestel’s eyes, the pieces fitting together in a way she hadn’t remembered to fear. Strong for her size,

and fast, more than she ought to be—more than *anybody* ought to be.

“I’m not—” Sen began, but there was no point. They were already whispering about her, resenting her, the Temple Dancer let in three years late, and she couldn’t blame them for it; but all she had to do, she’d thought, was show them she deserved to be there. And now they never would.

*I’m not a witch.*

Not all witches had red hair—only most of them.

Not everyone with red hair was a witch—only most of them.

She had no magic; she just had her body. Strength, speed, and devotion to the Warrior, which had brought her to this place. But witches were “the unbalanced;” they all but ignored the Warrior in their worship. And Hunter schools, descended from Warrior cults, kept the witches at arm’s length, on the rare occasions they dealt with them at all.

Kerestel’s weight had shifted onto the balls of his feet, his body turned halfway into the combat posture that was already becoming habit for the trainees. As if he were about to defend himself—or attack.

*The others disliked me before? They’ll kill me, now.*

Sen turned and ran.

\* \* \*

(Concluded in [BCS #67](#))

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## THE FAIRY GAOL

by Heather Fawcett

The blood drips from my fingers to the floor, where it coagulates into tiny pearls and baubles. Out of sheer boredom, I flick them through the branches of my narrow cell, my gaol, to be swept up into the skirts of the madames and ladies who fill the dance paths or end up crushed under their golden stilettos. A marble lands in the goblet of a River Knight bargaining for a new mistress, and wine spatters his gorget. My laughter resounds through the bedrooms of the inelegant brothel. I need these small diversions, after all. I am waiting to die.

My laughter goes unheard. The men and women who enter the brothel, bringing with them the salty damp of last night's flood and the scent of curdled caramelles hawked by the street vendors, do not notice the fairy gaol perched in the corner. One of the boys glances my way once or twice, but he is either attempting to discourage the attentions of a handsome *condottiero* or conscious of the dangers of revealing his sight to a fairy, for his gaze never lingers. I eye him as he moves through the crowd, distributing cheese, wine, and licquorice

among the sweaty dancers. His green eyes and self-conscious grace are attracting attention from all corners of the room. I would gladly wrap him in my arms and drag him into Fairy, were I still at liberty.

A fairy gaol is a ship without an anchor. We drift aimlessly through Istilbe, the last human city. Sometimes we become stuck between walls, or once a broom closet and a hallway, and then it takes a good gust to set us free. Other times, we hover over disreputable alleys. Crowded streets, jostled by windkites and hot-air balloons. These are the times I enjoy the most. The worst was a post office, silent and disciplined, high atop the Fifth Holy Hill where the life-heavy floods never reach. I wanted to bash my head open on its polished tessera floors.

For any fairy, the gaol is the worst kind of punishment. The human smell is so rich, so enticing, their clumsy movements as charming as a baby bird, and as delicious. More than once I catch myself reaching one clawed hand through the bars towards a golden fall of hair or dimpled ankle. But I am bound by the magics of the gaol; I can't even touch them.

The door opens. The patrons barely glance up as the breeze ruffles the flowers in their hair. He is halfway across the room before a woman offers him wine. He accepts a goblet and tosses her a topaz ring as payment, but he doesn't stop. She stares after him, surprised and disappointed—as usual, his

human guise is perfection, seamless to all but other fairies. Unlike other fairies, the shadowfay—a name coined some ages ago by the king himself—holds a dispassionate regard for humans, analyzing and categorizing them, drawing them this way or that if it suits, but otherwise leaving them be. I know all of his habits. I have been his shadow for centuries, as he has been mine.

As he nears, I fold my hands behind my back, rolling the dried blood together like clay. I will fashion a dagger worthy of his jeweled throat.

“You see, my dear one, I did remember,” he says, tugging a sprig of lavender from his cloak. When I make no move to accept it, he shrugs and weaves it through the lock. “It is your execution day tomorrow, is it not?”

“Your compassion knows no bounds.”

The shadowfay holds a long-fingered hand over his heart. Simultaneously, his doppelgangers mime the gesture. I can see three of them scattered amidst the swaying crowd, but I do not doubt there are more. They are his creations, woven from shadow and cobweb, though they feel real enough to the touch. While a few possess some semblance of independent thought, they are, for the most part, hollow creatures, and obey his whims. As bodyguards, decoys, lovers, they answer many needs.



“I am sorry for this,” he says quietly. His gaze roams my body, taking in the torn silks and mingled blood—my own, a deep rose, and the Fairy King’s, which is a pale silver like fish skin. But it is not pity in his eyes—he forgot pity some aeons ago, when he was made fay. Some say he was the first human to be so honored. I have my doubts about that, but there is no question that he is more ancient than the floods, more ancient than even Theonine, the Fairy King.

“I believe that you are sorry.” I finish the dagger, but I wait until he turns his head to light a pipe before I slide it into a fold in my skirt. “For you know that I will haunt you through eternity, cursing your name.”

“A ghost heart is still a heart. I will win you over again.” A smile plays on his lips as he steps through the cloud of cinnamon smoke. His eyes are dark, no matter what his form. Any attempt at reading his thoughts in that darkness, I learned long ago, is mere foolishness, like scouring the woods for a spider on a moonless night.

I do not want his scrutiny now, with the cool blade of the dagger pressing against my thigh. On the nearest dance path, a woman laughs as a fat prince covers her ears and throat with wet kisses. I feign interest as he spins her across the path, through the starlight that pours into the atrium. Unbidden, I

picture our last dance together, on a night so similar and so different.

He sighs, following my gaze. "I missed you, oldest friend."

I laugh. "And yet tomorrow you will watch with the others as the King's Crows tear me apart bone by bone, and feel no regret. You know I speak truth."

He shrugs and leans his shoulder against the gaol, which is made of branches from the ancient baobab trees of Fairy, woven together to form intricate runes and diagrams. I watch the pulse tick in his neck, but I don't move—curiosity grips me. The last time I saw him, he was plunging my bone sword into the Fairy King's chest.

"I've learned a number of things since then," he says, reading my expression.

"Indeed?"

"Yes—Theonine's death was instructive." He glances over his shoulder as the green-eyed boy darts past somewhat too quickly. The shadowfay must appear odd to them, talking to a blank wall, but then this place has born witness to far more entertaining displays of madness. "After the king lay dead at my feet I undertook a dissection of his vital organs... ah, the secrets that were hidden there."

"I guessed as much," I say dryly. When I awoke from the shadowfay's treacherous spell, King Theonine's blood trickling

from my limbs, as it does still, and his many children screeching curses in my ears, I found a heart in my hand. The king's. Veined in strange script and cool to the touch, it seemed unnaturally small—barely as large as a robin's egg. I consider asking the shadowfay what he meant by placing it there, but decide that he's too pleased with himself already.

"Here we are," he says, pulling a box from his cloak. He unclasps the lid and a shiver of music passes through the air, drawing the gazes of nearby mortals. The doppelganger draped languidly across an opium chaise asks one of the madames to dance, drawing their attention away from the shadowfay.

I wrinkle my nose as he holds the box open for me to see. King Theonine's ruby eye, nestled in an ocean of pine needles, gazes up at the starry night. Next to it is a scrap of his voice and a lock of his goosedown hair.

"What do you need such things for?"

"Research," he says. "This is for your benefit, darling. It will benefit us all."

"I fail to see how your experiment will benefit me, dear one," I say, suppressing a shudder as the king's eye rolls towards me. "Shall it spare me from execution tomorrow?"

He waves this aside, closing the box again with a neat flick of his wrist. "You know I dislike it when you parse my words; it's so tiresome. My experiments will help us—changelings, I

mean—to begin again. To reclaim what we lost when the Unfinished Ones remade us in their image.” He uses the old-fashioned term—never *fairy*, the name of their choosing.

I wonder if he’s gone mad. “You would become human again?”

He smiles. “Does that surprise you?”

“I don’t believe it.” I have heard of changelings who not only hunger for mortality but refuse to give up their memories of those short, blurry days before they were made new. Changelings who sink into torpor for want of such days. Unfathomable. I remember only bits and pieces of my own humanity. The thought of them is unpleasant, like the brush of recollected delirium.

He caresses my fingers, and I glimpse his true self beneath the human guise, the black hollows of his face and long, podotheca fingers, which used to imprint my bare skin with strange lines, like ogham. My fingers itch for the knife. We are almost close enough.

“But I am not there yet.” He sighs, his gaze on my hands. “My experiments fail. Even with the blood and sacred parts of the king, I can’t unlock the secrets of our making. The changelings regain their mortality, yes, but not its essence. They still hunger for human hearts and flesh. They lack those human qualities that escape the Unfinished Ones... hatred,

charity. Remorse. And without their immortality they merely wither away. It's frustrating." His fingers drum a rhythm on the bars.

I try to imagine him wanting these qualities, but find it impossible.

"Why?" I murmur.

His gaze sharpens as he meets mine. There is no escaping the chill that accompanies that gaze. The mention of it always made him gloomy, and when I was younger I would strain, unsuccessfully, to suppress the inevitable shiver that raced through my body whenever he had reason to scrutinize me. As I grew older, I learned to bear the chill without flinching. I even yearned for it.

"A memory, I suppose," he says.

"You go to a lot of trouble for a memory. It must be a very good one."

"Quite the opposite," he says with a melancholy laugh.

I turn away. "Why do you involve me in these strange fantasies?"

"I want you to understand."

"Understand what? Your betrayal? I understand that well enough."

"No, you do not," he says. "You cannot. Not being what you are... but I thought that perhaps, after what I did to you,

my dearest one, you would understand the measure of what I am not. What you are not.”

I laugh. His words are nonsense. I pace the gaol, summoning a wild southern wind to whip the tatters of my hair and gown into a fury. The women cry out, grappling daintily with their skirts and blossoms. Someone runs for the door, and shuts it.

He follows my movements with his eyes, and so does the green-eyed boy, I realize. He has dropped a tray of oysters, and they have broken and scattered across the marble. In the *mêlée* of music and laughter, few take notice. The shadowfay notes my attention, and begins to turn, but I reach through the branches and grasp his hand. I have seen what he does to sighted mortals. I don't want him distracted before I have had my revenge.

“How can I help?” I murmur. “Surely that's why you've come. Tell me, love, what can I give you? My secrets? My blood? My left eye, to match the king's?”

“I came only to see you one last time.”

I sweep him a mock-curtsy, starring the walls with the Fairy King's blood. “Do I satisfy you? Am I magnificent?”

“Always.” He steps closer, close enough to brush aside a strand of my hair. “As magnificent as your death.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh yes.” He continues to stroke my hair. “It will be the grandest celebration Fairy has ever seen. The sky will blaze with fireworks. Mortals will be chained to every tree. The King’s Crows will tear you apart with their customary enthusiasm, and then they will scatter you, and every scrap of magic you possess, across the king’s corpse like rose petals. When his children bury him, he will be adorned with the blood and marrow and magic of the one who killed him... or so they think. For such a display, all the ancient lords of Fairy will emerge from their kingdoms—dark corners of time and place where I dare not tread—to weep and plot over their lord’s body. And your own.”

His tone is mild, but I, who have known him long enough to memorize every stray gesture and intonation, understand that he wants me to press him.

“And?” I oblige, tilting my head into his familiar hand.

“We—” he nods at the doppelgangers—“will wait for them. My hope is that they will fill in the gaps in my experiments.”

“You will kill the Fairy Lords?” Something inside me softens. He would do all this for me, as much as for himself.

“We’ll see.” His brow furrows. I believe that he is lost in the intricacies of tomorrow—what might go wrong, how to foresee the inevitable complications. He planned the king’s death so exquisitely I find it hard to believe he is worried. But

then I realize that he is gazing at the charm I wear around my neck. It was formed from his blood and saliva. He has its twin, made from my hair and scapula—I have never seen him without it before tonight.

“I love you,” I say. The realization that he no longer wears the charm pains me beyond all reason, and my voice catches.

“No.” Something passes across his face, something dark and lovely that I have never seen before, and cannot understand. His remoteness, which I have always found so alluring, infuriates me now. He steps closer, as if to kiss me through the branches.

It is then that I raise the dagger and slide it easily into the pocket of skin beneath his jawbone. Another twist, and I sever the vein that carries blood direct from his heart. He is still staring past my shoulder as the knife slips free, thinly coated in green blood.

His body folds in on itself, pieces falling away. As they strike the floor they resume their true forms—a pocket watch; a pair of pliers; a dog’s jawbone closed on a mussel shell; silk scarves; an empty wine carafe; chains of iron, silver, mother-of-pearl; black buttons; a coin or two; vagrancies; four stitches—all the things that made him what he was, a ghost, an impostor. Another doppelganger, the finest the shadowfay has ever created.



My scream tears at my throat. I shake the baobab bars until the birds take flight, squawking, and my hands are bloody with splinters. The other doppelgangers quietly leave the brothel. Only one glances at my cell. He has left his partner on the ivied dance path—a plump, pretty girl with fair curls. She gazes after him longingly—and will follow, no doubt, as soon as the madame’s back is turned. He always has an appetite for such girls and will dispose of her with his usual bored thoroughness.

He, the shadowfay, holds my gaze a moment longer. He does not speak, or smile. He merely leaves.

I bloody the gaol with my fists. Even the woodwoses are scandalized and burrow themselves deeper into the baobab.

When I have calmed down sufficiently, I turn my attention to the fallen doppelganger that he had puppeted. Reaching through the branches, I search its blood for something useful, but the shadowfay has left nothing for me but a few worthless spells. I suspect he is mocking me. This, too, is a puzzle for me to guess at, a riddle to which he already knows the answer. Absently, I draw one bloody finger across my forehead. A fishnet veil coils from my brow, dappled with pearls. I leave the remainder on the floor, and a few swallows burst into existence as it dries, like popping corn.

A shadow falls across the branches. I know without looking that it is the green-eyed boy—he smells of sweat and oysters.

“Twelve *aureas*,” I murmur without turning around. He does not laugh at the joke. It’s customary for human seers to make their living from the inside of a cage—safer for their customers, as madness so often accompanies their visions. In another mood I would laugh because I can easily foresee this boy’s future. It will be short and unpleasant, if he is so easily induced to reveal his sight to the fay.

“I know what you are,” he says. I hear his skin brush the bark and I turn, amazed. His hand rests on the gaol door, a crude, flimsy composite of twigs and fisherman’s rope.

“I doubt that.”

His body trembles with fear, curiosity, longing, and the effort of hiding them. He is nineteen, twenty at most, still mesmerizing in his hesitant, artless motion. “Why are you in there?”

“Why, because I can’t open the door.”

He eyes it with suspicion, and the gaol itself, its branches, hungry mouths, and sweet, intoxicating berries. I realize that he cannot see the stilled doppelganger. Another reason to marvel at the shadowfay’s ingenuity, I think darkly.

“You’ll hurt me.” His voice is doubtful. His hand hesitates over the door.

I must strain to keep the growing astonishment from my face. What would tempt a sighted mortal into such danger? But then I remember how I must look to him—bone-thin limbs and pale, bloodied face. My honey-dark hair is a thicket of tangles mixed with leaves. All this, a harmless self-indulgence. I am fay and can change shape as easily as a human woman slips out of a dress.

My mouth twitches. I arrange the crimson folds of my magnificently tattered gown about my limbs, sighing as if the effort pains me. He follows my movements with his gaze, his tongue flicking nervously across his lips.

I slide to the floor of my gaol, my fingernails scraping against the bark. “Why would I hurt my savior?”

He glances over his shoulder. I realize that beside the cooking fire, where three lambs smolder amongst the flames, is a dour woman, forty perhaps, but balding and emaciated. The pestle in her hand endlessly circles the mortar, as the stars circle Istilbe. Her gaze has never strayed from the boy. I see him reflected in her green eyes.

“Will you reward me?” he demands. “Are those stories true?”

“True, all.”

“And you will do it?” He seems set on obtaining my word. Clever. “And my mother? You will reward her also. She needs healing that is beyond medicine. You can do this?”

“Yes, yes. Anything,” I murmur. I hold his gaze with my own, allowing my yellow eyes to grow larger, till they are near half the size of my face.

“I have your word?”

“You have my life. I will die if I remain here.”

“Well,” he says. His hand shakes as he pulls the door open, scattering the blackbirds. The heady smell of humanity tingles in my nostrils. And layered under that, the sweet smell of the sea.

I leave my little home, humming and swaying between the tired dancers and broken madames, the dear, lonely princes. I run my hands over them all. An eyelash here, a toenail there. They will never miss such treasures. I follow a young couple into the street, where we stand knee-deep in salt water. The floods reach all the way to the bell tower tonight. Tomorrow morning, Istilbe will find that the barnacles have advanced another pace, marching inexorably towards the city’s heart like the ghost in the children’s story, who each night moves one pace closer to the bed.

The boy comes to stand beside me, shivering as the waves lick his skin.

“I do not forget,” I say. I hold out a hand to him, and he takes it, wincing as my fingers coil up his arm. I gaze out over the dark water splashed with lamplight and stars. The shadowfay’s scent is gone, but I will find him again. I will fulfill my promise and haunt him until he is dead, at my hand or another’s.

A phantom shiver runs down my spine, but I cannot trace its origin. I feel I am being watched. My eyes search the mosaic parapets and spires, dark now with a few pale lights gleaming through the cracks. There, in the space between two gargoyles, I sense a watchful presence.

It is him, of course—he, who knows me better than anyone, knew I would escape, and is watching me now with that infuriating smile on his face. But as my eyes adjust I realize that the space is empty. I shiver again, conscious for the first time of a matching hollowness somewhere deep inside myself. But the delicious smell of the mortal revives me and I smile, pulling the boy after me through the floods, to a place where he will forget his worries and sorrows.

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## COVER ART

“Fly High,” by Tina Marie Lane



Tina Marie Lane is a Environment Designer and 3D Artist with eleven years of professional experience in designing architecture and retail environments. Her freelance work delves into these areas as well as fantasy environments for games and literature. Recently her work has appeared in 3D Artist Magazine and can also be found at her website [www.toyrocket3d.com](http://www.toyrocket3d.com). She fashions her worlds, both real and imagined, from Dallas, Texas.

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