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DANCING THE WARRIOR, PT. II

by Marie Brennan

(Concluded from [Issue #66](#))

* * *

Kerestel decided quickly enough that he wouldn't tell anybody—but he didn't have to. Silverfires were trained to notice things, after all. Marwen spotted it the next morning, and before breakfast was over the uproar had begun.

Red hair. Kerestel didn't know why it was the characteristic sign of the witches; maybe that knowledge came later in a Hunter's education, when they were taught how to deal with spells, aside from just hitting the witch in the throat. They weren't the only red-heads in the world, of course—but that didn't stop the rumors. *Temple Dancer* vanished from the trainees' lips, replaced by *witch-brat*.

It almost came to disaster, right outside the refectory. Seniade started moving the instant the masters rose at the end of the meal, but she wasn't close enough to the door to beat everyone through, and those who got out first grabbed her as soon as she emerged. Within moments a crowd had gathered, trainees of all years, nobody dispersing to their duties, and

Kerestel shoved his way through, not sure what in the Void he thought he was doing; was he going to hold the whole school off by himself?

Before he could answer that, the question was taken out of his hands. Silverfires were trained to notice things; for all he knew, the Grandmaster had seen the flame-red roots of Seniade's hair days ago, and had merely been waiting for the storm to break.

The crowd parted before the man like butter under a hot knife. Seniade was trying to break free of her captors, scrabbling for a vicious joint-lock neither Talon nor Kerestel had taught her, when the edges of that group spotted the Grandmaster. Half of them had the sense to back away, but one—a sixteen-year-old named Leksen—wrenched Seniade's arm around, forcing her to her knees. He buried his free hand in her hair, exposing the roots to the light. "Grandmaster, look what we found."

Kerestel winced. *Idiot*. Leksen wasn't long for this school, and he was the only one who couldn't see it; the bastard was a bully and a sadist more than a fighter, and none too bright, either. As he had just proven, displaying Seniade like some kind of captured bug the Grandmaster might not have known was there.

Leksen probably didn't hear the danger in the Grandmaster's mild voice, but Kerestel did. "What have you found, trainee?"

"A witch," Leksen said. *Yeah, he's an idiot, all right.* "See?"

The Grandmaster's cold, light eyes slid over the crowd, finally settling on one of the first-years. "Paura. How do witches cast their spells?"

The weedy little girl quaked at the sound of her name, but answered. "They sing."

Kerestel knew where this was going even before Paura spoke. The Grandmaster returned his attention to Leksen and his captive, and said, "Seniade. Sing for us."

With Leksen's fist tangled in her hair, dragging her head to the side, she was hardly in the best position for the task—but within two notes, Kerestel knew it didn't matter. Seniade had *no* sense of pitch. He didn't recognize the song she was trying to sing, but whether that was because she'd grown up in Eriot or because she was butchering something familiar beyond recognition, he couldn't tell. Either way, it was painful to hear.

"She could be faking it—" Leksen began, cutting Seniade off. This time, though, he had the sense to shut up when the Grandmaster's gaze fell upon him.

"Leksen. Tell me. Do you think I'm incapable of recognizing a witch when I see one?"

The boy shook his head, blessedly silent for once.

“How many dealings have you had with them, yourself?”

“Uh... none, sir.”

“And yet you think you’re capable of recognizing one?”

“But sir, the hair—”

“Means nothing. If the witches decided to put some kind of spy among us, they’d have the brains not to pick a child with such a simple identifying characteristic. Not to mention that they’re hardly renowned for their close ties with Temple Dancers.” The Grandmaster paused, letting the logic sink in. “Perhaps you left your brain at the top of the bell tower, Leksen. I suggest you search for it up there. Ten times.”

Kerestel shuddered. Climbing the exterior of the bell tower was a common enough punishment at Silverfire, but ten repetitions would be no laughing matter. Fortunately for Leksen, he scraped together enough wits to realize that saying anything more would only increase the number. He let go of Seniade, arm and hair both, putting his own hands up as if to indicate he had meant no harm.

The Grandmaster surveyed the silent crowd. “If the rest of you have nowhere else to be, you can join Leksen at the bell tower.”

One would have thought it was evaluation time, and the trainees’ right to stay at Silverfire depended on how quickly

they could vanish. Kerestel ran with the rest, not wanting to try and convince the Grandmaster he'd been planning to help. Somehow.

To his surprise, Sen passed him a moment later, jogging steadily for the woods, where they were to have their first lesson of the day. *She's coming with us?*

Of course she was. She'd come to the refectory that morning, after all, when he thought she would have bolted from Silverfire. Nothing was going to drive her from this place—nothing short of the Grandmaster's decree, anyway, and he'd just made it clear that wasn't going to happen. Not today.

But the issue wasn't anywhere near settled. Kerestel thought about Sen's strength, her speed, the way she picked up movement as easily as breathing. None of that was witch-like—but it wasn't normal, either. And he might not be the only one who had noticed it.

Her two-colored head bobbed ahead of him, red peeking out from beneath the black. Kerestel had known for a while that Sen must be crazy. But what if that wasn't the whole story?

Biting his lip, he followed her into the woods.

* * *

Even under Silverfire's discipline, it was possible to idle about. Sen found Leksen behind the visitor's stables, stretched out atop a bale of hay.

He sat up quickly when he saw her. Days had passed since their encounter outside the refectory, but not nearly enough for him to forget it. Sen raised her hands, open-palmed. “Hear me out.”

“What in the Void do you want?”

“Your help.”

Leksen gaped at her. As well he might; if she’d had any other choice, she wouldn’t have come to him. But Kerestel wouldn’t practice with her anymore—or the others wouldn’t let him; it made no difference. The Grandmaster might have stopped the trainees from killing her, but instead they’d taken to treating her like a leper. Which was fine by Sen—they could be damned to the Void, for all of her—except that she *needed* that extra practice. Drilling on her own wasn’t enough. She’d been working herself to the bone since losing Kerestel’s help, but Talon’s insults only got more scathing with each passing day.

“The Grandmaster’s watching you, you know,” she said. It might or might not be true; she didn’t much care. “After what you did that morning. You have to prove to him that you’re okay with me being here.”

Leksen snorted. “No, I don’t. I don’t know who licked his boots to get you in here, but you aren’t enough of a pet for him

to throw me out over that. If he was going to, he would have done it then.”

Sen’s anger at hearing him speak of Criel that way was a small thing, under the dread of hearing her gambit come up short. She’d hoped it would work; it was better than the alternative.

But the alternative was better than failing. Failing out, or failing the Warrior. She couldn’t find perfection on her own.

Before she could lose her nerve, Sen said, “Okay, then. Look at it this way. You hate me, right? But I *am* enough of a pet that if you try to beat me up, that *will* get you in trouble. I can offer you something almost as good, though, without the risk.”

His eyebrows slanted into a line of mixed confusion and curiosity. “Oh?”

“I need a training partner. So I can learn the things I need to know. If you’ll help me....” She had to pause, draw in a deep breath to steady herself. “Then as long as you don’t injure me so badly I can’t train, I won’t complain to anyone.”

Leksen’s jaw sagged open. He stared as if expecting her to take it back; then he looked around as if expecting to find the Grandmaster waiting to kill him. When neither happened, he said in a reverential whisper, “You’re *insane*.”

Only desperate. Leksen was hardly the best at Silverfire. He was the only one, though, that she thought she could convince to do this. Nobody else would come near her: Sen's Void-damned hair had seen to that.

"Yes or no?" she asked, voice hard. "If it's no, then I'll stop wasting my time with you."

He snorted again, with something more like his usual arrogance. "Oh, it's a yes. You want to play wooden dummy for me, I've got no complaints."

That was about how it would go, and Sen knew it. Leksen had no interest in *teaching* her anything. But she'd learned from Kerestel, even in that first sparring match; she would learn from Leksen, too. Hunters *did* make blood-offerings to the Warrior, after all. Hopefully the Goddess would accept this one.

* * *

Sen remembered thinking that her left knee was bothering her, that she would have to get some linen bandages to brace it with.

Then she was on the ground, in a different part of the forest, and her horse was standing practically on top of her, munching at a yellowing tuft of grass.

Her whole side felt bruised, which told her half of what she needed to know. She'd fallen off. And judging by the change of

surroundings, the other half was that she'd been asleep in the saddle for a while.

Sen straightened her leg, wincing as her knee complained. The tumble hadn't done it any good. Beneath the sudden racing of her heart, she was bone-weary; no surprise that she'd drifted off. *I suppose I ought to be proud that I stayed on the horse at all.*

She needed to get back on; today was her first endurance ride since coming to Silverfire, endless circuits out of the compound, and Anchor and his assistants were roaming about to see how the trainees were doing. But she wasn't able to make herself move until she actually heard approaching hoofbeats; then she leapt to her feet and reached for the reins.

Her horse sidled uncooperatively. "Void-damned beast," Sen growled; a quick snatch gained her the reins—*glad to know my reflexes are good for something; they haven't been much use against Leksen*—but she wasn't able to get into the saddle before the rider came round the boulder that hid her from view.

It was Kerestel, not a master, and she thanked the Warrior for that. He pulled his mount up short at the sight of her. "You okay?"

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Sen hauled herself into the saddle, pretending her left knee didn’t mind. The horse wanted more grass, but she dragged his head up and kicked him onward.

Of course Kerestel followed; they were all riding the same circuit. “Did Tobb throw you?”

“No.” *Wouldn’t you all like that—more stories to tell, of how the witch-brat can’t manage her horse.* They seized on any error, any weakness, and already had more than enough weapons to use against her.

“You sure? Because I could ride with you for a while—Tobb can be a troublemaker, but he generally behaves if there’s another horse around—”

Sen twisted in her saddle to glare at him. “What, you want to help me now?”

Kerestel flinched. They hadn’t exchanged more than a handful of words since their semi-secret partnership ended. Sen didn’t really care, not anymore; what she needed now was sparring practice, not tips on patterns, and she learned more from a more experienced opponent. Which Leksen was; it was the one good thing she could say for him.

Lamely, Kerestel said, “I just....”

He trailed off, clearly unsure how to finish the sentence. Sen turned her back on him. They were coming up on the place where she’d been ambushed after coming to Silverfire; he’d

warned her of that, but had done nothing to stop it. Maybe he wasn't as bad as the rest of them—but that just made him neutral. And therefore irrelevant. She had to save what energy she had, not waste it on him.

Steeling herself, Sen put her heels to the horse's flanks, moving him from a walk into the steady trot that was the fastest pace they were permitted during this ride. If Kerestel wanted to keep up, he could, but she quickly left him behind.

* * *

The shame eating away at Kerestel's gut like a disease found a partial cure that night.

Sen, he was willing to bet, didn't know about the raids. They were part of Silverfire tradition, and one she had missed learning, along with so much else. Every trainee eventually grew hungry and desperate enough to steal food from the store-rooms, and every trainee eventually figured out that was part of their training, too: a test of their skill at stealth and subtlety. People worked out different ways to do it—even bribing the kitchen staff—but for those in the middle years, it came down to a contest of sorts, one team against another, raiding in the night.

It was fun practice, even if it meant everyone would be exhausted the next day. They'd decided to work in trios tonight, him and Loye and Tareth against Marwen and Rolier and

Doiyet. Once they graduated, Silverfires mostly worked alone, but it was more exciting this way—especially since sometimes people betrayed their own side. The winners got first pick of whatever they snatched, and the losers owed them favors afterward.

The favors wouldn't extend as far as demanding the others help Sen out. But food could be shared, and he would have wagered his hope of a Hunter's name that she needed it.

Up ahead, Loye had already fiddled open the catch on the window with the point of her knife. Rolier thought he was so subtle; Kerestel knew perfectly well the other team was letting his side get here first and do the work of collecting the food. It wasn't victory until the raiders got the food back to the dormitory, and Rolier had an ambush planned. But Kerestel had a plan for *that*.

He patted the kitchen dog on the head as they went by. If this were real, he and his partners would have had to do something to prevent it barking, but—according to legend—the head of the kitchens complained ages ago about having his dog drugged every night, and the poison master complained about raids on *his* stores. Now the chief qualification for the so-called guard dog was an ability to distinguish thieves from Hunter trainees, thumping his tail in friendly welcome as the latter went by.

Back out into the night, prizes in hand. Up ahead, Kerestel heard muffled noise and grinned. Right on time. His team passed the scuffle without pausing, turning only once they'd crossed the threshold of the dormitory. A moment later, a tall shadow detached itself from the side of a building and sauntered up to join them, one hand out. "Pay up."

Kerestel scowled at Tareth. He'd picked *Leksén* as their secret ally? All right, so the other trainee was sixteen and well into his growth; he was more than capable of taking out the members of the ambushing team. But working with *Leksén* soured Kerestel's pride in their victory.

Grudgingly, he handed over a box of blackberries. *Leksén* took them without comment and headed off into the night, stuffing a handful into his mouth. Kerestel and his partners retired upstairs to his room, waiting for the others to join them.

"Dirty trick," Rolier said sullenly when his team arrived. "It was supposed to be trios."

"And the tripwire last time wasn't a dirty trick?" Kerestel wanted to know. His heart wasn't in the argument, though, not with Rolier's lip already swelling from the scuffle with *Leksén*.

Tareth shuffled his feet when Kerestel took him aside to say something about it a moment later. "Sorry. He was eager to help, though."

Not to help; to beat up on the younger trainees. Leksen wasn't good enough to get that satisfaction from his own year-mates, so he was always on the lookout for chances to dominate those below him. Kerestel shook his head, stepping on the urge to yell at Tareth. "Next time, I'll do the recruiting."

Doiyet went off to get some sleep. The rest ate in silence for a while, shoveling down the more perishable bits of food, saving the rest for later. Kerestel slipped a bun and a lump of cheese under his pillow when nobody else was looking. He'd sneak them over to the girls' side of the dormitory once the others were gone.

Marwen, perched on the windowsill, sat up suddenly. "What's that?"

She spoke more loudly than she should have. The masters knew this kind of thing went on, but they ignored it so long as the trainees stayed quiet. When there were girls on the boys' side of the dormitory, though, or vice versa, their bar for "quiet" was a lot lower. Kerestel hushed her and peered through the thick glass, watching a shadow slip through the compound, coming from the woods.

"Nothing," he said, trying to edge Marwen away.

"Too small to be Leksen," she said, not moving. "Wait—is that the witch-brat?"

Loye glanced up from sorting through the food. “What’s she doing out there?”

Rolier made a sneering sound. “Casting spells, probably.”

“Shut it, Rolier,” Kerestel snapped, forgetting to keep his voice low. “She’s coming back from practice.”

“With who? A tree?”

That was all she had to practice with, since Kerestel let the others scare him off. Or scared himself off—that had been part of it, too. He couldn’t shake the feeling there was something *strange* about her, and he wasn’t the only one. Rumor said she’d approached half the senior trainees, trying to find a sparring partner, and they’d all refused her. Unless—

Leksen hadn’t come upstairs after being paid.

Dread made the cheese Kerestel had eaten congeal unpleasantly in his gut. *She wouldn’t, would she? I mean, she’d have to be crazy—*

He already knew *that* was true. But this went far beyond that.

Marwen and Tareth were laughing with Rolier, embroidering on his suggestion. Loye, at least, was keeping out of it. But that only went so far, and all at once, Kerestel’s uneasiness resolved into fury—on Sen’s behalf.

“Look,” he said abruptly, cutting through the laughter. “What she’s doing would *kill* any of us. You realize that? She

gets up early, stays up late, and practices every minute she's got. The Grandmaster saw something in her—call it whatever you like. That's why he let her in. But the truth is that she's working herself halfway to death to make sure she *deserves* it. So go ahead and mock her, but don't ever forget that she's fighting harder to stay here than any of us."

It produced an awkward silence. What had he expected—for Rolier to hang his head and say, *I'm sorry, I was wrong*? It wasn't that easy. None of them knew what to do with her, not anymore. They mocked her, and she ignored them, living inside her own head and body rather than the world around her. They hurt her, and she accepted the pain. They shunned her, and she just went on learning—even from Leksen, it seemed. What in the Goddess's many names was *driving* her?

Talon was.

Kerestel sucked a quick breath through his teeth, forgetting the other trainees entirely. It didn't explain Sen herself, and what she was doing here... but it might explain the madness. Talon's demands on Sen were impossibly high, more than anyone could hope to meet—and unfortunately, he was one of the few people at Silverfire who could tell the Grandmaster that a trainee ought to go. If he said Sen wasn't meeting his standards....

Surely the Grandmaster would come see for himself. He wouldn't just take Talon's word for it.

But that word would carry a lot of weight. If Sen came under the Grandmaster's scrutiny like that, the slightest flaw could damn her.

Rolier said something, breaking his reverie. Kerestel didn't catch it, but he suspected that was a good thing. "Enough of this," he said, getting up and opening the door. "I need sleep." Rolier went out, grumbling, and the others followed.

When Kerestel went to collect the food for Sen, he found one of Loye's apples under the pillow.

* * *

"*Faster!*" Talon roared, from his vantage point off to the side. "Move from the hips, not from the feet—Warrior's teeth, girl, our *ten-year-olds* understand that much!"

Sen clenched her teeth on the reply she wanted to make. She could do speed; she could do good form; the problem was doing them both at once. And Talon knew it. "Forget it," he said in disgust, when the trainees reached the wall and pivoted to repeat in the other direction. "You aren't ready for this yet. Go to the far end and do stationary roundhouses until you can do them *right*."

Past the other trainees, who would snigger as she went by. Sen had spent half her evening practice last night on stationary

roundhouse kicks, until her hip muscles gave out. Hip muscles she barely even *had*, because Dancers learned to turn their legs out, not in. She snarled inwardly. *It doesn't bloody matter what Dancers learn, you sniveling idiot! You're a Hunter!*

Or trying to be. Banking the fire of her anger, Sen replied, "I can do this, sir."

"Can you." The sudden chill in Talon's voice made her tense. "Well. Since the little Dancer knows better than her master, let's have her prove that to us." He scanned the line of trainees. "Rolier. Get out here. You too, milady."

She could hardly refuse. Warily, Sen came out into the middle of the floor.

"Blocks and kicks only," Talon said. "No punches, no grappling. Rolier, if you fail this, you'll muck out the stables for a week."

Rolier's face hardened. He hadn't attacked her since the trainees noticed the dye growing out of her hair—nobody had—but Talon had just given him permission. And his long legs made him one of the better kick-fighters in her year, though not as good on other things.

"Begin," Talon said.

Range, Sen thought. *He has it, you don't.* But she had speed. She retreated, circled, waited for her opening. Rolier snapped a quick double kick at her, front shifting into

roundhouse; she leapt back to avoid it. Back and forth, neither quite managing to land a proper blow on the other.

Talon's voice cut through her focus. "Running away won't win a fight! You're going to have to stand your ground at some point, girl!"

She didn't need him to tell her that. Sparring with Leksen had begun to give her some understanding of this Dance, beyond the instinctive guesses of that test against Kerestel; she knew the back-and-forth flow of defense and attack, retreat and advance. Today she was off that rhythm, and badly so. *Still not good enough—never good enough*— Sen threw a combination at Rolier, but his long legs were good for retreating, too; she was too far out of range, so she surged forward—

The boards felt blessedly cool against her cheek. From somewhere far up above, she heard a voice say snidely, "Thanks, witch-brat! I would have missed, if you hadn't walked right into it."

"Hold your tongue, Rolier, or I'll tie it in a knot." Feet appeared next to Sen's eyes. She sat up hastily, and Talon crouched down beside her.

He inspected her jaw with a quick, professional hand, then grunted. "Not broken. Follow my finger." Sen forced her eyes to track his hand, even though the edges of her vision were wavering. "Mmm. Not so good. Off to the infirmary with you."

Shame heated her face, adding to the sweat and the spreading fire where Rolier's foot had struck her head. Sen scrambled upright, shifting her balance to hide a moment of unsteadiness. "I'm fine."

She could imagine the expressions on all the other trainees' faces. Laughing, no doubt, though they knew better than to make a sound. Talon's attention didn't flicker from her. "Arguing again, trainee?"

His eyes were narrowed. Sen didn't flinch from them. Those eyes, not Rolier, were her enemy; they saw every flaw. Talon's eyes, and his cutting voice, which flayed apart her body and exposed every weakness, everything holding her back from the perfection of the Warrior. The only way to win was to make that voice fall silent.

Which she couldn't do from the infirmary. Sen lifted her chin. "I feel capable of continuing. Sir."

The master held her gaze a moment longer, then sighed. "Fine. Get back in line, and show me you can do it *right*."

* * *

But she didn't, of course; with her head aching from that kick, she could barely tell *what* she was doing, to the point where Talon didn't even bother correcting her. The rest of the day's lessons were just as bad: she stumbled her way through a recitation of the recent history of Askavya, confused cow

parsley with hemlock, and fell asleep during a lecture on the alliances and activities of the Silk Consortium in Verdosa. When evening came, she couldn't even force herself to go out and practice with Leksen.

She sat on the floor of her room, staring into the corner; then, out of grim habit, she began to stretch. Her greater flexibility didn't give her much of an advantage in fighting, but stretching was the only thing that kept her muscles from seizing up beyond recall. Mornings were the worst; she slept like a corpse, and all those dead hours left her stiff and aching, barely able to move. But the pain was useful: without it, she might sleep too late. And she couldn't afford to waste time.

Her thigh cramped suddenly; she massaged the knot, hissing at the pain, until it relaxed. Tears threatened again, until she snarled them away. Crying was useless. What would Talon say if he saw it?

He'd call you a weakling and a child, and he'd be right.

Her weights lay on the room's one chair, a mute reminder of her contemptible weakness. Sen eyed them, her jaw set. *How long since you added any? Try it with more.* She put an extra ingot in each bag, slung the pair over her shoulders, then jumped up and grabbed a rafter. Her body felt like dead meat, and her arms howled at the weight. Fire washed over her side; she was afraid Leksen had cracked one of her ribs yesterday.

Never cracked a rib before. Toes, yes. Need to find a better way to bind them. I could have hit Rolier once or twice, I think, if I hadn't been afraid of hurting my foot. That fear had cost her a chance to silence the voice. Talon's voice, or the one inside her head; the difference hardly mattered.

She tried to drag herself upward, and got nowhere. *Can't. I can't do it.*

A strained, furious noise clawed its way up her throat. *Yes, you can. Or are you so Void-damned pathetic you can't even make your muscles obey you? No wonder you're a failure. Where's your spine, you stupid worm?*

Anger gave her strength. Slowly, ever so slowly, she pulled herself up to the rafter. *One.* Back down, carefully. Up again. *Two.* Her lips pulled back in a snarl. *Three.*

Then her arms gave out, and her grip failed at the sudden drop. She slammed into the floor and lay there, panting, trying desperately not to cry.

The weights dug into her side; she couldn't muster the will to move them. Tears poured free, despite her clenched teeth. She had to get up, to keep going; it was a full hour before she could allow herself to sleep. But she couldn't make herself move.

Warrior, why am I here? What was I thinking, leaving the Temple? This felt right, or so I thought. It doesn't feel right

anymore. It hurts. Goddess, it hurts. She tried to call back her fury, but failed. All she could feel was pain, and exhaustion that went deeper than bone. *I have to get up. I can't afford to stop now.*

Warrior, please, help me. I can't do this anymore.

A strangled howl escaped her. *The Warrior would spit on you, if she were here. If you can't even make yourself move, you don't deserve to serve her.*

One painful inch at a time, Sen pushed herself upright. The floor where she'd fallen was slick with sweat; she was careful in standing, knowing her body couldn't take much more abuse tonight. She needed to rest.

In an hour. In an hour you can sleep—if you've earned your rest by then.

* * *

Talon's shouts hit Kerestel like throwing knives, and they weren't even directed at him. "Where are your *muscles*? Did you leave them in bed again? Or maybe you just don't have any; there certainly hasn't been any sign of them yet. Warrior, girl, are you *dead*? Nobody alive could possibly have missed that block!"

Kerestel cringed, but Seniade's dead eyes didn't so much as flicker. There was hardly anything inside them today, just exhaustion, and a grim bleakness somewhere between

determination and apathy. He advanced, reluctantly, not wanting to press her. On good days, sparring was a joy, a friendly competition. This felt more like kicking a beaten dog.

Talon noticed his reluctance. “Oh, for the love of the Bride—she isn’t going to learn anything, Kerestel, if *you* go soft, too! Get in there and hit her!”

He bit down on the insides of his cheeks, a bad habit that had gotten him a mouthful of blood more than once. Not today, though; not with Sen looking that dead. Then inspiration struck. *Go ahead and yell. You’ve only got the one tongue, Talon; if I give you reasons to shout at me, you’ll leave her alone.*

It worked—and he even got a reaction from Sen, too, when he began leaving openings for her, committing uncharacteristic errors. And a characteristic one: remembering their first sparring match, he pulled out that old combination, overturning on the roundhouse kick. Her counter-attack this time was a lot more successful.

But Talon didn’t appreciate it. “Slow, too Void-damned slow. You’re asleep on your feet, girl. Naptime is at *night*, in your own bed; you should try it once or twice.”

Each word built a protective fury in Kerestel’s gut. She *wasn’t* slow, damn it. She was just as fast as anybody there.

Which, okay, was slow for her—but that didn't mean she deserved Talon's scorn.

It didn't help that when he'd broken into Sen's room to leave another gift of food for her, he'd found the last delivery all but untouched. Thinking of that twisted his worry and anger tighter, until it rooted him to the spot at the end of practice. The other trainees filed out; Talon went to the back corner and drank a large cup of water. *Must be thirsty work, being that cruel.*

The master put the cup down and saw Kerestel still waiting. "What do you want?"

Kerestel blurted it out, before common sense could persuade him not to. "Sir—you're not being fair to Sen."

One eyebrow rose at the nickname. "Oh?"

"You yell at her ten times as often as you do at any of us. You're always insulting her, criticizing her—you never say *anything* about what she's doing right. And then when she fixes one flaw, you just move on to a new one. Warrior's teeth—she never makes the same mistake twice, but you won't admit it. You treat her like she's hopeless, and she isn't!"

Talon came forward slowly, placing his feet with deliberation, like someone approaching a potential opponent. "What is she?"

Kerestel lifted his chin. He'd started this; he might as well finish it. "She's somebody who could be a good Hunter, if only you'd help her."

"A good Hunter." Talon paused, studying him. This was more like the master he used to know: sharp eyes that evaluated strength as well as weakness. Talon had never behaved like such a monster before Sen showed up. Hard, yes; cruel, no. "You think that's my job? To help you be good Hunters?"

The question nearly rendered him speechless. "Isn't it?"

Talon shook his head. "My job is to make you the best you can possibly be. And you're wrong. Seniade won't be a good Hunter. She'll be *brilliant*."

That *did* rob him of words.

"I've seen it in her," Talon said distantly. His eyes were still on Kerestel, but his vision had gone elsewhere. "The potential. More than just the component pieces, the moves and the speed and so on; she can bring it all together in a way most of us will never touch. You haven't seen it, because she isn't there yet. Not with what I've taught her. But she will be, someday. I'll make sure of that."

Kerestel wet his lips. This had not gone at all like he expected. But he hadn't forgotten where the conversation began. "The way you're treating her, though—"

Talon laughed. “Would break *you*, little boy. But everybody has their hooks, their levers you can push on to make them move. There’s no faster way to make that girl do something than tell her she can’t. I know what I’m doing.”

He might think so. But Kerestel had spent this morning staring into Sen’s dead eyes, and Talon hadn’t. “She’ll kill herself trying to satisfy you, sir. Did you know Leksen is sparring with her?” He waved the choice of word away. “He’s *beating up* on her, and she thinks she’s learning from him. Maybe she is. But it isn’t sane, and it isn’t good for her.”

“Leksen.” Talon spoke the name like a curse. “One of these days he’ll be out on his ear, but until then—we aren’t in the habit of coddling our trainees. Seniade’s still in one piece, so if she wants the extra practice, I’m not going to stop her.”

Kerestel had originally opened his mouth thinking this would end in disaster for him. It hadn’t—but it wasn’t helping Sen much, either. Okay, so Talon wasn’t going to throw her out; that was a relief. He hadn’t managed to change the master’s mind, though.

And he wasn’t going to. Talon straightened and said, “Enough. You spoke your mind, boy, and good for you. I’m glad to know at least *two* people in your year have spines. But you’re not going to tell me how to do my job. We’re done here.”

Arguing would bring about the disaster he'd feared before. Kerestel saluted and ran to his next lesson. *Didn't convince him. Any chance of convincing Sen?*

He was afraid he knew the answer to that.

* * *

Move, you stupid bitch!

Sen rolled just in time to avoid Leksens's descending foot. It almost caught her in the face; he was getting sloppy, forgetting their deal. He wasn't allowed to do anything that would interfere with her ability to train. Bruises were no problem; she could even live with wrenched joints and that cracked rib. Pain seemed a distant thing these days, on the other side of the wall of glass that separated her mind from the physical world. But if he gave her a concussion, it was all over.

Her roll brought her to her feet, but she staggered with dizziness. Lunch had come back up right after she ate it, even though she limited herself to rice and a boiled egg. It was all she could keep down lately, and now even that was too much.

Get your mind back on the fight, little girl, before Leksens paints the ground with your blood.

She never even saw the kick coming. It slammed her into a tree, and from there she collapsed to the ground. Groaning, she rolled onto her side. Leksens was there, putting one foot on her left knee, leaning just a fraction of his weight on it. Pain

screamed up her leg, but she swallowed it. *I'm not giving him the Void-damned satisfaction of watching me cry.*

"That was pathetic, even for you," he remarked.

She shoved his foot off and pushed herself into a sitting position. "So now you care about me learning?"

"Just wondering if I should go on wasting my time with you. Where were you last night, anyway? Crying in your room?"

The jab was accurate, but lacked force. He was nothing compared to Talon, or her own voice whipping herself onward. He was outside the wall of glass. She was alone inside it with her body, her imperfection, and her hope of the Warrior.

"I figured you needed the break." Sen considered using the tree he'd kicked her into to pull herself to her feet. *You can make it on your own. Come on.* She gathered her legs under her and stood, biting her lips as she tested her weight on the uncertain knee.

Once it was secure, she looked up, in time to catch Leksen watching her with disturbingly avid eyes. He enjoyed this, she knew; that was the basis of their bargain. But it sickened her. If she had any reasonable alternative—

She swallowed down bile. *Admit it. This isn't about training, not anymore.* Not just about training, anyway. Sen dreamt of the day she'd be good enough to thrash Leksen as he

deserved. *That* would be a service to the Warrior, taking down the bully who disgraced her name.

But that victory still lay beyond her reach.

The bell tolled the second hour of High, marking the end of their practice and the start of the next lesson. Leksen strolled off, not bothering to say goodbye.

Sen waited until he was out of sight, not wanting him to see her limp. How she was going to make it through practice under Talon's eye, she didn't know. Maybe if he paired her with Kerestel again—snarling, she slammed her fist into a tree trunk. It didn't hurt nearly as much as it used to; her hands had gotten tougher, even if the rest of her hadn't. *Stop pitying yourself, idiot! Talon is right; you don't need pity. You're stupid and slow and you haven't learned anything—certainly not enough to beat Leksen. You need practice, not pity.*

It gave her the strength she needed; Sen began to move. But it was less strength every time. What would she do, when the reservoir ran out?

In defiance of that thought, she pushed her legs into a run. *Beat the weakness out of yourself. Then, at last, you will be worthy of the Warrior.*

* * *

There would be no pity for her, no mercy—not today.

“Two opponents,” Talon said to the assembled class. “Your enemies won’t always come one at a time; it’s about time you started preparing for more.”

Sen knew what he would say, even before his eyes settled on her. *And I can’t do it. Not today. Not with my knee like this.*

“Kerestel and Marwen, against Seniade.”

She was behind the glass; pain was on the other side. She rose and went into the middle of the floor, her two partners—her two opponents—trailing behind, with uncertain looks.

Talon was saying something to her about strategy. She didn’t listen. Everything that mattered was inside the glass, with her. Sen offered up a prayer to the Warrior—a brief one, composed of words, prelude to the prayer of her body.

He wants to humiliate me. Please, help me prove him wrong. Warrior, Lady of Battle—my body is yours. My blood is yours. Every breath, every movement, I dedicate to you. Imperfect as they are, they’re the best I can do.

Give me the strength to show it.

Kerestel and Marwen weren’t paying attention to Talon, either. Their eyes were on her, nervous, almost afraid, as the three of them bowed to each other. Why? What did *they* have to fear?

“Begin,” Talon said.

Kerestel's moves she knew, from his lightning-fast reverse punches to that flaw, still not quite eliminated, in his roundhouse kicks. Marwen was less familiar, a stocky girl Sen had only been paired against once before. She kept her center of gravity low, but felt too safe in it; most trainees, taller than her, took advantage of their height to go over her guard. She wouldn't expect to be swept or thrown.

I can use that.

Marwen came at her first. Sen dodged and ducked under Kerestel's arm, forgoing the chance to arm-lock him; it would have slowed her unacceptably, with Marwen at her back. Instead she punched, not expecting to connect, just driving Kerestel back the necessary distance. Marwen was coming back in already. Sen maneuvered to put her in Kerestel's path. The more she could make them trip over each other, the better.

There! Sen dropped, planting her hands on the floor and pivoting in a quick, devastating sweep. Marwen dropped like a rock, gaping in comical surprise. Nobody had taught Sen that move yet; she'd picked it up from Leksan, by dint of being its victim a hundred times. Momentum brought Sen back up. She shifted her weight, thrust downward with her left foot, stopping just shy of Marwen's face—and then flung herself to the side, avoiding Kerestel's opportunistic attack.

“You’re unconscious,” she heard Talon tell the other girl. “Stay down.”

An imperfect attack, but successful: the strategy of her mind and execution of her body, in harmony for the first time in ages. *Warrior*—

Hope threatened her focus. Sen brushed it away. There was still Kerestel to worry about, Kerestel to prove herself against. She *could* do this. Get him on the defensive, off-balance, turning and turning until he lost track of direction, then drive him back over Marwen’s forgotten body; he rolled and recovered with speed, but not fast enough, not this time. She could see the gap in his defenses, clear as crystal; all she had to do was slide her body into it. Over Marwen and punch once, not to hit, just to make him retreat those few inches, and then twist and—

Something tore inside her knee.

For a moment she didn’t register the pain, or her own scream. Then she slammed back into her body with brutal awareness; she was on the floor, and the other students had leapt to their feet and were crowding around her.

“Out of my way,” Talon barked, pushing his way to her side.

Hot, liquid agony poured through her leg. She could have wept at her own unforgivable stupidity. She’d remembered for

Marwen, pivoting on her right leg so as not to strain the left, but then she'd seen her chance and she'd *forgotten*—

For an instant, it had been within her reach. But she was too eager, too hasty.

Too flawed.

Unworthy of the Warrior, and now she'd destroyed her chance.

“Lie back,” Talon said, his voice tight and yet weirdly gentle. “Kerestel, bring that pad over here to elevate her leg. Somebody go to the infirmary. And get the Grandmaster. Sen, lie *back*.”

In a panic of desperation, Sen shoved his hands away from her knee, as if that could somehow change the truth. *I'm done. Whatever I've just done, it won't heal quickly; I'll be out for ages. And that means I'm finished here.*

She couldn't accept it. Couldn't admit it. “I'll be fine. I just need to rest it.” She hated the tremor in her voice. “It's nothing. I'll be fine.”

Somehow she made it to her feet and began walking. It hurt like nothing she'd ever felt before, and blackness fluttered at the edges of her vision. *Warrior, just let me get out of here. Allow me that much, please.*

Three steps short of the door, she collapsed.

* * *

Singing awakened her.

A strange tune, not very melodic, and she couldn't understand the words. At first she thought it part of some dream. But shudders chased through her body, heat and cold in successive waves, and that felt too real to be a dream. Sen opened her eyes and found herself staring at a wall.

Carefully, feeling as if somebody had replaced her neck muscles with rotting leather, she rolled her head to the side—and found herself staring at red hair.

Sen jerked away, breaking the woman's concentration. Heat and chill both vanished, leaving behind a dull ache. Not stabbing pain, though. Not the white-hot agony she remembered, from the moment before she blacked out.

Red hair, and singing, and a body that hurt less than it should. "What are you doing to me?"

A truly stupid question, but the witch was kind enough not to point that out. "Healing you—as best I can."

Healing. Magic.

A *witch*, here at Silverfire.

Sen recognized the room; it was part of the infirmary. "But—why? Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The witch wasn't the one from Angrim, who had complimented her Dancing. A stranger. Not anyone with reason to help her. "I am Ninkou-kai," the witch said. Sen's

reasoning might not be working very well, but her memory was just fine; *kai* meant she was a witch of Air. Itinerant, like a Silverfire Hunter. “I had business with your Grandmaster, and when he mentioned your condition, I offered to do what I could.”

The meaning of that began to sink in. “You *healed* me?”

“I did what I could,” the witch said. “The spell works better on some things than others. Clear injuries, such as your torn knee, can be pieced back together. More generalized problems, though....” She pinned Sen with a sharp look. “What has *happened* to you?”

Sen’s mouth went dry. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve just been training, that’s all.”

“I’ve treated Hunters before, girl. ‘Training’ doesn’t do this to you.” She began to tick the points off on her fingers. “Two cracked ribs. Three broken toes. Stress fracture to your lower right leg. Virtually every joint in your body has been overstrained, to the point of near-collapse, quite apart from the knee that *did* collapse. Malnutrition, infected blisters, enough bruises for three abused wives—you should have been flat on your back ages ago. How you could *walk*, let alone fight, is beyond me.”

The litany appalled Sen. She felt it, too, every strained and cracked and weakened bit; whatever clarity she’d found in

those last moments before the end, it was gone now, beyond recall. Tears burned hot behind her eyes. She couldn't have answered Ninkou-kai, even if she wanted to; it would have come out in a storm of weeping. And she would not—could not—allow that. *I've lost everything else, but I will keep my dignity, damn it.*

The witch let the silence stretch out; then she sighed. “As I said, I've healed what I can, but you'll need strict rest to recover fully.” She rose from her chair, brushing her loose riding trousers as if they'd picked up dust from Sen's ground-down bones. “I'll go tell your Grandmaster. Whatever you've been doing, girl, I suggest you stop, unless you want to destroy yourself.”

Sen waited, staring blindly at the wall, as the witch left. Then she waited another minute more, giving the woman a good head start.

Then she lurched off the bed and ran.

* * *

It was more like a stagger, even with her body more whole than it had been in ages. Out of the infirmary, through the compound, avoiding eyes at every turn, desperate to get *away*.

Her thoughts kept chasing in circles. *They'll kill me. The witch-brat, being healed by a witch; they'll never believe I have nothing to do with those women.* She crouched behind a

stack of crates, waiting until a clutch of the older trainees had gone by. *It doesn't matter. I won't be here for them to kill me.* Strict rest; Talon would never accept that. He would insist she be thrown out. *Not thrown out; once Silverfire takes you, they keep you.* But what job would she be fit for, broken as she was? *It doesn't matter. They'll kill me, anyway.*

Into the forest, where at least she could hide. Sen made it as far as the clearing where she and Leksan “trained;” then she collapsed, gasping through the tears she could no longer hold back. *Unworthy. Goddess. Where did I go wrong? Should I have stayed in the Temple? I thought this was right; I thought it was a sign, that you wanted me here—but I failed you. I wasn't good enough. Nowhere near good enough.*

Even despair couldn't last forever. In time, the storm passed, leaving her cold and drained on the ground. Empty. Her clarity was gone, and her purpose; what happened next would not be hers to decide.

“You in here, witch-brat? Hiding from the world?”

Leksan.

His voice hit like a splash of cold, stinking water. What was he doing out here? Sen scrambled to her feet. No point running; she was too stiff and sore to be quiet, and he knew where to find her.

To the Void with it. Pitching her voice to carry, Sen called back. “Over here, you ugly bastard.”

A branch cracked behind her; she turned and saw Leksen, gaping like a fish. “What did you call me?”

“I called you a worthless piece of goat shit. Looking for someone to beat up? Warrior knows you won’t find it without picking on somebody younger than you. You’re not good enough to take on your own year-mates.” Sen spread her arms wide. Something had snapped inside her, but unlike the tearing of her knee, this rupture brought relief. “You want to hit someone? Try me.”

His face flushed purple. With a roar of pure fury, Leksen threw himself at her.

Anger gave Sen cold focus, but it made him crazy. She sidestepped his first wild blow and got in a solid kidney punch that made him howl; he grabbed her arm and slugged her in the stomach. Sen snarled that away and clawed his face, leaving bloody furrows down his cheek. It wasn’t a Dance of any kind, but she didn’t care. It was her sacrifice to the Warrior. Either he was going down, or she was.

“Sen!”

The sound broke her concentration, making her turn at the worst possible moment. She saw Kerestel, his hand outstretched, horror on his face—

Then something hit her jaw, snapping her head around with a crack.

Then nothing at all.

* * *

Kerestel's breath burned in his lungs, white-hot with panic and guilt and desperation and rage, driving him through the compound as fast as he could run. He couldn't even spare an instant to look behind and see if Leksen was chasing him. The Grandmaster—he had to tell the Grandmaster—

A hand caught his arm and brought him slinging around so fast he bounced off a broad, hard chest. Staggered, he looked up and found his captor was not Leksen, but Talon.

“What’s happening?” the master demanded. “What are you running from? Or to?”

“Sen,” he gasped. Too many words were trying to crowd out of his mouth at once; her name was the only thing that emerged.

Talon gripped his other arm, steadying him. “Deep breath. Tell me.”

Deep breaths weren't doing him a Void-damned bit of good. Kerestel held his breath until he thought his lungs would explode; then he exhaled, spilling it all out in a rush. “Went to look for Sen. She vanished from the infirmary. I followed

Leksen, and—" Horror surged up in a fresh wave. "He killed her."

All the blood drained from Talon's face. "What?"

The sickening crack echoed in his memory, over and over. "He broke her neck." *My fault. I distracted her.* Kerestel wanted to vomit.

"*Show me,*" Talon said, cold as winter ice.

That voice couldn't be disobeyed. Against the will of his conscious mind, Kerestel's feet took them back toward the forest, the clearing where the two had fought. It was empty.

"Hid the body," Talon said, in a quiet, abstracted voice that held murder not far below the surface. "We'll find out where. Did he see you?" Kerestel nodded. "Then he'll try to flee. Stables."

They didn't even have to go that far. In the falling light of dusk, a figure was riding for the head of the trail; Leksen had been at Silverfire long enough to know the forest offered the best chance for sneaking out. Talon broke into a silent lope, angling to catch him where the trail bent downward. Kerestel followed, leaping branches and stones, not even caring if he broke an ankle. Dead leaves skidded underfoot, and he slid wildly for a moment, but then he fetched up short against Talon's suddenly unmoving back.

Clinging to the master's jacket for balance, Kerestel looked around him—and saw the impossible.

* * *

Snap the foot forward, like a punch, then pivot and snap again from the side. Block as you come down, turn into it, too fast for him to follow. Fist to the ribs, low, lock his arm so he can't strike, then haul back and sweep the near leg; keep the arm and twist, make him roll or be broken, drop your weight and pin him, easy as breathing, easy as thought, because this, at last, is the Warrior's Dance.

“Sen!”

For the second time that day, the voice broke her concentration, but this time it was all right. Sen came aware once more, like the first free breath after an exhausting Dance, breathing herself back into the world around her.

The woods, fading rapidly into dusk. Leksens beneath her, pinned and trembling. His horse, nosing along the ground for interesting grass.

Talon and Kerestel, staring at her from the slope above.

Her year-mate was gaping, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. But Talon... he had that look in his eyes, the one she sometimes saw in audiences after a perfect Dance. As if he had, for a moment, glimpsed the face of the Goddess.

The face of the Warrior.

She'd lost hope of ever seeing it again. All these long months, however many it had been, until she ceased to believe she was blessed, or even worthy, in the Warrior's eyes.

She knew otherwise, now.

Sen stayed, kneeling atop Leksen, while Talon descended and caught up the reins of the horse. He pulled them free of the bridle, then tossed them to Kerestel. "Tie that bastard up."

Kerestel approached her sideways, still gaping. When Sen let go of her captive, Leksen remained face-down in the leaf mould, limp as a puppet for Kerestel's nervous hands. Sen didn't resist much more when Talon took her arm and pulled her aside.

"There will be plenty of explaining to do, back at the compound," he said, in a low voice not meant for Kerestel's ears, "but before we get there—Seniade, I made a mistake."

Her voice felt like she hadn't used it in years. "Sir?"

"He warned me." Talon nodded at Kerestel. "But I didn't see it. I thought you were doing fine—no, not fine, but not so badly that I needed to step in. You *seemed* like you were all right. I didn't know, until the witch told me, how far it had gone."

All the bruises and cracks and strains, hidden from everyone, for fear of showing weakness. "That wasn't *your* mistake, sir."

“Yes, it was. Most trainees, their will breaks before their body does. Not you. But I didn’t see it. And I almost broke you permanently, driving you so hard. As the Warrior is my witness, I *never* meant that.” Talon’s free hand clenched into a fist, but not to strike. In his voice, she heard something entirely new and unexpected: anguish. “I just knew... I saw you out here, you know. Just after you came to Silverfire. Dancing. When I saw that, I knew you had more in you. And I wanted to bring it out. Any way I could.”

The memory of her fight against Leksen still hummed along her tired muscles, like the Dance in Angrim. She’d found that transcendence again, making good on the promise she’d spoken that day: that she would serve the Warrior forever.

It brought such joy that Sen almost laughed, which probably would have offended Talon. She bit her lip until her voice steadied, then said, “I don’t blame you, sir. We wanted the same thing.”

Talon *did* laugh, a short, disbelieving bark. “Which only goes to show you’re even crazier than I am. Girl, whether it’s me breaking you or you breaking yourself, there are better ways to learn. And better people to help you than this useless piece of dung.” He jerked his thumb at Leksen, whom Kerestel had just hauled to his feet.

Leksen's face was a mask of terror, and not, Sen thought, just for the fate that awaited him when he got back to the compound. When Talon seized him by the scruff of the neck, he almost seemed glad to go.

Taking the horse's bridle in one hand, Kerestel fell in beside Sen. He still walked with that odd, half-sideways air, torn between staring at her and looking absolutely anywhere else. The words burst out of him in a strangled, disbelieving whisper. "You were *dead*."

Against her will, Sen's hand rose to rub her neck. Skin, muscle, and bone all answered smoothly, with no sign of damage. "You were seeing things."

Kerestel made a noise like he'd just choked on his own tongue.

"He only stunned me," Sen said. "Like Rolier did. Remember? When I got up, he was gone, so I staggered around a bit, and then when I saw him riding away I jumped him."

No jumping had been necessary. He'd hauled so hard on the reins at the sight of her that his horse had reared, throwing him to the ground. From there, it had been the Dance, muscles and bone and blood, *perfection*.

Because she knew now, beyond the slightest doubt, that the Warrior hadn't abandoned her.

The hideous, incomprehensible crack; then nothing. Then waking in the cold, damp leaves, and the soul-deep understanding that the impossible had just happened. A miracle, unasked-for, beyond her ability to explain. The Warrior had brought her back.

Kerestel was right.

She would never admit it, and she'd deny it if Leksen said anything, too. This was too personal, too profound to be shared with others. What she'd done to deserve it, she couldn't begin to guess; her decision to devote herself to the Warrior couldn't have been enough. Could it?

She'd thought, briefly, that maybe she'd been revived just to be a spirit of vengeance against Leksen. But he was in custody, and she was still standing; Sen doubted she'd drop dead again once the Grandmaster decided how to punish him.

Maybe it was just to be a Hunter. A second chance at what she'd almost thrown away, in her blind, overzealous stupidity. Death seemed to have blown all the cobwebs and madness out of her brain, leaving her aware of just how far down the path of insanity she'd traveled since coming to Silverfire, and how close it had brought her to real failure. That didn't seem like the kind of thing the Warrior would reward someone for.

Unless all of that pain did count as a blood-offering. If so, Sen hoped she never had to make a similar one again.

“I thought I was seeing a mirage,” Kerestel said, shaking his head, staring at the shadowed ground beneath his feet. “You couldn’t possibly be real.”

Sen hesitated, the long habit of isolation staying her hand. Then she kicked herself mentally. *A second chance, remember? However it you earned it, don’t waste it.*

She reached out and pinched Kerestel’s arm.

“Hey!” The horse almost pulled free at his exclamation, and Talon glanced back to see if everything was all right. Sen waved a reassurance. Kerestel demanded, “What was that for?”

“To prove I’m real.”

He stared again, but at least this time he was looking at her like she was a person, and not—well, a miracle. The sooner he forgot about that, the better.

“I’m told I have to rest,” she said to him. Kerestel snorted, with jerk of his chin toward Leksen that seemed to question that necessity. Their fight certainly hadn’t counted as rest. Sen knew the witch was right, though—and as it seemed Talon didn’t really hate her, maybe she could afford to take that advice. “When I’m back on my feet... I don’t suppose you’d be my sparring partner again?”

The question seemed to interrupt some dawning thought of his, as if a puzzle he’d been worrying at for ages had fallen

into something like its proper shape. Eyebrows rising, Kerestel asked, “Don’t you *ever* take a break?”

“Not really, no.”

He shook his head—but in disbelief, not refusal. *Whatever the others think of me, Sen thought, he, at least, is a friend.*

For the rest... the witch’s healing, and her red hair, and the rumors that might yet slip out about Leksén, all would make her life harder. She was prepared to accept that, though. It couldn’t be as hard as what she’d gone through already.

Not when she knew the Warrior found her worthy.

Kerestel doesn’t understand. It isn’t a burden; it’s my purpose. Dancing the Warrior, in whatever form I can. From now until the day my soul goes into the Void, I live to serve her.

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Marie Brennan is the author of the Onyx Court series of London-based historical faerie fantasies: Midnight Never

Come, In Ashes Lie, A Star Shall Fall, and the upcoming With Fate Conspire. “Dancing the Warrior” is a prequel to her novels Warrior and Witch. Her stories have appeared multiple times in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, including two set in the world of the Onyx Court novels, and “Driftwood” in BCS #14, which also appears in the BCS anthology The Best of BCS, Year One. She has published more than thirty short stories in venues such as On Spec, Intergalactic Medicine Show, and the acclaimed anthology series Clockwork Phoenix. More information can be found on her website: www.swantower.com.

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MEMORIES OF HER

by Greg Linklater

My hand is seamed with quartz and gravel. It used to have folds of skin a witch could trace. No fingernails now, only the squares I scratched with a rusty blade for some reason I've long since forgotten.

I kneel in the jungle. Snakes slither between my stone toes, thinking me nothing more than an outcrop, a relic; maybe they're right to think that. There's not much left of me these days.

I watch fires ripple in the clearing. Men crouch, honing weapons, unspooling magical blooms and charges and other arcane things that speak to some deeper part of me. Imperial Trading Company men, for the most part, joined by a smattering of the Half-God's zealots.

These latter ones, I see their frozen faces and golden eyes as they watch the Company men hoot and holler, throwing up straw dummies to tear them down again with the latest piece of tech devised by the Company's research division. They drag a pig from the supply wagons and burst it with projectiles from a

shoulder-mounted weapon which spits in a human *HUT!* They impress themselves with these displays.

Any morale they have they owe to the Half-God's rampant propaganda machine. I know this because I am told. I appreciate the irony.

These men whoop and prance in their immaculate blue uniforms. They laugh. The sound fascinates me; you don't hear it in the Chemist's camp. You just don't. But they are all too green, too wet. There is no such thing as a veteran, not out here. The equation is simple: you come up against the Chemist and you die.

Or you end up like me.

I take one hand in the other and unscrew it. Inside my hollow wrist is a padded pocket. A mantis scuttles out, tethered to me by a chain as fine as hair but stronger than anything I could name. It scurries up my arm, across my cheek and props on the tip of my nose.

"Time now," it clicks. "You go."

Orders straight from the Chemist.

I unclip the chain and lift the mantis to a nearby tree.

"Wait here."

It clicks again, scrubs its mandibles with a hooked limb. I don't have a name for it. I called it Peter once, but it seemed to dislike that so I never tried again. I think it's like me, a convert,

although I couldn't say for sure. Captain Collis assigned me to it a few months back, conveying its superior rank in no uncertain terms. My first instinct was to crush it, just to see what would happen, but those kind of impulses are bleeding away, becoming easier to ignore every day. Soon there won't be anything left, which I suppose is the whole point.

I count almost fifty men around camp. The Company men thrum with magical tech. At least twenty of them are heavy infantry, and five of the zealots unmistakably Core Disciples, maybe even two of those fully-fledged Seed Gods. Cities have fallen to less manpower than this.

When I'm done, they dangle from trees, smear the walls of their tents, lie smoldering in fires that throw up an acrid tang to send the penned animals wild.

I splash to the creek and slop water over me to wash the blood away, otherwise the flies will come crawling. A severed leg floats past me, heading south, heading home, where the memories are dying slowly and me too far gone to miss them.

* * *

"Tell me about her."

"Who?"

"I think you know who I mean."

"No," I say. "Who?"

“Come now. Let’s not waste time on this little charade again.”

“I honestly have no idea who you’re talking about.”

An academic sigh. Parental disappointment. “Do you honestly believe there is anything to be gained by withholding? It only retards the process, and I can assure you there is nothing you should want more than a smooth, seamless transition.”

I have seen what happens to discards, those who fight the process. They are lead to the base of the mountain, where the Chemist is building something I have neither the capacity nor the inclination to understand. But I have ventured close enough to learn that stone can scream.

The psychiatrist flicks lint from his lapel. The spherical room bulges around us, a slit of jungle visible through a door-like opening in this bubble between worlds. Oversized dragonflies tick against the glass sleeve of a solitary lamp.

“Think of the memories as impurities in your blood,” he says. “And think of this room as a sweat-box. When you convey the memories to me they are drawn to your skin like sweat, then washed away.” He claps his hands. “And you are clean! So.” He drops his pen to the pad on his knee. “Tell me about her.”

He calls it withholding. The truth is, I just can't recall enough about her. Maybe I've already said too much in this confessional and the important parts have already been stripped away. I can't remember. Of course I can't. If you give these trained interrogators enough to grip they'll tear the whole memory out from the roots. But I recall a closed eye, a sleepy smile, and my lips pressed to the warm, sweet-oil pocket of skin between brow and hairline, and I know that is something worth holding onto.

The psychiatrist frowns. Behind him is a photograph of dumpy dour relatives with flat faces. He must have brought it all the way from home. He flips between the pages of recall I've offered up today. "Your progress is slowing. This will not do."

He tears the pages from his notebook, folds them, secures them with a tin clip.

"Everything has a purpose here," he says, tossing my memories in a box along with hundreds of other bound notes. "Everything is replaceable. You would do well to remember that."

When I step back out into the jungle the line of animates extends away through the trees. I see a hundred creatures like me, waiting for a chance to purge every last drop.

* * *

There are quarries beyond the rim of the camp, great concavities in the hillside where the stone is cut and crushed and molded into shape. Between confessionals I either fight in the jungle or I work here alongside hordes of other animates, all of us tearing down chunks of the very thing we are now.

The jungle has become an abattoir; the Company and the Half-God combine to send endless tides of soldiers north against the Chemist, and those not killed end up here in camp, remaining physically human for as long as it takes to source good stone and invoke the powers.

The appetite for stone is so insatiable that rich veins of gold are ripped down and tossed in a pile which grows daily, untouched. If ever the empire hoped to understand what the Chemist is truly doing out here, that discard pile of unimaginable wealth is proof they never will.

* * *

“Tell me about the first time you performed,” the psychiatrist says (not the same one, a different one—this is later that night; the lights burn continuously in the confessional).

“Performed?”

“Um....” He consults his colleague’s notes. “Ah, yes, at the Clarevonne. I understand you were a keen student of drama,

and enrolled there before the war. So, tell me about your first performance.”

The idea of me being some kind of aspiring thespian is long gone, but I can picture the incident he mentions. “It was terrible. I dressed in these baggy clown pants my mother gave me. I don’t know where she got them. I wore a giant red tie with white polka-dots, and I pranced around on stage like a chicken.” The memory squirms, fighting. “We decided to end the performance by throwing pies at each other. I don’t think the audience knew what to make of that. We ruined the stage curtains, these lovely velvet drapes, and got in a lot of trouble for that.”

“Good, good.” His pen scratches across the page. “When you say your mother gave you those pants to wear, do you remember anything else about her?”

All I have is the faintest notion of her clinging to the memory of those ridiculous pants. Then nothing, just a placeholder for the concept of motherhood. That too begins to fade. “I’ve already spoken at length about her.”

“Hmm, yes, yes, it appears you have.” He taps his lips. “What else can you tell me?”

“About what?”

“Anything. Anything at all.”

“I can’t remember anything else.”

“Alright.” He consults his notes again and sees something that makes him brace himself. “Alright, now what about *her*?” He leans forward, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Some other woman, I believe. What can you tell me about *her*?”

“Who?”

* * *

By waiting outside the confessional bubble long enough I see one of the mechanical pygmies come out with a box full of notes. Notes about me, among others. I follow the creature through the jungle to the decrepit remains of the town called Jasper. Snaggle-toothed streets missing cobbles, vine-choked bricks and mortar crumbling slowly back into the earth.

The little steel marionette clumps down a set of stairs to a cellar door. I wait behind a segment of wall, listening to the *plink plink plink* of its footsteps fade. When it returns to the sunlight it no longer has the box.

I squeeze down the steps, my shoulders gouging plaster from the walls. The door is reinforced steel with no handle. I drum. Some kind of magic grease covers it. I try to drive my fist through it and only succeed in powdering two of my fingers.

* * *

We all sleep hunkered down in the jungle. Us animates, I mean. The rest of the men dream in bunk beds stacked inside barrack-bubbles, while the Chemist and his inner circle share a

private complex hanging from the edge of reality like a crooked thumb. This is why the Company never finds him, with their scatter-gun shelling. The entrance to his quarters is reinforced by hex on hex, and this world has no claim on anything that lies beyond that.

The rest of us sleep standing up, like horses. A stranger might think himself come across acres of termite mounds spread through the jungle. You can tell the newer converts by the fact they talk in their sleep. It's their humanity bubbling away. Early on there is just so much of it to vent. They spend all day recounting everything they remember, everything they know, and at night it all blows away in clouds of turquoise spores. It's beautiful to see.

Tonight I don't sleep, just stand there thinking about that door.

She lives beyond there. All I have is a closed eye, my lips on her skin. Over and over. They kept me in solitary for my first two weeks here to soften me up. Total darkness. I retained a shred of sanity by plucking a button from my shirt and tossing it away, then scrabbling on hands and knees to find it again, over and over and over.

The shelling starts sometime during the night. Arcs of orange, whistling, followed by cataclysmic roars and spectral fire tearing through the jungle. Birds and lizards vaporize in

puffs of dust, while the trees are left untouched. The Chemist and his men are safely ensconced where the shelling can't reach them. But in the morning I come across a smoking pair of boots draped in trousers, a button shirt and a sweat-stained cap. A book lies in the dirt.

Such mishaps are not uncommon.

* * *

"Tell me something."

"I noticed my left wrist was loose last night, so I unscrewed it and found an insect inside."

"You mean your navigator? You've had that since the beginning."

"But I don't remember ever seeing it before."

"Well, I can assure you it is standard issue. Nothing to be alarmed about, in itself, however in perusing your file I see no reason for knowledge of your navigator to be missing. Hmm. This is troubling."

"How so?"

"Well, animates who withhold for too long have been known to develop a form of dementia. They forget things they should know."

"Isn't the whole point of this to forget?"

"No. The point is to have the memories bled, like a poison from the brain. This form of dementia locks them away. They

become... inaccessible.” The psychiatrist with the friendly face writes something in his notes. “Do you often find yourself confused as to where you are?”

“I get déjà vu all the time.”

“That is normal, all part of the process. I mean confusion as to your purpose, what we are doing here.”

“How would I know?”

He steeples his fingers. “Focus on the One True Purpose. Work back from there, identifying and scrutinizing each facet of your existence here. If at any point you find yourself at a dead-end, unable to continue, return to me immediately.”

He tries to reassure me with a smile. I see his eyes tick down to his notes, his smile tighten, and I know I’ve been told this before.

But I don’t remember.

* * *

They draw us into formation for the latest crossing.

This is in the town square, in Jasper, because we need this much open space to accommodate us. I count over four hundred animates on one side of the square, with twice that many men on the other. A covered canopy shields the Chemist and his retinue from the sun. He sits on a throne of carved diamond, naked and strangely featureless save for long blonde hair, almost a clay prototype of everything that’s followed. His

sons stand around him in their immaculate suits and black satin waistcoats, their oil-slick hair glistening.

A bizarre distortion ripples in the centre of the square. Purple, pink, and silver. The Chemist leans across to Norton, his eldest son, and whispers something. Norton steps forward and orders a group of technicians to attend to the disruption.

They circle it and probe with electric-blue hands, sinking fingers into the ripple, straining elbows and shoulders until chunks of color come away like rotting boards to reveal a golden sheen. Another group of technicians are busy assembling a cast iron apparatus nearby. Cogs and joints squeal. They adjust a brass gramophone horn. One of them buries his head inside that and yelps loud enough to jump the needle on an attached meter. He gives his colleagues a thumbs-up.

I have seen this ritual many times before.

A group of five animates shuffles forward to be tethered to the apparatus via cables anchored to sockets in the base of their stone spines.

The mantis on my shoulder whirs. "Our time. Should be us."

"I haven't purged the memories yet."

"You stall. You scared."

“What’s there to be afraid of? The next world can’t be any worse than here.”

“Then why? Been too long.”

“I don’t know.”

“Almost done. Have to be. Finish quick and we go.” The mantis sways in the breeze. “Otherwise total waste.”

Each of the five animates hold their own mantis pilots in their hands. A couple of burped words from the technicians and the mantises are encased in pearly bubbles that could survive a direct hit from a Company shell. Everyone pauses, looks to Norton, who flaps his hand impatiently.

The five animates clump into the golden nebula and vanish. The ends of their anchor cables float inside the distortion, dipping in time to a rolling gait. Then one slackens and drops to the ground. The technicians squawk and dive on it with knives.

My mantis clicks. “He not ready.”

Indeed. Still too human.

The severed cable hisses across the ground to be swallowed by the glamour.

* * *

“Tell me something.”

“I saw a failed crossing today.”

“Yes. I saw it too. Nasty business, but preventable.” The psychiatrist (the one who loses patience with me easily) cracks his knuckles and leans heavily on one knee to stare me in the face. “It is the memories that tether you here. That and your old body, which we have long since freed you of. Some think they have fully confessed when in fact they have not. They put themselves forward for crossing and... well, we saw the consequences of that hubris for ourselves today, did we not?”

“What happens to them?”

“Best not go into detail. Suffice it to say, the Khoba-Hai do not tolerate human interlopers, even representatives of the Chemist. They believe humanity to be an infection, the carrying of which violates the terms of our agreement with them. But you know all this already, correct?”

I catch the canny glint in his eye. “Correct,” I lie. I failed the test of working back from the One True Purpose. But I keep that to myself.

The man says, “The final shard of memory can sometimes be so difficult to detect. It is like a glass splinter in the sole of your foot that you can never find. I gave that particular animate his clearance yesterday. I detected nothing left. Apparently I was wrong.”

“Are you in trouble for that?”

“Trouble is a relative term. Certainly do not worry yourself on my account.”

“What’s your name?” I ask.

He stiffens at the question. “That is none of your concern.”

“I only want to know your name.”

“And create more work for one of my assistants, when the time comes to perform the final wipe of your memories of this camp? No, I think not.”

“Sorry.”

“Tell me about her,” he says. His voice is sharp now. He hasn’t even bothered to open his notebook for me.

“Who?”

“Her!” They don’t even have a name.

I blink and shrug.

There’s a timepiece on the shelf, an antiquated series of runes and rails and counterweights from a place I’ve long since given away the name of. The psychiatrist turns to it sharply. “This is your penultimate session,” he snaps. “Either you come to me tomorrow with that final nagging scrap you seem so eager to cling to, or else I inform Norton that you are a dud. And you know what happens to duds.”

“But I still have more to offer.”

“No. No. I have picked you dry, my boy. You have nothing left for me, nothing, except her. Even then she is but a sliver of

a memory. I can feel that. Would you risk everything for such a flimsy recollection? Are you that stubborn?"

His rage frightens me. I almost blurt out the last thing I can truly call *myself*. Maybe he senses that, because he flashes yellow teeth at me.

"Yes, say it. Say it!"

"I really wish you had told me your name."

* * *

I hear the squeak of rusting joints well before I see the mechanical dwarf round the alley mouth carrying another box of notes. I remain hidden until I hear it stop at the base of the stairs. When I step out I see a square of light falling across flagstones beyond the door. The sun is behind me, and my shadow darkens the threshold.

The pygmy drops the box and spins, but I am too quick. I barrel down, catch it inside the room, and smash it to pieces before it can swing the door shut. Even so, the magic grease on the door must sense me because the steel slab begins to grind closed behind me. I grab the iron skull of the pygmy and wedge it between door and jamb, leaving enough space for me to pry my fingers in and rip the door open when I'm finished here.

The room beyond is long and low and stacked with endless crates full of notes. Brick upon brick upon brick of memory spoken, transcribed, and left here to gather dust. She is in here

somewhere. I rummage in the first crate and accidentally split the wood with my hands, spilling pages on the floor. My fingers are too blunt to re-gather all of them. I scrape the clip off one and paw it open.

I see a name (Dr. Hemwood) and two numbers: HO 6445 (a date, maybe?) and 20031 (ID number), followed by scribble.

“My dad used to take me camping. I always enjoyed that. Two (2) of us (me and my brother, Simon) and dad. He kept a sack of bottled beers in the stream to keep them cool, and one night he gave me a bottle to drink (my first ever) while he let my brother only take a sip (he was younger than me). I remember thinking it was no big thing. I stole another when dad was asleep, thinking he’d never notice, but he did, and he—”

The scribble continues overleaf and I can’t turn the page.

I open another one.

“Dr. Francis / HO 6445 / 21118:

“My friend and I, we lost touch. Don’t think it was anything in particular, just growing apart. Sad, when you think about it. Friends for so long, closer than kin, then bam, nothing. How does that happen?”

And another:

“Dr. Bell / HO 6445 / 2—3:” Some of the numbers are smudged.

“It was the first time I ever went to Old Pope. I know it’s just across the water by ferry, but it seemed a whole different place to me, you know? The people all talk different there, snootier, maybe. I never liked them. But the buildings were beautiful, real classy compared to what I’m used to.

“I saw a parade for the Half-God there. What colors. Fuck that guy and all, but he knows how to turn it on for his people. You can respect a guy like that, even if he is a queer. I can say that to you, right? I mean, you got no love for him, either, right? Say, can I get one of those? [animate requests a cigarette – concerning that it fails to realize it lacks the capacity to smoke => recommend twice-daily confessional]”

Every word of it bursts inside me. I recognize things—places, names, feelings—in every scrawled sentence. My own memories ripped from me have left a void, and this trickle only serves to emphasize what I’ve lost. None of it is me, either. None of it sings to me. I might be Animate 2—3 (there is a number scratched in the stone below my left shoulder blade which I’ve never been able to see -- the psychiatrists all use it to identify me), but because I don’t want to be I’m not. I have nothing to base that on. In the perfect dark you are whoever you want to be.

I plough through other crates, scanning for any word that meshes with the image I keep, that last piece of me. Nothing. I

find memories of conscription, of landing in the swampy coastal deltas, sex (tender, furious, and a bit of both), secret shames, regrets, the pleasures and pains of family. I find endless accounts of women; wives, girlfriends, sisters, daughters, mothers, but none of them are *her*. I know that.

And when I see the size of the room, realize that all the crates here couldn't possibly hold the transcribed lives of the hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of animates that most likely came before me, I know she's not here. Maybe they burn everything when the room fills up. Maybe she's gone. Maybe she never existed.

A strange compulsion keeps me flipping through page after page after page. Each memory sticks to me even if I don't want it to, so that by the time I accept I'll probably never find her the *mélange* of memories is so thick I can barely think straight. The seams knit, the pieces melt into a coherent whole, and there's a story to me once again.

* * *

"Are you ready to confess your final thoughts?"

"Yes."

"About her?"

"No. About something else."

“There is nothing else but her! Did you not listen to a word I said yesterday? This is your final chance to prove to me here and now that you still have some value to our operation.”

“I found where you keep the notes.”

A pause. “Notes? What are you talking about?”

“The notes you make to steal our memories. I found where you keep them.”

“You mean the repository?”

“Whatever you call it. I found it.”

The man licks his lips. “The location is hardly a secret. But the door is sealed against the likes of you. You cannot simply open it.”

“I waited until one of your mechanical slaves opened it and I smashed him to pieces. The door tried to shut but I propped it open with his skull. When I was done I gathered all the pieces of him and threw them down the dry well in Jasper.”

“Are... are you trying to provoke me? Is this some kind of a joke?”

“I found boxes and boxes of your notes inside. I read as many as I could. I was looking for her, but I never found her. I guess you destroy all the old notes, once you run out of room.”

The man flings his notepad to the floor and tries to stand, but I take him by the shoulders in my chipped hands and shove him back into his chair. He shrieks in pain, but the door to the

confessional is sealed against a recent plague of mosquitoes. There is no one to hear him.

“Pick up your pad and write what I just said.”

He stares at me, eyes greasy with pain. I squeeze his shoulder, hearing ligaments creak, and he screams again.

“Pick up the pad, or I’ll tear you apart.”

He knows I can do it, too. He whimpers, one arm limp, the other hooking the pad and dragging it up onto his thigh. He fumbles in his breast pocket for a new pen.

“Now write.”

He does, quickly. I read through his blurring fingers and see he has captured everything I said, almost word for word. I release him and he flops in his chair. “Finished,” he gasps. “This will be the end of you.”

“Better some kind of end than a lifetime of nothing.”

* * *

I am walking through the jungle.

Norton and his two brothers keep pace, surrounding me in a triangle. Their immaculate suits look misplaced here. A rogue branch slaps Norton’s head and he smooths the oiled hair along his scalp. A single mountain peak fills the sky before us.

“I never liked that cretin Bailie anyway,” Norton says, glancing at me with a smirk.

“What happened?” I ask.

“You don’t know?”

“I remember hurting the doctor, but nothing about our conversation.” I fumble. “Maybe I was trying to escape.”

Norton’s eyes cut to me again, sly, and he smiles, revealing perfect teeth. “If you don’t recall the particulars, then good for you.”

The three of them chuckle.

The past comes to me as we walk. I remember simple things, like drawing a picture or climbing the sagging tower over the Crocodile Channel. I remember laughing with friends and punching someone in the nose hard enough to spray blood down his shirt. I remember the smells of the bazaar in Diaspora, the taste of spiced manaka meat, the first time a woman made me quiver (and the first time a man did, too).

I remember endless combinations of mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers. Children, too. I remember being hired and fired and hauled up in court under charges of rank embezzlement. I remember the fear of my first landing on the beach, of wondering how or when the Chemist would come for us. I remember insubordination, cowardice, heroism and finally, capture.

Most of all, I remember a closed eye, the scent of hair and warmth and being home.

Anything that comes next can’t be so bad.

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Greg Linklater lives in Sydney, Australia, where he crunches numbers in an office so he can indulge his writing habit on the side. When he's not scrabbling at the keyboard he's either reading, tending to his pregnant wife, or wondering why he continues to support certain sporting teams despite the fact they only ever break his heart. A novel set in the same world as "Memories of Her" is occupying a large amount of his time.

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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. She fashions her worlds, both real and imagined, from Dallas, Texas.

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