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THE FINEST SPECTACLE ANYWHERE

by Genevieve Valentine

Ours is still the only circus I've ever seen, and that's pretty sad to think about, given how much ground we've traveled. There's something strange, being the only people in the world who'd rather entertain than start shooting.

* * *

We did all right, though, even in the early days. There were only three things I really worried about: where our next meal was coming from, whether Elena would kill me in my sleep, and when I could join the others in the ring.

The next meal always came, even if it was sandy and burned until all the taste was gone and it was just mouthfuls of char with some meat underneath.

I was still waiting on the other two.

* * *

"The Amazing Musical Man, Elena and the Sprites of The Flying Trapeze, and The Leaping Brothers" wasn't a circus, not by a long way. It was just a sideshow with a too-long name and a tent to keep the rain off and gawkers out.

Back then there were so few of us: Alto and Altissimo the tumblers, and Nayah and Mina and Elena on the trapeze, and Panadrome and Boss, and me. We lived out of three rickety trailers and a flatbed cargo truck that had most of the parts it was supposed to. The war had been going since before my time, but you could still get things in decent shape if you kept an eye out for a conquered ditch-city where the smoke had died down.

We'd cruise through empty cities, four of them driving the trucks, Nayah and Altissimo playing lookout, and Alto and me running alongside, darting wherever they pointed us to snatch up pipes and wrenches and books and dishes and any clothes not attached to the departed.

I had a knack for spotting things—"Little George," Alto would call, and before he could finish the words a half-smashed clock would be in my hands like magic.

(It was strange, sometimes, how bone-dry and dusted over the cities became, as if we were going backwards through time and the war was falling further and further behind us.)

Still, scrounging always got you something. If it was too heavy for me (I was small for my age, Boss always said), Panadrome would pull up short and jump out, lift a generator into the bed of the open truck with one arm, then disappear back into the cab.

(Elena never asked for a thing for herself; she'd point out lumber and wiring, but not one bracelet, not one book. I still don't know if she couldn't bring herself to ask anything of me, or if she didn't want any extra weight. With Elena it could be either.)

Every so often there would be a big building in ruins, and everyone would turn off the trucks and get out. Elena and Panadrome and I would pick over the wreckage (we had the best hands), looking for things most people didn't have the patience for.

Boss stayed outside with the trucks, always, and never came close to the buildings—wouldn't even get under their shadows.

When we came out again we'd find her peering at the notices plastered on this wall or that, scraping away dirt with her fingernails, carefully peeling things away from the stone and rolling them up as she walked back to the lead trailer and swung into the cab.

(It made my skin crawl to watch her, like she'd appointed herself the archivist of the whole world.)

But I didn't have the luxury of getting the creeps; I did what I was told, biding my time until she asked me into the ring.

* * *

I took it for granted that there was a place waiting for me.

Why else would I agree to sit in the back of the open truck at night, holding on to the cargo straps with aching arms and praying the canvas didn't break loose and knock me right into the road?

What else was keeping me there, back then?

* * *

Panadrome always got a thrill out of the rubes, but Elena and Nayah and Mina were the real draw, by then.

I was a plant in the crowd to drum up excitement. Boss stayed in the tent all show and gasped during the finale when Elena “fell” and only caught herself by one foot in the very last second before she crashed.

I could hardly keep from laughing at the rubes that panicked and then applauded three times as loud as they would have if it had all been perfect. Elena and the others had Boss's copper bones—what could happen to them that couldn't be mended?

(Now, Boss keeps things perfect. You get afraid of mistakes.)

Elena hated the trick. Every night as we unbuckled the tent and unscrewed the rigging, she was working beside Panadrome and seething, her dark hair knotted so tight that it seemed to be pulling at her face.

“What does it get us?” she said. “World’s Last Sideshow, Almost Worth Seeing.”

“It’s more exciting,” Panadrome said. He followed Elena, holding whatever she’d lifted into his arms. His brass-barrel body couldn’t bend, and if he snagged the accordion that hung from one side Boss would have his hide, so mostly he just followed Elena, trying to be useful. Alto and Altissimo would have been better for the job, but Panadrome seemed to take to Elena; she was the only one who never looked at him askance, and he didn’t seem to mind that she only spoke when she was angry.

Panadrome slid the rigging into the cargo truck. “People like a sense of danger.”

“You’d think they’d have enough of that trying not to get shot on their doorsteps,” said Elena.

Panadrome didn’t answer. That sort of logic was hard to argue.

* * *

One night, I tried to sneak into the tent.

Mistake. I didn’t know yet that the tent was Elena’s property as soon as the rubes had gone home. (Laugh if you like, but none of us will. You’ve never seen Elena after the crowd’s gone home.)

She was standing beside one of the support poles, perfectly still, with her head turned to watch me come in as if she'd been waiting for me.

I squared my shoulders and stepped inside, letting the flap fall behind me and sink me into the dark.

It took a few moments until my eyes adjusted; then I saw Elena still staring right at me, a tight smile on her face. The dark didn't bother Elena at all. (After Boss fits you up with the bones, you see better somehow. I couldn't wait for mine.)

"I'm just looking for something," I said.

Elena didn't even bother to answer; she turned away, grabbed the rig, and ascended. (She doesn't climb it, like all the others do. She just disappears from the ground and reappears at the top, like gravity forgets about her for a moment and she takes advantage.)

"Get out," she said.

Then she dropped from the rigging headfirst like a stone, caught the trapeze with one hand as she passed, snapped in and out of a pike until she was sitting on the trapeze like it was a child's swing.

There was no talking to her once she was on the trapeze. I turned and left. Behind me, the rigging creaked as she picked up momentum, and I knew when she had started to practice in

earnest from the slap and whistle of her body moving back and forth, back and forth.

* * *

Boss came out of the tiny workshop trailer with Panadrome, wiping oil off her forearms.

Panadrome's face looked grim, like it always did after repairs, and as he passed I clapped him very gently on the shoulder. He was one of us, even if he looked like a nightmare.

"I wish you'd stop asking Elena to be on the trapeze," Boss said.

I didn't even wonder any more where she got her information.

"I'm ready," I said. "I've put in my time on the ground, I'm getting stronger. If she'd just let me try—"

"You think you're ready to work at the level Elena requires?" Boss tossed the rag back into the darkness of the workshop. "I didn't peg you for an idiot when I picked you up. Maybe I should reconsider."

She cut around the truck toward her trailer. I followed, hurrying to keep up with her long strides, her round shadow eclipsing me.

"Then let me do something else," I said. "I can do anything—join Alto and Altissimo!"

"We'll see," she said, after too long.

In her trailer she sat at her dressing table, staring into the mirror like a woman facing something awful. (I thought that was unfair; she wasn't a beauty, but you could do worse.

I didn't understand that the work she had done was already beginning to catch up to her.)

In the corner near the bed, Panadrome was half-propped on a plank of wood rolled in blankets to give him a way to rest. He didn't bother pretending to be asleep, and his eyes gleamed in the dark as he looked back and forth.

"Elena wouldn't like you getting the bones," Boss said.

"And she decides?" I snapped.

Boss raised an eyebrow, but she only said, "Elena has the nose for these things. She'd sooner slit your throat. And you're enough trouble as you are."

Past the open trailer door, I could see glimpses of Elena through the tent flaps, flipping like a shell caught in the undertow.

"She's going to cut my throat as it is," I said.

"Don't think I'll stop her," Boss said, running a cloth across her eyes to drag the coal-smudge off. "If you can't do the job you have, why should she give you the job you want?"

"I can do the job I have."

She smiled. "Then who's outside packing tonight's barter into the truck?"

Panadrome coughed a laugh that turned into a two-tone whistle.

After I turned to go, she added, “And fix your buttons. You’re in a sideshow, not a zoo.”

I stomped across to the cargo truck and launched myself into the cab, thinking it would serve them right if I drove off in the middle of the night and left them all here to rot.

(We were all so separate; even Boss and Panadrome crammed into that tiny trailer were somehow apart and alone.

It’s no wonder we didn’t survive like that. Who could have?)

* * *

Back then, Boss took auditions from almost anyone who asked.

I think, now, that she was looking for the thing that would take us from a sideshow to a circus; she was hoping to find the one person who would bring us through and out the other side.

Then she found him.

* * *

Peter was a juggler. He juggled three tin mugs full of water without spilling a drop, and then eight knives with his bare hands, coming away without even a nick.

She took him into the workshop, where I knew she was explaining the bones, to see if he had the courage.

(All it took was courage. It was too early, then, to ask for patience.)

I was going to hate him no matter what, because Boss had picked him over me, so when Boss left him in the truck and held the vote, she began with, “We know Little George’s complaint. Gentlemen?”

Alto and Altissimo shrugged, nodded.

“Mina? Nayah?”

Mina nodded yes, Nayah shook hers no.

“Panadrome?”

“He can juggle,” Panadrome said, and after a moment Boss took it as an answer.

Elena said, “No.”

“You can’t keep people out of that ring forever,” I said.

Elena said, “I don’t like him.”

(I didn’t like Elena either, but that wasn’t what she meant, I could tell; even then she was standing where she could keep the workshop in sight. The hair on my neck stood up.)

Peter was adding our glass tumblers to the mugs he had in the air. His boots were worn out, and his ribs showed through his shirt, and he had a gun tucked into his waistband like any good soldier would.

“We’ll wait,” Boss said—a compromise. “See what he can do.”

“I know what he can do,” said Elena, and disappeared into the tent.

“She’s only sour,” Alto said.

But I knew it wasn’t true, I knew something was already wrong, and I shivered when Boss said, “Keep him out of the tent when Elena’s there.”

* * *

I had hoped that Peter wouldn’t give up his gun—no guns in the Circus, that had been the rule since the beginning—but the gun disappeared, and suddenly Peter was sleeping in the trailer with Alto and Altissimo as if everything was fine.

For a little while, it was. He knew how to keep a crowd watching, and whatever they tossed to him he could keep in the air as long as they liked, until they couldn’t quite keep count of what he was juggling.

But I could count quicker than the rubes could, and every once in a while something went missing, just for a round or two, like he was practicing making things of value disappear.

* * *

I didn’t know what to tell Boss—I couldn’t even imagine if I told her “He’s out to skim us” and she got that disappointed face she wore whenever I was being jealous.

(I couldn’t say, “Don’t make him one of us,” which was worse.)

Boss kept to her trailer more and more as the nights went by, watching the yard from the window as if she was waiting to be called. It wasn't like her.

But it meant that when something vanished from Peter's hands, Boss was watching the crowd and the rigging, not the dangerous face of the man who couldn't see for a second where his watch had gone.

It meant that when we gathered around the fire at night and Altissimo and Mina passed around whatever they called cooking, I watched Peter looking at the trucks with impatient eyes and felt as though I was going to crawl out of my skin.

It meant that when I saw Peter near the truck where we kept the barter—never inside, only near—it felt as though it was only Peter and me along that whole empty road.

Once I noticed as we struck the tent that Elena was on the far side of the circle, loading rolls of canvas carefully into Panadrome's arms, giving Peter glances that looked how I felt.

(She's just jealous, I thought out of habit, like it would give me a name for my own worry, but I watched her so often I must have known it wasn't true.)

It might have comforted me that she was watching him that way, but Elena had never been a comfort, and that didn't occur to me until after it was too late.

* * *

What Peter stole, in the end, I never saw.

What I saw was him coming out of the workshop, where only Boss and I had permission to go alone. The workshop, where the sideshow performers came out with the copper bones that made you Boss's own in earnest.

Somehow seeing him sneaking out of there, seeing him stealing what he couldn't wait for, snapped the string I had been hanging on.

I thought I would spit out his name and he would look guilty and they would all come running to my aid somehow, but that would have been more luck that I have.

Really, I misstepped on some gravel and he looked up and saw me (he seemed surprised -I had developed quiet feet, I guess, from sneaking through the rubes acting awed).

The surprise only lasted a moment, though; then he smiled, and I started to worry. He was still rail-thin, but he was faster than I was, that much I knew for sure.

(If only I had the bones, I thought desperately, as if I could pause time and arm myself and come back when I was ready for this fight.)

He had a bag in one hand full to bursting, and his other was empty and open, which frightened me more than anything.

"What did you take?" I asked, like it would matter. One nail from that workshop would be too much.

Then he reached behind him for something hidden at his waist, and I remembered that the first thing he'd ever made disappear was his gun.

I bolted for the tent.

(Strange what you think is safe, for reasons you can't name.)

We had stayed two nights—the city was in a truce—and the tent was still up, littered with the setup tools between shows. I dove inside, yanked the flaps closed behind me, and dropped to all fours in the darkness.

He was right on my heels, though, and as he skidded into the tent I fumbled blindly for whatever I could grab—a board, not even as thick as my finger, but it was something.

I got my footing, pushed up, and swung.

I was smaller than he was, and slower, but I'd hauled equipment until my muscles were dense as brick, and when it connected there was a sickening crack. It sounded like ribs (I was pleased) but when he gasped the sound was too close, and the next thing I knew I was on my back in the dust with a welt rising on my forehead from the butt of the gun, and I heard a little click as he thumbed the hammer back.

I winced and wondered how quietly I could scramble out of range without splitting my head open on the rigging in the dark. (Chances weren't good.)

Then I heard the slap and whistle of a body swinging back and forth above us, and the unmistakable sound of a rope slipping free.

If you work in the circus, you know what that means. I pushed off with all my strength, aiming low and for distance, and the sound of the gun going off got swallowed up as the tent fell in around us, an avalanche of canvas so fast and heavy that it sucked away the air.

I kept my head to the ground, knowing what was coming, so when the tent fell it wouldn't break my neck.

After that, I don't remember.

* * *

I woke up in the empty bed of the truck, aching so badly that I thought for a moment he'd blown my skull open.

The sky was pink, nearly morning, and there were shifting shadows at the edge of my vision.

"I hope you're not Peter," I said.

Panadrome wheezed a little, three high notes like his accordion was stuck. "Welcome back," he said, smiling, and glanced over at Boss.

Boss turned away to look out at the mess where the tent had been. "You're stupider than I imagined," she said, "managing to keep quiet from help when we live close enough to share a fork."

I sat up slowly, propping my arms for support. Panadrome and Boss were crowded close; between their heads I could see glimpses of the others setting up the tent. Elena was standing a few steps off, watching all of us with a drawn face.

I asked, "What did he take?"

"Doesn't matter," said Boss.

(It was true, but it's never stopped me wondering what was so worth stealing that he did all that just to rob us of it.

His courage must have failed him; something about the bones must have woken him in dread, just before he broke into the workshop and tried to make a run for it.)

"He's dead," Elena said, before I could ask.

"The rigging pole got him," said Panadrome, watching Boss.

"I heard someone," I told him. "Before everything caved in, I heard someone moving."

In the rigging, on the trapeze.

I looked over, but Elena was already gone.

"Leave it," Boss said.

When she used that tone, you gave way, and so I closed my mouth and kept it closed.

I slept off my headache in Peter's bunk, dreaming that Boss went into the woods and dug a grave.

* * *

When I came out of the trailer it was nearly sundown and Alto and Altissimo were already dressed, smoking a single cigarette in their shabby-looking jackets, their makeup running a little in the heat.

Mina and Nayah must have been inside warming up, because I heard the squeak of the trapeze and the solid clap of hands clasping hands.

From inside Boss's trailer, I saw the shadows moving that meant she and Panadrome were almost ready.

It was all as it should be, it was all as it had been before, but something had changed, I could tell, while I was sleeping.

It took me until I was standing before the tent to see it—a new banner, the letters traced with care, the paint still gleaming wet in the heavy capital letters. On one end Boss had painted the griffin that was tattooed onto her arms. It stood at the ready, like a talisman.

I read the banner slowly, twice. It seemed strange that it was new; it seemed at once that it had always been hanging there, and yet that it had sprung into being from the wreckage of the tent that had fallen, giving everything a real name at last.

The Mechanical Circus Tresaulti, it read, and underneath, *Finest Spectacle Any Where*.

"It's certainly shorter than the other one," Elena said behind me. "We'll see if it does any good."

But she must have known already what had changed; she clenched her hands before she turned away, as if she had just been called to a fight she'd wanted for a long time.

I was still watching Elena's back when Boss stepped up beside me.

"It's time," she said. "Long past time."

I thought about Peter, about the little crowds that had grumbled at the price of barter and the soldiers who had given us dirty looks and kept us from even slowing down as we passed their city walls.

A little sideshow could come and go, neither a thrill nor a threat. A circus, I could tell, would be a different thing—a circus was something real, something united.

My hands were shaking. I pressed them to my sides.

"Some people won't like it," I said.

Boss said, "Then they can be afraid of it."

(Strange, how sometimes I could guess her reasons, and sometimes nothing at all.)

But she was smiling, and it happened rarely enough that I was happy to smile back, and think about the future as an even road we would all drive along together, and make out all right.

Then I lifted the canvas aside for her, and together Boss and I went inside to the circus.

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Genevieve Valentine's World-Fantasy-Award-nominated short fiction has appeared in *The Way of the Wizard*, *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, and more. Her story "[Bread and Circuses](#)" appeared in *BCS* #55 and as [BCS Audio Fiction Podcast 049](#). Her first novel, *Mechanique: a Tale of the Circus Tresaulti*, set in the same world as both "Bread and Circuses" and "The Finest Spectacle Anywhere," was released by Prime Books in April 2011. Her appetite for bad movies is insatiable, a tragedy she tracks on her blog at www.genevievevalentine.com.

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BUZZARD'S FINAL BOW

by Jason S. Ridler

Down a cold dark hallway covered in wild skins, furs, and the harsh sculptures of the north, Buzzard walked flanked by two vigils with barely enough fuzz on their face to prove their manhood and not a battle scar between them. Still, the winds were thrashing against the palace walls instead of his naked bones, as Razor would have preferred it. He smiled and walked on, waiting for the inevitable.

Behind them was the cage he'd been dragging since his lost days of glory. From within it, Razor, the old red tiger, growled low and constant. Massive paws hung between the bars, flexing grey claws. Buzzard halted, and the guards gripped their weapons.

"Humble gents," Buzzard said, enjoying the nostalgic weight of chains on his wrist. "I'd suggest you don't force me to part from my companion. Razor won't let me out of her sight for long." Truth was, she lived off his misery as much as off rats and hens. And her appetite for both was bottomless.

A sword hilt jabbed his back.

Buzzard hardened his stance. "This is for your safety, good sirs, not mine. I'm not moving unless—"

An open—palm slap warmed his face. "You don't give orders, buffoon!" said a vigil. "We do."

A captain emerged from a massive ornate door made of twisted wood and black amber. He had the hard strides of a campaigner. His face winced at the stench of Buzzard, but a flicker of his eye held recognition of the familiar, though Buzzard had never seen him before. His guts clenched.

"Lady Astra will see you," said the captain.

Buzzard bowed, stiff. "Of course, good sir. And I'll be glad to perform for her with my companion."

The captain shook his head. "The beast stays."

"I wish that were so," said Buzzard. "I won't go forward without her." Though it did bring a smile to his heart to consider Razor slashing the guards to gruel then gumming the remains up off the floor, since the metal teeth he'd made for her were in her water bucket.

"This is my arena, not yours," said the captain. Buzzard inhaled the pain caused by the word "arena" and swallowed hard. "I will not allow a wild beast to our Lady's chamber. No matter how good you might be at... besting her."

Buzzard gave him his largest morning smile, the kind that children laughed at, hating the man and his knowing stare enough to taste bile bite the back of his tongue.

The captain nodded forward. "Come."

"No."

The vigils drew swords and the captain's face tightened. "You don't have a choice."

If that were true, they'd all be dead. Including Buzzard. And then Razor would stop having the satisfaction of making him suffer. But freedom was a seductive dream he'd laid to rest long ago, and to resurrect it would cripple what spirit was left alive in his heart.

"Or...." Buzzard said, "you can simply keep the door open so Razor knows where I am. My ripe odor, as you noticed, carries itself far and wide, and her sense of smell is as keen as her claws. So, an open door..." Buzzard closed his hands and pulled the chains wide for a throat strike. "Or take your chances right now with me."

The captain smiled, but not unkindly. "I'd like that... but you are to be unspoiled. Vigil Meris, keep the doors open and three men on the cage."

They shoved Buzzard through the door. "Keep me in your nose, Lady Razor." She inhaled once, long and strong, then snorted.

Smoke and jasmine awoke childhood memories that Buzzard quickly strangled. Bigger hides hung off these walls, and above them a row of crimson skulls. The captain's ragged voice sang out. "Lady Astra, Lord and Protector of his highness Prince Konrad, Future King of Baltikum."

Lady Astra strode in from an antechamber, nothing short of hideous. Pale and jaundiced as fresh goat milk with a dribble of piss, but eyes like iron ringlets. She walked with the confidence and strength of a southern beast in the wild, and her dark hair was richer than the normal fey blondes and weak browns of the north. Roughly his own age, Buzzard thought. Soured by power like he was from poverty.

"You may leave us, Captain Landris." Her voice was soft as a piglet's belly. "I require privacy."

The captain bristled. "Your Grace, this is no alley rat, he is —"

"No threat to me," she said, thick hands folded. "Tend to the beast he brought with him." Her accent was not the broken harshness of the captain but braided with a southern sting.

"Aye," said the captain, whose heavy steps thudded into the distance.

Lady Astra sat in her throne of oak. "You are the traveling tiger man who has been entertaining the seedlings outside the

arenas, along the northern arm of the Royal Empire? Buzzard the Beast—Man.”

He bowed. “At your service, Your Grace.”

“You are actually Bazzar Kiln, the champion beast hunter and gladiator, born into the Tarish slave camps of the southern empire and chosen for arena combat when only ten.”

Buzzard held his bow as sweat cut down the filth on his back. The dull echo of long dead crowds roared in the pit of his heart. He quelled them with a bitter anger that made his chains rattle. He couldn't let the warmth of this keep, the freedom from the elements, nor the caress of memories, seduce himself into forgetting.

“And earned his freedom before his twentieth birthday against a scarlet tiger from the Mountain of Desert Wind in the East. Carrying the supposedly dead beast's carcass past Freedom Gate after the Royal Court games, thirty years ago. Vanishing into the air like some market conjuror, when I was but a young maiden at the arena.” Her voice burned smooth like desert wind. “Is that you, Bazzar Kiln?”

He emerged from his bow, lip twitching. “Bazzar died outside the Coliseum. I am Buzzard.”

She puffed up. “Save me the sad poetry of your drifter existence, I have no ear for it. Though I believe I will need both the gladiator and the buffoon from you.”

“I am no gladiator.”

“I can see that,” she said, the disgust like venom from her lips. “Freedom has not treated you well.”

“I have no complaints.”

“Do not patronize me, gladiator. I know misery when I see it. The misery of what was once powerful and gone to rot.” She hissed out her breath. “What is it you want?” Her stare hardened and he could not lower his head. “Another stab at glory? The roar of the crowd at Cressus? The pleasures of a saffron house? You must pine for greater days than a peasant death on the streets of this fringe kingdom of ice!”

He held still and counted heartbeats to ignore the affirmation in his mind and what remained of his soul. She was touched with mage blood, he thought, likely some bastard child from a lower royal house, stuck in the backwater kingdom to keep her petty schemes far from the Royal heart of the empire.

He focused on the bitterness of his last days on the blood—stained sand and the pervasive smell of death from young life snuffed out.

Lady Astra’s lids fluttered, then opened. Red orbs cindered into azure blue. “Goddess,” she said in a fit. “You want... nothing. Nothing but what you’re doing.”

He swallowed bile and gave her the same smile he’d shown the Captain. “Only the laughter of children.”

“Do not insult me!” Spit flared from her bottom lip. “You bled the sands for the glory of battle and the adulation of the masses and the flavor of death.” She wiped the froth away, anger settling into determination. “Fine. Desire is but one key to my needs.”

“And what do you need that I can offer?”

One word escaped her graveyard smile. “Entertainment.”

He wondered if Razor could smell the fear on him, and if she was enjoying it.

Lady Astra spoke of Prince Konrad, a sickly boy, weak in bone and will, and the future king of Baltikum. “Given his frailty, he is not allowed to leave the confines of his room, which looks upon his late mother’s garden. An indulgent mess that I will have cleared for your performance.

“As it is sacred ground, I cannot have it sullied by an actual bloodsport. So you and your beast will put on a show so real, so savage that it will scare him into being a man capable of ruling. I can see the birth of that spark.” Her blue eyes flickered red once. “When your mock battle triggers his soul, you will be free to go.”

“And if I fail?”

She exhaled slowly. “Then he will have an accident. One that your... pet will be sure to take advantage of. If he cannot be strong, then he shall meet his mother below the roots.”

“And that would not sully the sacred ground?”

She smirked. “I suggest you prepare for your performance.”

“No,” Buzzard said.

She glared.

He made a silent prayer to his deaf gods. “I will die before I hurt a child.”

“You will do as I command, gladiator,” Lady Astra said, standing. “Or your companion’s hide will become the latest addition to my collection. I’ll hang it next to yours.”

At the command of a royal house, void of choice, Buzzard let his powerlessness wash over him with a sad relief. Until he realized Lady Astra’s malice might make that of Razor seem as light as dust.

All roads from the arenas were damned.

* * *

Frost laced Buzzard’s breath as he dragged Razor’s cage through the dark limestone labyrinth of the Keep, vigils flanking him on all sides, until they came upon a great stone door, smooth as the summer sky and flecked with metals so that torchlight made it shimmer like stars.

Three guards pulled the great latch. “Inside,” said the captain. “Our Lady has ordered you to examine the grounds.”

“You’re not going in?”

“It is the late Queen’s garden. Sacred. We are not permitted. Even the gardeners are high born.”

“And I guess my presence there is even more of a stab in the eye of the dead royal. Your new queen has a mean streak that could make a starved wolverine proud.”

“Watch that degenerate talk!” said Vigil Meris. “Get in there, slave, or we’ll—”

Faster than hate, Buzzard snatched the dagger from the vigil’s belt and brought it to his neck.

Another sharp edge braced his own throat. “I am no slave,” Buzzard said. “Nor have I been, for longer than you’ve been staining the world with your turds. I’ve killed more than you will see living, to get my freedom. Call me that again and the Lady can have my head, for I will gladly take yours.”

“Lower your blades,” the captain ordered, voice calm and clear. “Our Lady needs him more than a loud-mouthed vigil too stupid to keep his blade out of reach from a trained killer.”

They all retracted their weapons. Buzzard dropped the knife.

The captain held his head back. “They’re too young to remember your glory days. If they did, they’d see fit to ask you questions instead of trying to slit your throat.”

“Their loss, obviously,” Buzzard said glumly, picking dirt from his nose.

The captain held his belt, hands away from his sword hilt. “I saw you take on the Talinide Bear when I was a child visiting cousins in the south. Such courage was inspiring enough to take a meek northern stick and see if he could face the challenge of a martial life.”

Buzzard tried to smile but shook his head. What little good he’d done in the arena was an ember next to the fire of his crime. “Please, just tell me where I am to go.”

“Inside,” said the captain, gripping Buzzard’s shoulder. “We will leave the door open so your... companion stays quiet.”

Buzzard nodded, then covered his eyes and walked inside. Sweet, warm air cleared his nose. Winter... had not touched this garden.

Here, the air tasted of spring. Rich greens and reds filled the garden and the chirps and chitters of bug and bird were ripe as fruit. Above, the ice—blue sky taunted him with iron clouds that ran over the Keep and on to eternity. The courtyard was as wide as a hundred cells, surrounded by wild trees and flowers that were in turn surrounded by grey walls. A patch of colorful heaven amidst the Keep’s somber cadence, he thought, but heaven in chains was still a prison.

A single balcony with a high rail faced him from a few stories up. The prince’s room.

Buzzard sat down. He was damned, he thought. Death waited for him on either choice. And what of Razor? He cracked his knuckles. They hurt.

Something moved in the long grass a few feet deep under a thornberry bush. He ignored the urge to pounce and kept running his hand across the weak grass blades. Maybe it was a test. Maybe that useless vigil wanted a second crack. Then, another rustle.

Buzzard waited three heartbeats then sprang like Razor in her prime, grabbing the body in his leap and twisting the manacle's chain around his prey's neck, crushing the squeal that was about to break the silence. They landed silently on soft grass and not even the song birds in the tree stirred.

"You think you could surprise someone who's bested a pack of jaguars?"

Small white hands gripped his massive scarred forearm. Buzzard let go and dashed away.

It was a boy, pine—needle thin, coughing so hard into the long grass that it seemed his tiny neck would snap.

"Forgiveness," Buzzard said, hands on the ground. "I thought you were—"

The boy sucked in air, then fell back, gripping his neck.

"Shit!" Buzzard whispered, then leaned over him, tore the boy's hands away, and flipped him over. "When I hit you,

breathe out hard.” He slapped the boy’s frail back and his thin body hit the grass like a fallen log. But from his mouth shot a gory nut, dyed black.

The boy sucked in air until the words formed. “Why... why did you save me?”

“You mean you’d rather die choking on nuts? I’m sorry.”

The boy spat, eyes closed to slivers. “I mean, are you not here to kill me?”

A flash of the obvious smacked Buzzard. “You’re the prince heir.”

The boy rolled onto his bottom and wrapped weak arms around his blade—thin knees. “You didn’t know?”

“I thought you were a vigil, or maybe your mother testing me—”

“That snake is no mother of mine.” Hate licked every word. “And if you say so again, I will kill you where you stand.”

Buzzard sat, cross legged, manacled hands in his lap. “Well, from suicidal to murderous. You are a young man of many emotions, Prince... I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Konrad.”

“Lord Konrad.”

“Not while she’s staining the throne.”

“Not an admirer of your Protector?”

Malice gripped the boy’s eyes.

“Ah, did away with your mom, did she?”

Konrad looked around. “Buried her alive in this garden, and cursed her spirit. I can still hear her sobs coming from the thornberry blossoms.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“Will you be sorry tomorrow when you kill me?”

A quick stab of guilt gripped his heart from every angle and made it hard to swallow. He coughed. “Who told you this?”

Konrad tore at grass. “I am no fool, gladiator. While she thinks me weak, I am also cunning. I listen to mice. To bugs. To the pollen in the air. Even if I have no power to change my fate, I know what it will be.”

“Unless you choke on a nut.”

Konrad glared. “Some of us don’t have the grand choices of the arena to pick our deaths. But at least a suicide would stain her reputation as Protector, and perhaps bring one of my uncles from the Qurile Mountains to come challenge her.”

“Is that what you want?”

He shook his head. “All I want is Mother free from this garden.”

“And how can that be done?”

“Why should I tell my aunt’s assassin?”

Buzzard cooled his nerve. Assassin. The word was poison to what little honor he had left.

“I’m your entertainment, my prince. I’ve been hired to show you the virtues of manly conduct through beast wrestling. I will do this, and it will spark the manly virtues inside you and make you a great man.”

Konrad, stunned, took a moment to let the words work their magic in his head. “And what would happen if I fail to become a warrior born, in the wake of your act?”

“I’d suggest you make peace with the gods you cherish, because you’ll be buried here with your mother before the sun kisses the horizon.”

Konrad tossed grass aside. “Then I was better off choking in the afterlife. At least I could haunt that rotten cow. Tell me, Gladiator—”

“My name is Buzzard.”

“Buzzard. Before you seal my fate—who sealed yours? You were once a freeman? How did you end up a slave of my aunt?”

Buzzard wiped his face. In all the leagues he’d traveled, no one had ever asked. “In my last fight, they tossed a starved tiger cub at me.” The crowd’s laughter cackled in the back of his mind. “It bit my leg, so I killed the tiny thing. Killed it for being hungry.

“Then they released its mother.” Roars filled his ears like the tides of his youth. “They all wanted blood. Mine, hers, they

drank us both dry... but I'd never seen a beast fight so hard. So noble."

"But you won."

Buzzard nodded. "Only the match. My last match. I hoisted the beast in the air as if it were dead. But I'd only made it slumber with a choke, a more vicious variation than the manacle one you just enjoyed. And as they opened the gates, I carried it over my bleeding shoulder like a royal present. Into freedom." Buzzard ran his hands through the grass. "Past the rose—petal parade the crowd had prepared, past the charnel house I'd dreamed of slaking my thirst in, past the comforts of a bath and bed made of more than mangy straw. I took the sleeping tiger up the cliffs of Craysus, where none of the wandering peasants could follow. As the chill of night bit us, she awoke.

"I knelt before her, neck out. But she would not strike me dead. A layman would say she was scared, but I knew she wanted me to live. And suffer. She followed me, directed me, until I found the one job that she approved. Buffooning.

"And that that's what I've been doing until now. Replaying that last fight, reminding me each time of what I did to her. Until she finally decides it's time I die." He shook his head. "But she never does."

A knock came from the stone door, and Konrad ran into the thick grass. "I am not allowed on the grounds. Thank you for telling me your story, Buzzard."

"Vagrant," said the vigil, a fresh bruise the size of Razor's left paw throbbing on his cheek. "Time to give your beast its teeth."

Buzzard chuckled, and stood. "I remember the first time she slapped me. Still hurts when I eat hard bread." Each bite, each shock of pain, a grim reminder of the invisible chains fastened to his very bones.

The guard grimaced and yelled at him to hurry up.

* * *

Buzzard pulled Razor's cage to the great stone door, led there by the captain.

"I find it a shame that you've been reduced to this," said the captain.

"Funny," Buzzard said. "I thought it rather fitting."

"You have an odd sense of humor for a man about to entertain the prattle of royalty."

"It keeps me young."

The captain smiled.

Sunlight, green, and screeching laughter assaulted him in the perpetual spring of the cursed garden. Razor snorted, eyes

shut. Buzzard pulled a tarp over the cage. "Alright, old girl," he whispered. "Showtime."

Above on the balcony was a handful of children in bright finery, making more noise per person than a legion of drunks in the front row of the Hadic Arena. Konrad stood to the side; behind him was Lady Astra. The stone rail he leaned on was a shade lighter than the rest.

Buzzard pulled the cage into the center of the garden grounds. He coughed once into his hand, took a deep breath, and let his voice boom.

"Ladies and Gentleman, boys and girls, and our Lady Astra. Welcome to the resplendent spring gardens of Keep Baltikum for today's birthday celebration honoring the young and dapper Prince Konrad, who is turning thirteen today. A lucky boy, a lucky number, and with any luck he'll see many more." He bowed.

"Hurry up!" a child yelled.

"Release the monster!" screamed another.

"In due time, my young masters. For within this cage lies the most ravenous beast to prowl the empire. Found in the black jungles mountains of Garad Moir, it took two legions to subdue her and another legion to load her into her cage and another legion to remove her. She is the undisputed, ferocious, Mountain Queen——Lady Razor!"

He tore off the tarp.

Razor's custom metal teeth glistened in the sunlight like daggers the size of men's arms, and the children gasped.

Until Razor farted so hard her tail twirled.

Laughter rained down. He smiled up. Yes, we're both jokes, idiots, playthings for the privileged. Laughing most of all, with her iron—blue eyes was Lady Astra, powdered hands stern on Konrad's shoulders.

Konrad stood stoic. With death at his shoulder, even at a tender age, he'd found peace and solace. He did not look at the show but at the thornberry bush imprisoning his mother.

So that was a noble noble, Buzzard thought. A first time for everything.

"Lady Razor has the hearts of two lions that she swallowed whole in the beast hunts of Mersa Lanor! And though it may mean certain death, I shall seek to best her in a contest of strength and sinew until one of us is dead." He yanked the latch. "Dead!" The trap door dropped and Razor yawned, metal teeth barely opening. "Dead!"

More laughter.

Buzzard sighed, grabbed Razor's collar and pulled her from the bottom of the cage. "Alright, Mountain Queen. Prepare to be tested!"

They ran through the tumbles and bumps, grips and leaps, Buzzard tossing and turning with her as she barely noticed, thrashing about to make it look real... and coming off like an Emperor's counterfeit smile.

And as they tussled on the ground, Buzzard snaking his python choke around Razor's mighty neck, he spied the balcony. All the children were leaning over, pointing and laughing, ignoring Lady Astra, who smiled and nodded, then shoved Konrad hard into the stone rail until—

The stone crumbled.

And Buzzard flexed with enough real pressure to snap Razor from her malaise stupor. She saw the powdered hands outstretched, shoving a child into the abyss.

Buzzard released the hold and dashed across the courtyard, diving with his manacled arms outstretched to catch the sickly boy. He twisted as he crashed into the wall beneath the balcony, ribs crackling. Konrad was a crumpled doll in his hands.

The boy looked at him, petrified. "What are you doing? If I don't die here, she'll torture us both forever."

"I doubt that," Buzzard said with a grunt. "Watch."

Razor growled up at the balcony. Then leapt.

Grey claws snapped out of her paws, digging into the walls like daggers in flesh. With a spider's grace, she scaled the sheer

rock surface, rubble trailing her leaps. Before the first screams ended, she was on the balcony. Lady Astor cried once. “Guards!”

Children howled as Razor leapt down from the balcony, blocking the sun, and crashed to the ground. In her metal maw was Lady Astra. Bright red streams burst out from the Lady’s wounds. She trembled, the ghost of life still in her angry blue eyes.

“Happy birthday, Your Highness,” Buzzard said, releasing Konrad.

Konrad approached the tiger with the courage of a champion. Razor spat out Lady Astra before him.

“Free her, Astra” Konrad ordered, pointing at the thornberry bush. “Free her, or I shall incant as you did, so that you take her place in that wooden prison!”

Her eyes flared red, briefly. Soft, sacred words came from her trickling mouth. Then her wretched form crumbled.

In a flash, a flock of black birds rose from the thornberry bush, piercing the blue sky with shadowy forms that spoke of higher powers. The garden’s sweetness lightened and a chill began to grow, but a stream of golden light descended. Konrad fought tears that dripped onto his tiny fists. He shook, watching the birds disappear into the gold and blue heavens and whispered “Your prison is broken. Mother... goodbye.”

Razor spat out her stained metal teeth. A mighty breath rolled from her nose and across Konrad's face. She licked his tears clean, then walked into the thick lush grass.

"Where... where is she going?" Konrad said, touching his face.

Buzzard wiped his nose and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "To the ghost hills of her people. Where she belongs. She's earned it."

"As have you, gladiator," the vigil, Meris, said as the guards rushed in. "You've committed regicide."

"No," Konrad said, "that mighty creature committed regicide. This man saved the heir to the throne. We do not hang selfless patriots in Baltikum. We make them part of the honor guard. If, Buzzard, you will accept me as your king. I will have need of men of valour and cunning."

Breathing hard, ribs seething, Buzzard watched Razor's slow saunter into the green. She did not look back.

No, he thought. No parade, no triumph, no mortal peace should follow this victory. His just reward rested in darker fields.

He gripped the boy's shoulder. "I accept you as my king. But I serve another." He followed Razor into the long grass.

"Wait!" Konrad called

Buzzard winced, ribs grating with the steps, but followed Razor. “Rule well, Lord Konrad. Remember the courage you showed today, and your people will follow you to the heart of hell and back.”

The prince cried out behind him. But Buzzard marched on.

He found Razor by the thornberry bush. A deathly white shadow encased her. Her energy, spent in one last great hunt, worthy of story, had burned bright and brief and now she longed for the peace of long sleep on distant shores.

Though Buzzard hoped she held enough strength for one last act.

He kneeled before her. “Last chance,” he said.

She huffed, mouth stained fresh from her kill, claws bared. The last thing he heard was the scream of children, the cry of a young lord, and the wheeze of a dying tiger.

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Jason S. Ridler has published over thirty short stories in such magazines and anthologies as Brain Harvest, Not One of Us, Big Pulp, Crossed Genres, Tesseract Thirteen, and more. His

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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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