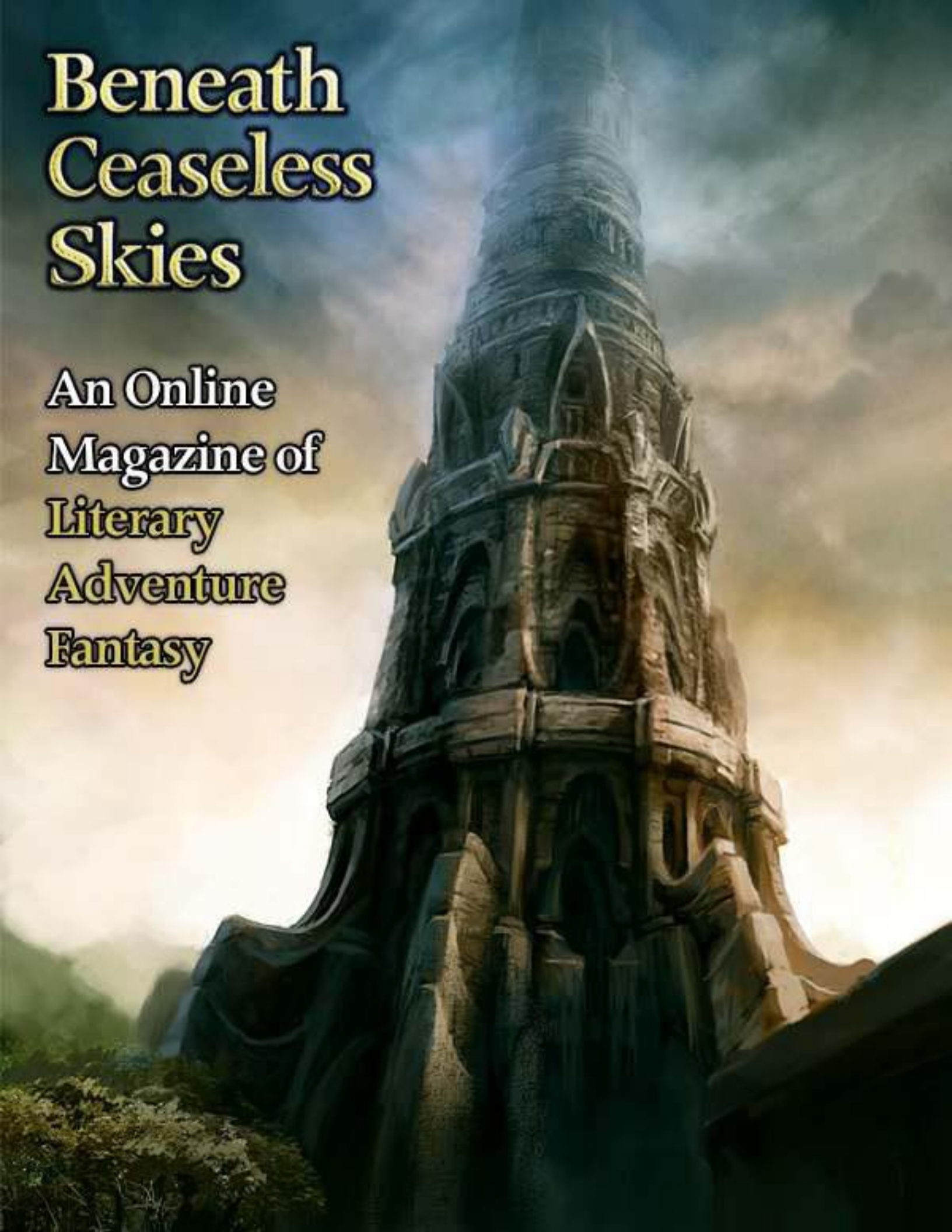


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online  
Magazine of  
Literary  
Adventure  
Fantasy



# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

Issue #87 • Jan. 26, 2012

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## THE LAST GORGON by Rajan Khanna

The air is rank with the stench of decay as I stalk through the halls hunting the last Gorgon. Fate has not been kind to Medusa's progeny, has not tolerated their presence or proclivities. For as we seek to change, to evolve, to transmute the world around us, the Gorgons seek to keep things as they were—in silent stasis. In stone.

That they don't deserve the treatment they've received is none of my concern. Their time is passing like a whisper; like the age of harsh breath and cold steel, my mother's age, has given way to a time of gunpowder and steam. The revolver that I hold in my trembling hand, a woman's hand no less, affirms this. Yet I need the last gasp of the old world to aid me in the new.

I crouch and listen for footfalls, for breath, for anything that might give me the position of the creature. Legends say that the old ones had bestial bodies, but over the decades they've grown more human, though they still retain the ability to turn one to stone with but their gaze.

I angle the mirrored discs attached to the frame of my glasses. They're not a perfect solution, but they do prevent me from having to look straight at the Gorgon. Which is what ultimately proved the downfall of the race. Once the trick to defeating them was out, any fool with a mirror could follow in the footsteps of Perseus. And so, many unique and wondrous creatures were taken from this world, leaving us with only a few. Perhaps one. Whose location I bought from a drunk in a bar.

I walk a long corridor, sighting a small room at its back. Crumbling pillars surround me. I wonder how stable the structure is, whether the ceiling will collapse before I find what I seek.

The slightest sound, like a foot upon sand, crunches behind me. I whirl toward it.

I catch a glimpse of soft, down wings fluttering, as silent as an owl's, and a slender body, before a scaled, clawed hand knocks the glasses from my face.

I squeeze my eyes shut and throw myself backward, holding the revolver in the air, my whole body tense. I scuffle for concealment, thrumming with panic. I listen, but all I hear is the crumbling of old stone.

"I only want to talk," I say through the dryness of my mouth. "I came to talk."

Silence. Then a hiss, and footsteps charging at me. Fast.

My eyes closed, my heart a maddened beast, I raise the revolver and fire into the thing in front of me until the cylinder spins onto empty chambers. I open my eyes slowly, warily, using the polished silver handle of the gun to look around. The Gorgon lies at my feet, twitching. Her wings are bloody; soft down floats through the air.

As she dies, I search for my mirrored glasses and find them nearby, then secure them to my face.

I see her face, scaled but not monstrous, and find myself tracing its shape along one cheek. Then I draw my sword and begin half-hacking, half-sawing through the creature's neck.

Blood and feathers spatter my clothes along with a smell that is both earthy and musky. Blood pumps slowly from her severed neck, pooling along the dusty, mossy ground inside her lair.

After I tuck her head into the oiled leather bag I brought with me, I take in my surroundings. The lair looks old and sad and gray. It smells of mold and that same musk scent.

Something moves at the end of the corridor, stirring in the small room I had seen there. I raise the gun and stop when I see the small figure, the same soft wings but smaller; coiled serpent hair tight about the head. Little more than a girl. The creature's offspring. What she was protecting.

I suppress a shudder, as sadness and weariness settle hard into my bones. Then I leave as quickly as I came, my prize, the head of the Gorgon, slapping against my leg.

\*\*\*

My mount doesn't spook at the additional weight or the nature of my trophy. It is, after all, a cousin, of sorts. The Pegasari descend from Medusa's child, after all. My Ariadne doesn't do anything but ruffle her mane the way she always does. She's a fine mount, a gift I couldn't refuse from a man I would.

She gives a trot then a little jump, and her great wings unfurl and flap and we soar into the air. Back. Back to where I must make my stand.

Clytos is of the Blood Olympos, tracing his family lineage back to Poseidon, less than five generations back. A captain of the Hellenic Fleet, he is at the moment leading a successful campaign against the barbarians of the Ebony Coast.

And he wants me.

Were he a simple soldier, I could have rebuffed him, but one of the Olympos.... They have godsblood in their veins. They are used to getting what they want.

When last we met, Clytos asked me what gift would be suitable for a woman of my exquisite beauty. His words. So I named it. I named a horse of the Pegasari, thinking it beyond him, a man of the sea. But Ariadne is real and strong beneath me.

A few hours later, with me maneling at her endurance, Ariadne puts me down in the city. The streets of New Knossos are filled with people from all corners of the Empire. Skin as dark as volcanic rock and as light and freckled as a doe's belly. Soldiers, slaves, traders, musicians, they all swarm through the labyrinthine streets, the city's blood pumped through by its powerful urban heart.

I wind my way through them, cradling the oilskin bag in my arms. A priestess of Aphrodite sells perfumes and oils and love potions. Across the street, a man sells goats for sacrifice. I do little more than glance at them as I pass by. And hold my nose.

Shuddering and coughing, a steam conveyance crosses the street in front of me, belching smoke from the twin stacks mounted on its back. The driver, a tall dark-skinned Asiatic man, pushes levers and pulls on switches, keeping it moving.

At last I reach Hieronymus' workshop, and the ticking of gears greets my ears as I enter the room. Hieronymus is said to be blessed by Hephaestus, and it doesn't seem to be boast alone. His workshop is filled with wondrous creations of brass and gears, of steam and steel. He is faced away from me, bent over some new project of his, his red-brown hair hanging about his face. He is thin and lithe, and even there, working, his movements are fluid and precise.

I toss the mirrored glasses upon the counter. "You know you're likely to go blind without more light in here," I say.

"There are, perhaps, other ways I'd go blind first," he says, his voice full of humor. He tosses something to me over his back. I catch it out of reflex, a small silver orb. It ticks in my hand, tick-tock, tick-tock. I'm about to ask him what it is, when the ticking stops and the orb unfurls, revealing petals that spiral open to form a metallic flower that gleams and grows until it stands, beautiful and bright, in my hand.

"Did the glasses work?" Hieronymus turns at last to look at me, dark goggles covering his eyes. His face is smeared with grease where he's rubbed it.

"Until they were knocked off," I say. "Here. You can have them back."

He shakes his head. "No, keep them." He stands up and comes up to me, curling my fingers around the glasses. His hands are warm, mine cold. The difference seems to create a charge. He holds my hand for just a moment too long, then lets go.

I flush. "What am I going to do with these?" I say. "My task is done." I left the bag for emphasis.

"Is that...?"

"Yes."

He winces.

"She attacked me. I had no choice." I look away. "She had a child. She was protecting it."

He pulls the goggles from his head, ruffling his hair. I hold the bag forward. He opens it hesitantly, almost tenderly. He peers in, then pulls back, covering his nose from the smell.

"I know you've smelled worse than that," I say.

"Machine smells are one thing. Animal smells..."

"She wasn't an animal." My voice stills him. He nods.

"Do you really think this will work?" he says.

No one other than Hieronymus knows what I intend to do. I trust no one else to know. His question stirs up all my doubts, my fears, my desperation, but I push them back down, out of my mind's sight. "It's all I have."

"Well, that and a flying horse." He grins, and I want to grin with him. "How did she ride?"

"Like a dream," I say. And then I do smile. We stand like that, both beaming at each other, and suddenly the moment passes into awkwardness.

"The mask?" I say.

"Already completed. It should be delivered today."

I thank him, then turn to go.

"Don't forget your glasses," he says.

I open my mouth to protest.

His fingers find my hand, squeeze it. "I made them for you," he says. "They're fitted to your face." I recall him doing so, his face very close to mine, his breath warm on my skin, his fingers light upon my face, the smell of oil. "I can't reuse them. Not without ruining them."

I sigh and pick them up. They have no purpose, but I take them anyway.

"Good luck, Naima," he says.

\*\*\*

On my way back to my tenement, I hear people talking of the fleet returning. Of the ships being sighted by fishing vessels off the coast. My time is running short. I quicken my pace. I take Ariadne on one last task. One that has been weighing on me since I left the Gorgon's home. It is a foolish thing, perhaps, something I might regret, but it is a tangle in a weave I wanted to be smooth. Then, once home, I bathe, pouring heated water into the great brass basin. It scalds me as I lower myself into it, but it's the way I prefer it. The water covers me. Not the sea, not Poseidon's domain, but drawn from springs deep in the earth. I let it soak me, hoping that it will wash me clean of the filth. Clean of the blood. But that, I know, is harder to shed.

When I am done bathing, I dress in a long, sheer gown, so different from my shirt and trousers. But it is what he will expect, and I do not want to alert him from the start.

He is no fool, that is certain. He was already a wise ship captain when I was just a girl. I recall him coming to the house when I was a small thing. I was surprised that someone of such an entourage and with such carriage knew my mother. He bent down, as if assessing me, and I remember being bothered by the look he gave me.

Then he spoke to my mother. Despite my discomfort at his expression, it was the expression on her face, after he left, that disturbed me even more. For years afterward he would send me gifts from his travels on the sea. Every few years, between campaigns, he would stop by to see us and each time, that same assessing look. As if I were a horse that he were grooming for a race.

No, he had too much experience to be taken in easily. And so I would need to be smart. As smart as Hieronymus.

cream is far off. Another world. Another time.

Clytos will come soon, dressed in his finery, his head high, shoulders back, a proud member of a proud race. I have often wondered what it must be like to live as one of the Blood Olympos, with the blood of gods in your veins. What it must be to have the world at your feet, to want for nothing, to get whatever your heart desires. To know little fear. For it is a death sentence to kill one of the Blood Olympos. A crime to draw the blood of the gods.

I light candles, prepare the jug of wine. Bowls of grapes, figs and olives rest on the table, awaiting my lord's pleasure.

He comes. Soon.

\*\*\*

I lift the Gorgon's head and remember my mother as she lay dying in her bed. The apothecaries and sages had all come, had all left saying there was nothing they could do.

My mother would die.

I pleaded with her. "Why don't you ask the aid of Clytos? Even if he can't cure you, he can certainly make your hours more bearable."

She shook her head. "You don't know what you ask of me."

"I don't understand."

"There will be a price." She reached out with trembling, clammy hands to grip my face. "That price is you."

"Mother..."

"He has desired you from the start. From when he saw you as a child. But he can not have you."

I pressed her hands down. Stroked her lank hair. "I will refuse him. I do not want him."

"You don't understand," she said. "You would not be able to refuse. He is of the Blood Olympos. But he is something much worse...."

"Worse?"

Tears welled in her eyes, spilled down onto her wan cheeks. I clutched for her hand.

"He is your father."

Achill threaded through my chest, seizing my breath. "What?"

"He came to me long ago. When I was newly upon these shores, and had little to my name. He was taken with my beauty, or so he said. So different. And he helped me, gifts, favors. And he was already powerful then. At first I was overcome by his attentions. Then... then I feared his disfavor. He has a cruel streak, as they all do, those who hold the world in their grip. But by then I was pregnant with you and so... and so I endured until he grew bored with me."

I gripped the bed upon which she lay, as if to reassure myself of my surroundings. "But if he is my father...."

"He is Olympos. That matters little to him. You are something new. Something different. Something that has attracted his fancy. He has waited a long time, but he will only wait so long. And you are old enough."

My mouth was dry. I thought I tasted the bitterness of the herbs my mother breathed for her condition.

She gripped my arm with her bony hand. "Do not let him have you," she said. "Promise me."

"I promise," I said.

Later that night, while my mother slept in fitful sleep, I sent a message to Clytos. I told him that I needed his help. And offered to meet him.

Unfortunately, he was away at sea, but he sent a message back, swiftly accomplished, as one with access to Hermes' kin can. I asked him to help my mother, to do what he could to ease her suffering. He asked, in return, if he could call on me. With this my only hope, I acquiesced.

My mother's pain vanished, but three weeks later, she died. Clytos's physicians did what they could, but there was no stopping her sickness.

After her death, he arranged for her funeral rites. He came to the funeral procession, embraced me and gave his apologies. "I'm sorry there wasn't more that I could do," he said. "But I eased her suffering and her spirit will be cared for in the Underworld. I've seen to that."

"Thank you," was all I could manage.

He placed his hands on my shoulders and locked eyes with me. His irises were the blue of the ocean. "I will give you one year to grieve," he said. "Then I will come for you."

I nodded. I had sought this, after all.

"Until then," he said.

His touch on my face as he said those words lingered long after he had walked away.

I can feel it still.

\*\*\*

I prepared myself for what would happen once the year was over. What else could I do? I made the bargain knowing full well what the price was. He had done what he could to help her. What choice did I have?

I helped put my mother's affairs in order. I organized her belongings. It was then that I came across the lacquered box and the small scrap of parchment upon it. I recognized Clytos's writing from the many gifts I had received as a child. But I had never known him to send my mother anything.

The box contained a packet of worn letters and an empty bottle. I couldn't help myself. I untied the string that bound the vellum pages and began to read.

Love letters. Letters praising my mother, her beauty, her exoticness. Her fire. *I burn with the memory of your touch. I am pierced by the arrow of your love.*

Clytos was no poet, but they did show passion, evidence that he had once cared for her, or at least was caught by obsession. A tempest of emotions swirled through me at these words from the man who was my father. My mother's lover, who would be mine as well.

The letters stopped some time before my birth, but the last was dated far later, when my mother was sick. It read, "I was gazing at the waves, from a cliff on the Asiatic Sea. And I thought of you. Here is the juice from these foreign shores in memory of the time we once shared. Drink it and lose some of these long years."

The barest hint of reddish residue darkened the clear bottle at the bottom of the box. I removed it and tucked it into my satchel and headed into the city. There, I found the apothecary who had helped with my mother's illness. "Can you tell me what was once in this?" I said.

"I can try," he said. "It might take some time."

"I still have some of that left," I said.

On the way out I bumped into a man, his red-brown hair tumbled into his eyes, working some contraption in the shop.

"Sorry," he said, his brown eyes starting.

"It's okay," I said. "What is that you're working on?"

"Steam-powered stirring device. For potions and elixirs," he said.

"That sounds fancy," I said.

"Sounds like progress to me," he said. And smiled. Like a strong light in the eyes, it took that smile some time to fade from my mind.

The apothecary called me back a week or so later and I stared at him eagerly as he held up the bottle. "Where did you say this was from again?" he said.

I shrugged. "Some foreign shore."

He rubbed the edge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. "Well... I don't know exactly what this is, but..."

"But what?"

"I found the presence of alkalis. They... they were the same kind we found in your mother. The same kind that killed her."

I gripped the edge of the counter, though whether out of rage or to hold myself up, I didn't know. The world receded from me then, and a shroud of darkness descended onto me.

When it cleared, I was staring into those warm brown eyes. "Are you well?" the man said.

I managed to nod. "I just had a shock," I said. Then the tears came and I cursed myself for them. My shoulders shuddered and my fists clenched at my sides.

The man, who was Hieronymus, held me close and weathered the worst of the shuddering. "It's going to be fine," he said. "Everything's going to be fine." I didn't know how, but I believed him.

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The sound of horse hooves on the path bring me back from the depths of recollection. I walk to the window and see Clytos dismounting. He is alone. His normal retinue have been left behind to give us some privacy.

I open the door for him and stand in the doorway, lit by the candles behind me. He comes toward me, smiling. His face is more weathered since I've last seen him, bronzed by the sun and buffed by the wind. He stands before me, a half head taller. I place a hand on the side of his face and kiss him. This man who is my father. Then I take him by the hand and pull him in.

"This is a warm welcome," he says, placing his cloak and sword across a chair. Taking in the candles and the burning herbs.

"That was my intention," I say. "Wine?"

He nods and takes up one of the cups, drinks deep. The hair on the sides of his head has the barest hint of grey, the first real signs of age I've seen in him.

"There are gifts, too," I say.

"Gifts? For me? I thought I was the one who brought the gifts." He says the last with a hint of mockery in his voice.

"Well, you've been away for months," I say. "And I have grown some in that time. And I thought that you should have something worthy. Especially after your last gift."

"Ah, the Pegasari," he says. "That was a dear gift. But well spent, I think."

"She is beautiful. And wondrous. But I have brought you something rarer, I think."

His eyes scan the room and rest on metal box. His eyebrows raise and I nod. He strides toward it and lifts the lid slowly, tenderly. A limp snake head tumbles free. He pulls back. "Is this...?"

"A Gorgon? Yes," I say. "One of the last of its kind."

He looks at me, his face serious. "You killed it?"

"I did."

"You are full of surprises."

"Open it all the way."

He smiles and shakes his head. "What do you take me for?"

"Fine, I will," I say and move past him to open the lid. I pull out the Gorgon's head, now adorned with the mask that Hieronymus made for me. The bronze cast shows her face just as it was but protects us from her still powerful gaze. My finger grazes against the catch on one upper corner, depresses it.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

"Fascinating," Clytos says. "And what am I to do with this?"

"I thought you might mount it on the prow of your ship. And reveal it when you close on your enemies."

Asmiles dawns across his face. "A wonderful gift. Or is it a bargaining piece?"

"No, my lord," I say. "Just a symbol of my gratitude. For what you did for my mother." I point to the urn that holds her ashes, sitting on the mantel.

He smiles again, crueler this time, and places his hand on my throat, his fingers curling around my neck. Then he kisses me. Hard. His grip tight. I taste copper as his teeth find my lip, drawing blood.

"Your mother was so fierce when I first knew her," he says, looking at the urn. "Wild. But she was tamed." He turns to look at me. "By the city. By her circumstance."

"Except where it concerned you. Then she was as savage as any she-wolf with a cub to protect." He steps closer, looks me in the eyes. "I think she would have even battled the gods for your sake."

"She loved me," I say.

He nods. "You are so beautiful." I can see the hunger in his eyes. The mounting passion.

"There is one last gift," I say, mindful of my time dwindling.

He looks at me, intrigued. "I thought you were my last gift."

Not a gift. A prize. I shake my head. I remove the lacquered box from its shelf and hold it out to him.

He frowns. "What is that?" he asks.

"Don't you recognize it, my lord? You sent it to my mother."

He shrugs. "So I did. What of it?"

I hold it out to him. "Open it." He hesitates. "Please, my lord."

He stands up and walks toward me, the irritation plain on his face. With one hand, he raises the cover, sees the glass bottle. Then he lets the cover drop. "So? Why trifle me with this? Now?"

"Because I know of the poison," I say. I keep my eyes on him. I will not look away.

His face twists in rage. One hand, the same to us to the boxel, shoots to again by the throat. Pain sparks up into my jaw, fueled by the Blood Olympos, is staggering. Lines from the letters he sent to my mother dance in my head. *You steal my breath from me; I shall hold my breath 'till we meet again; I am breathless...* I am breathless.

He forces me down. My vision streaks with black. My eyes bulge. His erection is still there, surging with his violence. I force my hands down from where they scabble at his choking claw and I strike. I punch and claw and pull. His grip lessens and I wrench away from him, sucking in great gobs of air. I turn to the gorgon's head, but its blank bronze eyes stare back at me. Lifeless.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

Clytos is back on me in an instant, a single tear on his cheek the only sign of the pain I caused. His hand grips me once again. Stronger. Harder. I wonder if Hieronymus has failed me. And then I think that I will never see him again. Never feel the light of his smile, or feel his strong fingers on my skin.

Adick sounds and I close my eyes, tight, though they can barely see, and I feel Clytos release me and I sag to the ground. Hieronymus' mask and its embedded clockwork mechanism will have fallen away now. Clytos will have looked at it. Clytos will be...

I hear him chuckle.

I open my eyes to see the Gorgon head lolling in front of my bedroom, tossed, no doubt, by Clytos' god-strong hands.

His eyes burn into me. "What exquisite treachery," he says. "But I will have you. Then I will kill you. For you are mine and always have been." He wrenches at my hair and pulls me up, almost snapping my neck like an olive branch.

Movement attracts my eyes. The soft flutter of downy wings near my bedroom door. The small shape, the tangle in my weave, the orphan I fetched from the Gorgon's lair, bends down, one small hand reaching out for the head. Her mother's head. Now cruelly used.

Tears blur my sight.

Clytos notices my attention, follows my gaze.

The young Gorgon lifts her head and I catch anger in the crinkle of her mouth and chin.

*For when I see you, my eyes shall drink you in....*

I look at Clytos' face, not the girl's. Never the girl's. His eyes widen and he knows, then, in that moment, that he is undone.

His skin pales, and he is unnaturally still. He begins to turn grey, his bronzed skin hardening and shifting to stone.

In a moment, it is done, and he is a statue in my parlor. One hand encircles my throat, now with stony certainty. Another curls around my arm, holding me fast in violent embrace. That I can suck in a thin trickle of air does nothing to still the panic that rises in me.

I am trapped, and the statue that is now Clytos will not move no matter how I push and pull at him. He may kill me yet, I think. Though now I can go to the Underworld with my accounts settled. Now I will see my mother... Thoughts of my mother remind me of the young Gorgon, and I see her tear-streaked face in my mind as she cradles her mother's severed head.

I plant my feet and push. And push. And push until I'm sure my head will burst and my breath-starved muscles will strip apart.

Then I am falling, and Clytos's stone form is falling, and we both crash to the ground in our frozen embrace. Then I am rolling free, Clytos's hand still around my neck, clinging to me, crushing me.

*I can not escape you...*

Then the pressure eases and I suck in breath, greedily, at the air like water in a desert.

I hear the flutter of wings and know that the girl has saved me. Has saved the killer of her mother. I scabble for the mirrored glasses, where they lie on the table. Where they were meant for her mother's gaze. I fit them to my face.

She stares up at me, wide-eyed. Her little hand still hovers near Clytos's arm, where she somehow released me, crumbling his fingers to dust. Then she extends that hand to me.

Tears blurring my sight, I reach for her and take her hand.

\* \* \*

I bury Clytos on my mother's land, together with his letters. He may yet be found, but not easily.

Still, they will come looking for him, and so I must not be here when they arrive. I pack my things, gathering the few objects the hold meaning for me. Then, with the child alongside me, now hooded, I move to Ariadne.

Hieronymus is waiting for me at the horse. "The Blood Olympos," he says.

"Was not spilled."

"By either of you," he adds.

"I would give it away if I could."

He grabs my hand. His touch is so unlike Clytos's, confident but kind. Warm. "No. You must make them take it from you."

I kiss him, and inhale the scent of him, taste him. Breathe him. Then I take him with one hand, the hand of the girl in my other, and together we walk away from a world of stone.

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## THE CASTLE THAT JACK BUILT

by Emily Gilman

Jack stood high on his one thin, wooden leg and stared at the horizon. He had stood in this same spot since early spring, and his button eyes never blinked, and so by this point he had become intimately familiar with his personal patch of sky and with the acres of fields that stretched out in every direction, all of it gone to seed. He didn't know what sorts of seeds—he knew very little about plants at all except those that were useful in building—but even he could tell that the field looked sad, forgotten and untended. Just like him.

He had been so very tired when they came to him and said that they were sorry but they couldn't just let him go, not with all that he knew and the enemy still out there somewhere—both the betrayer and the one who directed her... And of course he had understood. He didn't want them to let him go. What he wanted, he told them, was to live out the rest of his days somewhere quiet, away from people and the temptation to speak, where he might watch the sky.

He thought the bears had smiled, though that might just have been wishful thinking; certainly they had looked at each other for a moment, and then they turned back to him. Yes, they said, that much we can do, and it is little enough payment for your services.

And they had turned him into a scarecrow.

Sure, it had gotten boring after a while, but it was also peaceful, and never needing to sleep gave one a lot of time to learn to read the sky, and then, rain and heat and wind and cold didn't really bother him anymore. All in all, the birds and the wind in the trees weren't bad company, and whenever he caught himself wishing he could go back to being a man, he remembered the bears, and the masterpiece he had built them, and the secret at its heart that he must never, ever reveal.

But then one day, when most of the leaves had fallen and evening came early, the wind changed. It changed just before sunset and blew all night long, coming from every direction like it didn't know who it was or where it was supposed to be going and was trying to make up for it in sheer exuberance.

And then, just as the sun was rising in the morning, it changed once more: all at once it blew hard from the south—but strangely cold for a south wind—and so sharply and suddenly that he thought at first he had finally been knocked over. It took him a few minutes (probably—his scarecrow sense of time was not one that lent itself to such measurements) to realize that he hadn't been blown over at all: he'd been blown out.

Jack looked up at the faded, battered scarecrow, still tall and proud on its seemingly fragile prop, and then looked down at his own hands. They looked solid enough, but he felt thin, and he would have sworn that the wind kept blowing *through* him, even as it drew him north.

"Well," he said, but he didn't know what else to say after that, so he fell silent. Well. He longed to just stand there, as (he felt) he always had, but something about being so near the ground made him uneasy, and in the end he began tottering, and then eventually walking, in the direction the wind wanted him to go.

\* \* \*

He walked until it was too dark to see the ground in front of him, and then he crouched down among the roots of a tree to wait for moonrise. The closeness of the dirt frightened him, though. He could only hold out for a minute or two before he scrambled up the tree, moving by feel and much too quickly so that he kept scraping his hands and arms against the rough bark.

Finally he sat straddled across the lowest branch big enough to support his weight and he leaned back so the trunk of the tree pressed against his spine, solid and stately. This was what he was meant to be; he closed his eyes and wished he could melt into the living wood that supported him, of which his scarecrow had been only a pale reflection.

He might have stayed there like that forever, but the wind kept tugging at him and whispering strange sounds in his ears. Finally a sudden gust managed to yank him away from the tree trunk. It startled him into opening his eyes, and as he grabbed the branch in front of him to keep from falling he saw a tiny golden light flicker in the distance. It took him a moment to remember that fire could be something other than the devourer of wood and straw, but in that time his body had already remembered and started climbing down from the tree, and the wind danced around him like a pleased child.

It was slow going, scrambling over roots and rocks and fallen branches almost entirely by feel and with only a small, far-off fire to guide him. By the time he reached the clearing he'd focused so much of his attention into his sense of touch that the sudden open space caught him unaware. The shift to flat, unobstructed footing confounded him more than the transition from land to sea or sea to land ever had; he stumbled, loudly, and so the fire's keeper saw him well before he saw her.

Jack saw the keeper and her knife at the same moment, but he registered the knife first and froze; his hands, which had been extended to catch him if he fell, shifted slightly upward in a remembered gesture that said, I am weaponless, don't attack me. The knife didn't move, nor did the hand that held it, and so Jack's attention moved slowly away up her arm and to her face, which flickered in the shifting light from the fire. She was dirty from travel, and she watched him so intently that he thought she might be the first human he'd met who could stare down a mountain lion.

As he studied her he realized that she appeared neither panicked, nor lost, nor as... she *did* look young, to him, but experienced. And it was this impression of capability that gave him the nerve to say, quietly but distinctly, "Hello."

"Hello," she said. She did not move.

"I saw your fire," Jack said, "and hoped... I was going to wait for moonrise to keep going, but then I saw your fire and I thought it would be good, you know. To have company." He hoped she knew; *he* hadn't known until he said it.

She frowned, and his heart (about which he'd completely forgotten until now) beat faster and louder in his chest. "Where did you come from?" she asked.

He paused for a moment, thinking, and then waved vaguely behind himself. "A clearing back that way, somewhere. At least, I hope it's back that way, that I haven't gotten turned around..."

"Where are your supplies?" she interrupted.

Now Jack frowned. "Supplies?" But of course he ought to have supplies: warm clothes for after dark, and a flint or matches, and food, and water, and something to sleep in. He was human again, wasn't he? He ought to have eaten at least *once* during a full day of walking.

"What are you?" the girl asked, and when she met her eyes again she saw fear there for the first time, mingled with pity. "I was a man," he said, and remembered walking down stone corridors into stone rooms that he'd first created as lines on paper. "An architect. And then I was a scarecrow. I don't know what I am now—I think I'm meant to be a man again, but..."

They stood for a moment, and the only sounds were the sighing of trees in the wind and the crackle of the fire. And then she relaxed—not completely, but enough to give him hope—and said, "You'll probably be more comfortable if you can find a rock or a log to sit on." Jack lowered his hands and took one careful step forward, then another, and in a few more steps he stood near enough to feel the warmth of the fire. "Thank you," he said. She nodded, and said nothing, but after he'd stood there for several minutes with no sign of moving except to change which side of him was nearest the fire, she asked, "Aren't you going to sit?" "No, thank you," he said. "I'm used to standing." And *I don't seem to get tired*, he thought, but decided it was better left unmentioned. Upon reflection, however, he added, "My name's Jack." Once again she nodded and said nothing, but that was all right. She had shared her fire with him; his name was all he had to offer in return.

Jack stood, balanced between the heat of the fire and the cold wind that had driven him to it, until long after the girl had fallen asleep. All night he watched the stars—the handful of them he could see through the tossing branches above him—while the wind seemed to blow him snatches of memory: a woman with short, bronze-colored curls and a sudden smile. A place he thought must be a banquet hall, where all the guests were bears. Other places, other rooms, where he sat working late into the night. Even the girl who had allowed him to share her fire, though that couldn't be right because he saw her in a rich dress, standing next to some sort of wall hanging, and he was certain he'd never met her before.

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Jack was surprised at how quickly they broke camp in the morning. He of course had nothing to eat or to pack, but he hadn't quite expected the single-minded efficiency with which his companion did everything, from packing her things to chewing her food. Before he knew it she'd finished, and their eyes met, and he saw her hesitate for the first time all morning.

"Where are you headed?" she asked. He hesitated a moment himself, and realized he was waiting for the wind to push or pull him in some direction. The air was still, though, and he had to answer, "I don't know." She frowned slightly. "I'm looking for a friend of mine," she said slowly. "I'm not sure who you are or where you're from, but I don't like the idea of leaving you alone in the middle of the woods. No offense, but I get the impression you could use some looking after. If you'd care to travel with me for a while..." Jack smiled. "Thank you. I'd like that, as long as I won't be in your way."

Her laughter surprised him even more than her efficiency had; nothing about her bearing, or the way she'd held a knife the previous night, had prepared him for that sudden burst of joyful sound. "Be in the way? You walk all day without needing to stop for food or water, you don't get cold, and unless I'm very much mistaken you don't need to sleep. How could you possibly get in the way?" Jack's cheeks felt warm, and he realized he must be blushing, but he didn't know what to do besides mumble "Thank you" again and wait for her to lead the way.

She hesitated a moment longer, though, and then held out her hand to him. "My name's Greta." Her skin was warm against his, and soft and tough at the same time, and he felt it again—that flash of recognition. He saw her in heavy red velvet, with torches set into rough stone behind her. She frowned a question at him; he'd held her hand too long, and now he dropped it abruptly and forced what he hoped was a polite smile. "Which way?" "North," Greta said, fishing in one of her pockets. Her hand reappeared wrapped around a small metal object: a compass, he saw, as she flipped it open and waited for the needle to settle. The lid looked like it had either been engraved or badly scratched, but he couldn't tell which, and before he could make up his mind or get a closer look she flipped it shut and it disappeared back into the same pocket. "This way," she said, nodding to her right, and they set out.

They hiked in silence at first, but after a while Greta asked, "You said you were an architect?" Jack nodded. "What did you build?" An image: pages of plans; lists of materials; a hand, which must have been his own, ink-stained and steady as he guided a pen along the side of a straightedge. "I don't think I built things, exactly, so much as designed them..."

Greta nodded. "What did you design, then?" Jack frowned. "Houses, I think?" "You think?"

"My memory's kind of... fuzzy," he said slowly. "But I remember houses, and town halls, and churches..." He stopped short at a sudden image of white stone reaching toward the sky, and so many bears working. "The castle," he breathed without thinking.

"Were you good?" Greta asked. "Yes," he said, and of this he was certain. "I was very good. My buildings are... lucky. No thieves, no mice, no storms, no fires..." The words had come to him; he knew their truth only when he heard himself say them. He felt her eyes on him, intensely curious, and he mumbled quickly, "Not magic or anything, just lucky." Lucky enough that the bears had come to him when tragedy struck.

But she kept staring at him, excited, and then she surprised him by asking, "Were you the one who built..." She frowned. "It wasn't a castle, exactly, and parts were built into a mountain, but—" Her voice seemed almost to catch on the words.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, I don't think I ever designed anything like that." But if not, he wondered, then why could he picture rough stone walls, low ceilings, and torches shining off of red velvet, brown silk, and fur? "So," he asked after a few minutes had passed in silence, "what happened to your friend? The one you're looking for?" Greta's whole body went tense; when she spoke she tried to sound casual, but her voice had an edge to it. "What makes you think something happened to him?" Jack said carefully, "You said you were looking for him. I thought he might be missing, or... maybe you just fell out of touch?" "Well," Greta said coldly, "in any case it doesn't concern you."

They didn't speak again until much later, when Greta stopped suddenly. "It's noon," she said. "We should rest for a bit, and eat." Jack nodded, though he didn't particularly feel the need to do either. Greta hesitated when she saw that he didn't intend to eat. "Do you know any stories?" she asked. He started, surprised by the question, and began to shake his head, but even as he did an image came to mind, and he heard his voice as if it came from far away: "Once there was a girl who had been trapped in an evil witch's house. It was close and dark and full of candles and mirrors and secret passages, and she was always afraid. But then one day she escaped."

Greta had started eating; he thought perhaps she was more comfortable if he wasn't just watching her. The story was catching him up, though, and words and images came faster and faster as he spoke: "At first she just ran and ran, to get as far away as she could, but no one was chasing her, and then she looked up at the sky. Off in the distance she could see a bank of clouds, but they weren't like any clouds she'd seen before: they made her think of the colors in a pool of oil, or images she'd seen of the Northern Lights, except that they were clearly clouds and not anything else. They felt *wrong*, but at the same time they were very beautiful, and she couldn't make up her mind whether she wanted a closer look.

"What decided her was the wind: she stared at those clouds until the wind turned to blow into her face, and she smelled salt. Now, this girl had grown up by the sea. She would recognize that smell anywhere—that smell meant *home*—and after being trapped and scared for so long, *home* was irresistible. Her feet started walking before she realized she'd decided anything, and even though she got hungry and thirsty and tired, she kept walking until the whole sky above her was full of swirling, glowing clouds of all different colors and the ground beneath her turned to pure white sand.

"At last she came to the sea. The waves seemed sluggish and glistened dully, like liquid pewter. She felt heavy and slow, and a little bit queasy whenever she looked too long at the sea or the sky. The air still smelled clean and salty, though, so she stayed, and crouched down from time to time to run her fingers through the soft, soft sand, and tried to think what to do.

"Finally she saw another person. He wasn't actually very far away, but he was dressed like a knight, and the metal plates of his armor reflected the shifting colors beyond and above him so that he seemed to disappear. Even walking toward him she had to pay close attention to make sure she didn't drift too far one way or the other.

"She thought at first that he had sensed her approaching and started to speak, but the longer she listened the less sure she was. 'Always I see them on the horizon,' he said, 'but they never sail closer. At first I wanted them to stay away, but I have found Him, now, and the waiting grows weary. Yes, I can see them, on their little ships so far away, crawling like ants over the wooden boards. And I can see beyond them, to my city. Its towers glitter in the sun and the flags and pennants dance like warhorses who know the battle is coming. I will return, carrying God within me, and my people will rejoice, for with Him we will conquer any enemy..."

"The longer he talked the more fearful she grew, until finally she took a step backward and started to turn away. But she froze when he said suddenly, 'Wait! Please...?' And then the knight turned, and the girl stared in horror because his eyes were like holes that had been filled in with twin pools of whatever it was that churned in the sky. 'When will they come for me?' he asked her, his voice pleading. 'I have waited so long—I have found God—when will they come for me? I am ready to return home..."

"She ran. Even faster than she had ran away from the witch, she ran away from the strange, eyeless knight, so fast that at times she wondered if she was actually flying over the sand..." Jack fell silent, staring with his mind's eye at the strange seashore, and after a moment Greta asked quietly, "What happened next?"

Jack blinked, and the images of the story faded to be replaced by the forest; Greta's hands, empty of food now; Greta's frown. "I don't remember," he said slowly. "It's been a long time, since..." A new image appeared before him, one of the woman with curly hair. Her hands darted like birds as she spoke, and her eyes glittered with the story she told. He started to say a name, but he couldn't remember. All he could do was say again, "It's been a long time..."

He could feel Greta's eyes on him, but he couldn't bring himself to turn and meet her gaze. At last she said, "I heard a storyteller perform once, before... but it's been a very long time for me, too. You remind me of her a little, though." She paused, and then added casually, "I'd be curious to hear the rest, if you remember it," before rising to her feet. "We should get moving again."

"Yes," he said, but after that neither of them spoke, just concentrated on walking. He knew there was more to the story he'd told Greta. Not just later, not just the forgotten ending; he had vague memories of a reason the girl had been trapped, reasons her captor was evil that had nothing to do with her being a witch.

And he kept seeing the strange knight's face hovering before his own, terrible and sad. He knew that if the knight returned home there would be war and bloodshed and that whatever madness had seeped into his soul was not God. But even when he had been telling Greta the story he had heard a woman's voice behind his, and it was the heartbreak in *her* voice that told him that the knight was lost and that he should pity the poor man who must never return home.

And perhaps because of the knight's face, or because he was remembering the woman's voice, he pictured her again. She wore deep brown silk cut with a blue that brought out her eyes, and she looked straight at him and said, "She has no idea, and if he keeps on like this I'm afraid—" But then she turned and smiled at one of the bears, and never finished the sentence.

It took Jack a moment to realize Greta had stopped. She was consulting her compass, and he asked, "Did we get off course?"

"No... just making sure." But she was frowning at the little piece of metal and glass. Something made him reach out a hand. "May I?" he asked, and after a second's hesitation she handed it to him. It took him a moment to decipher the markings, but then he read: *A— In case you lose North*, and something he decided was meant to be a heart, and then G.

"Is G for Greta?" he asked at last, confused why she would have the compass if it were. She nodded. "It was a joke," she said. "It took me forever to find my way around, and he couldn't figure out why. Finally he realized that I couldn't just tell which direction was North and know from that where I was, so then I showed him my compass. It fascinated him so much that it ended up finding something to carve that with and giving it to him. And then he—and the compass and I got left behind."

Jack watched her as she spoke, saw the smile tugging quietly at one corner of her mouth and the light that came on in her eyes when she spoke and disappeared abruptly when she stopped. He looked once more at the compass and then handed it back to her.

They were both quiet the rest of the day. Even setting up camp and building a fire they barely spoke except to say "Goodnight" when Greta crawled into her sleeping roll. Jack sat, his back against the largest log they'd found, and closed his eyes—not to sleep, but to remember.

Immediately he pictured the woman again. A different memory this time, if it was even memory—he couldn't be sure. But he saw her standing at the top of a hill, bronze curls dancing in the wind and a worn maroon shawl wrapped tightly about her body. *She's too thin*, he thought, *her shoulder blades shouldn't stick out like that*—but then she turned and for a moment he couldn't even think around the joy of seeing her again after so long.

Only for a moment, though. Then he noticed the faint creases lining her forehead and the dark circles under her sky-blue eyes. Fear struck him as suddenly as happiness had, and he knew that he should know why she was so thin and tired and sad, but he couldn't remember. He tried to step backward, but his legs refused to move, and he knew all at once that they'd been turned to stone, and it wouldn't be long before he was stone all over.

Frantic, he looked around for some clue, but all he could see was the sky, shadowed now by the pain in his love's eyes, and then away below them a partly finished building—a castle, he realized suddenly, made of glittering white stone, and just as he recognized the castle he knew that the tiny figures working there must be bears...

He turned back around, but the woman had disappeared, and he woke with a question, half-formed but unasked, melting away to nothing on his tongue. Only one small sweetness remained, but it made the dream and the question bearable: *Nancy*, he breathed when he first opened his mouth, and smiled a small, quiet smile to himself. Nancy. He remembered her name.

Greta cried softly in her sleep, and Jack moved automatically to comfort her. His body was too stiff, though, from having sat on the ground all night, and the rustle of leaves as he fell sideways was enough to wake Greta. Her eyes snapped open; Jack thought they glittered strangely, and he heard her breathe in quick, shallow gasps, but she blinked rapidly and her breathing slowed and by the time he righted himself he couldn't be sure quite what he'd seen or heard.

Still, after a moment's hesitation, he asked, "Are you all right?" "Strange dreams," she said, frowning absently. "I saw him... he was sleeping, and I tried to wake him up, because if I could wake him up then everything would be all right. But he wouldn't wake and he wouldn't wake and the wax had turned red and kept growing, like a wound, but he wouldn't wake up..."

"Who wouldn't?" Jack murmured, but already he was thinking of a young man with some strange, waxy substance that poisoned anyone it touched growing across his chest—a young man he had first met as a bear.... The wind was playing with Greta's hair. She tucked a strand of it behind her ear, but the wind tugged it out and tossed it again almost immediately. "Who couldn't you wake?" Jack asked.

Greta opened her mouth, but no sound came out. At first Jack thought she simply couldn't decide how to answer, but then anger swept over her features like a sudden storm and she muttered a string of curses too quiet for him to follow. Finally she spat out. "My friend. The one I'm looking for. But it was just a stupid dream, because I will find him and I will make things right." More quietly—quietly enough that he shouldn't have been able to hear her, except that the wind carried her voice to him—she added, "Even if he doesn't forgive me, I can at least make things right."

Jack thought again of Nancy's eyes, and the shoulder blades sticking out of her too-thin frame, and he wished that he knew what it was he needed to make right, let alone how to go about doing so. He pictured her again, wind playing with her shawl and hair, but through the memory of Nancy he still saw Greta: packing up her sleeping roll and getting ready to travel, and all the while tucking her hair behind her ear just in time for the wind to pull it free again.

"What's your friend's name?" Jack heard himself ask suddenly, not entirely sure why but knowing that the answer was somehow important, if only he could make it make sense....

Greta glared at him for a second, but then she seemed to recognize him again and her expression softened a little. "I can't tell you that."

What was it? He felt like he was grasping at dust motes and dandelion seeds that he couldn't even see. "You can't tell me?" he asked, "Or you won't tell me?"

"I can't," Greta said, "though I'm not sure I ought to tell you even if I could."

Jack frowned, ran a hand through his hair (and felt a sudden shock of memory at the gesture; it seemed his old habits were coming back to him along with his memories), and sighed. Frowned more, and took a long, slow breath. There. He knew that smell. It was the north, and stone dust, and berries and hazelnuts and the occasional raw fish with baklava for dessert, carried to him by the same wind that had carried him Greta's words, had led him to her in the first place, had forced him out of the scarecrow... had brought him Nancy... had brought Greta her friend?

He had heard rumors, when he was working for the bears, that their prince had fallen in love with a human girl, and that she had been the one to betray him. The prince, the young man who should have been a bear, was the reason why the castle must never fail, the reason why Jack must never speak. Who knew what the girl might do next, or who might be helping her? And with Bernadette, next in line for the principedom, itching to take over and lacking only the proof that Auberon was human or dead to make herself prince instead of regent....

He heard Nancy's voice again: "She has no idea, and if he keeps on like this, I'm afraid—" And he remembered all the times later that Nancy would frown at something the bears said and whisper to him, "I can't believe it. refuse. I saw the way they acted around each other, and I swear she loved him back." Saw Greta in a red dress, in a hall full of bears, a hall he had not designed but had visited, once, with Nancy....

She doesn't know where he is, he realized suddenly. She's got some sense of which direction to look, but that's all, and if I wanted to I could lead her to him right now, or I could make sure that she never, ever reaches him.

"Are you all right?" Jack started, and saw Greta looking at him expectantly; the fire was out and all her things were packed. "Where did you go just now?" she asked.

"Nowhere," he said, and shook his head as if that would clear it. It didn't.

"Well, if you're ready—"

"I am."

"Let's go, then."

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They walked all day, and all day Jack watched Greta. Here was, he thought, the one the bears always referred to as "the betrayer," and right now she was his only friend in the world. He wished he could remember more, or that Nancy were here to help him choose....

After an hour or so Greta changed direction slightly, and Jack heard himself say, "No."

Greta stopped and turned, confused. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm not...." Something was drawing him, tugging gently at his stomach, and he thought in panic, *but I'm not supposed to give away the secret! I should make sure she goes the wrong way!*

She loved him. He had to believe that she loved him. Not just because of what she said about the compass, or what he remembered Nancy saying about her, but because of how real her fear had been when she was still caught in the dream, "It's this way," he said, though still unsure.

Greta frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Jack took another deep breath, and said, "The castle I built for them. To hide him. It's this way."

Her eyes widened, but she didn't argue, just gestured for him to lead.

Nancy, he thought, *let me have chosen right.* And he let the castle draw him to it.

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They arrived with the sunset; the forest had grown thicker all day until suddenly they stepped through and the white stones shone red before them like they were burning. Greta stared up at the huge, glass-smooth structure for a moment before she murmured, "What now? They're not just going to let us walk in."

"No," Jack said, half to himself, "I don't imagine they will...." Something felt off about the castle, something not as he'd built it, but he couldn't put his finger on what....

"Well, is there some sort of side door, or a secret entrance that wouldn't be guarded?"

Jack shook his head. "It wouldn't make a difference whether it's guarded or not, except to me. The things I build... they know, somehow, who should be there and who shouldn't, and the people who shouldn't never find a way in." As he spoke he walked hunched-over along the edge of the woods, studying the castle wall until he spotted what he was looking for: a hair-thin crack he couldn't see but knew was there; the door leading to an escape passage. He smiled slightly. "But I can."

They moved slowly, crouched as low to the ground as they could manage, and he hoped that the combination of fall grass and deepening dusk would be enough to hide them from any watchful eyes. The closer they drew to the castle walls, though, the more Jack felt in his bones that something was very, very wrong here. He didn't understand until he placed a palm beside the secret door and felt a sudden, sharp pain.

"What's wrong?" Greta asked.

"I don't know, it—" He held out his hand a couple of inches away from the wall and thought he could almost hear the stones speak to him in their sleep. *Intruders, they rumbled, invaders, thieves, murderers, spies, little rodents trying to creep in through the cracks, but we won't let them, no, no matter how they might gnaw or dig with little teeth and paws, we will not move and we will not fade, we will stand for centuries without tiring....*

Jack frowned and drew back his hand. "I don't understand," he whispered.

"Don't understand *what?*" Greta hissed back.

"It's... I've never been shut out by one of my buildings before. And I've never felt one so... awake, and lively." He held out his hand again and thought, *it's me. Don't you recognize me? I built you, I'm a friend, please let us in, we mean no harm....*

The rumbling felt louder, and Jack had just enough time to see Greta's eyes widen and to wonder if she felt it too before he heard, *liars, too, trying to convince us they made us! We made ourself, with help from the bears. We directed our own creation—we remember it—and we will not be fooled into betraying our friends who helped us to grow so tall and strong!*

"But I am you," Jack whispered, letting his hand drift just a little bit closer to the wall. "Don't you remember me?"

*You cannot be us,* the stones replied. *We would know. We would remember.*

Slowly, Jack drew away from the wall again and just sat for a few seconds, thinking. He'd expected to get in without any trouble, but now....

"Can you convince it to let us in, or not?" Greta asked, eyeing the castle warily.

"I think so," he murmured.

"So do it now before someone sees us!" she hissed.

"But—"

"Jack!" she interrupted. "Please. I don't know if he's all right, or if I have time to.... Just please, whatever you have to do, if you can get me in there I'll do whatever else needs doing."

He studied her for a moment, the intensity of her gaze and her body cruder to spring into action the moment the door opened, and he realized that any lingering doubts didn't matter. He believed her when she said she loved her friend, and once he believed that, there really wasn't much else to consider.

Jack pressed both his palms flat against the wall and tried to summon the same rumbling voice within himself. *You do know me,* he thought to the stones. *You do remember. You just need a reminder. Poke around all you like until you find what you need, but once you do you'd better start behaving yourself!*

The castle took him at his word: the skin of his palms melted into the stone so that he couldn't have separated himself if he'd tried, and suddenly he could feel all the minerals in his body—calcium in his bones, iron in his blood, bits of other things he couldn't identify—and his ribcage felt as if it were made of marble and breathing might crack it, but he breathed anyway, and he almost thought he could feel his veins branching out into the walls and the floors and the ceiling and his own blood pumping through all of it, and he could follow it from his own heart to the castle's, where Auberon twitched and whimpered in pain and the waxy, translucent something spread across his side, spreading so slowly the movement itself was invisible but he could sense it, could sense the man's pain and couldn't do anything to stop it, and he cried out—

"Jack!" Greta screamed in his ear and tugged at his shoulder, but he could barely hear her, and he couldn't let go.

*Let her in,* he thought to himself. *Let us in. He needs us. We can help.*

*But we are helping!*

*Yes, we are, but we're only helping to keep him safe until she comes. We've kept him safe and we've found her, and now we need to let her in so she can do her part. Our job is done; we can sleep now.*

*But what if she's false?*

*She isn't.*

*But how do we know?*

*We know. And they did, all the different parts of the Jack-castle, and the invisible door swung open beside him.*

"Go," Jack croaked. His voice felt like sharp rocks and stone dust, and Greta hesitated, but only for a moment—"Go!" Jack shouted, and she was off into the passage faster than a hare running from the dogs.

Jack waited several heartbeats before he tried gingerly to pull his hands from the wall. He had expected them to be stuck, but they came away easily. His palms were raw, though, and covered in blood, and he watched as his two bloody hand-prints sank into the stone and disappeared. He didn't want to think about what that meant.

He couldn't think how to wrap his hands when both were so badly injured, so he just crossed his arms, pressed his palms against his sides, and—as he stumbled in just before the door swung shut—hoped for the best.

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The first wave hit Jack when he was about halfway down the passage and could no longer hear Greta's footsteps ahead of him: groping his way gingerly in the dark, between one step and the next, he suddenly felt the full weight of his body, his stomach churned with hunger; he remembered designing this passage and walking through it after it was built, checking it for the last time. And he remembered when his hands were smaller and chubbier and he could just barely grip the wooden blocks that he placed one on another to build castles and houses and towers almost as tall as he was. He remembered the smell of Nancy's hair, and the way it felt to kiss her, and the mixture of love and fear and pride that filled her eyes and her voice when she looked at his plans for a castle—*this* castle—and said it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever designed.

All at once, all between one step and the next. He stumbled a few steps, but by the time the next wave hit him his feet were steady under him again, and it hit him just as hard but he recovered faster. Another few steps, another wave of memory, and he didn't stumble at all, even though his body and mind raced to keep up with all the parts of him that were suddenly no longer missing.

The passage surprised him by ending, dumping him out without warning into a bright, open chamber. He stopped short, dazzled by the sudden light, but even before his eyes and mind adjusted he heard voices, all familiar (though only one was human), and as the room and the stooped, shaggy figures before him came into focus, so did their words.

"I'm telling you it was an accident but I can fix it, you have to let me—"

"—don't know how you broke in, but—"

"—doesn't matter, you shouldn't be here—"

"—please! You don't understand—"

"Listen to her!" Jack croaked, surprised at how the sound grew in the space between him and them, amplified by the stones.

Some of them stopped speaking; all of them turned, and a whispering chorus of "What now?"s and "Is that...?"s slithered back to him under the clacking and huffing and pouncing of the more anxious and blustery bears.

Another wave. Jack braced himself and wondered what the bears must think, what Greta must think, but then it had passed and he said again, "Listen to her."

One of the bears stepped toward Jack and rose up on its hind legs to study him; he thought it might be one of the ones that had turned him into a scarecrow, but it had been a long time and his brain was addled enough that he couldn't be sure. He met its gaze as best he could, though, and waited for it to speak.

"You broke in," it said at last.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Another wave, mostly memories of Nancy, but it only slowed him for a second and then he said, "Because she loves him. Because maybe she can do what you can't. Besides, I don't think this castle is quite the same anymore; I think it's just a stone building like any other, now, so you'd better let her do what she can before Bernadette finds you."

The bears started muttering and huffing among themselves, and Jack heard Bernadette's name and his own more than once, but behind them he could see Greta slipping away toward the hallway. Jack's heart jumped into his throat, and he let himself fall to the ground. More of the bears came toward him, curious or concerned, and that was good—it gave Greta a head start. More importantly, though, it put his palms against the floor, and this time he

went straight to the castle's heart, opening doors along the way.

Greta almost missed the first door, Jack saw through the castle, and he cried out in spite of himself. He didn't think he said anything articulate, but it was difficult to be sure, and anyway it hardly mattered: the bears had already realized she'd gone. Greta stopped, though, and doubled back, and Jack did his best to close doors behind her. But of course, the bears knew exactly where they were going and she didn't.

They caught up to her at last just as she ran into the last room. Greta saw the young man on the bed and stopped short; she tried to say something, but the words caught in her throat. What little sound she made seemed to wake the young man on the bed, though, and as he stirred, the bears hung back as if to wait and see what he would do.

Greta stepped forward slowly, waiting after each step, but Jack thought the young man looked too weak to raise himself even enough to sit up, so Greta just kept step, step, stepping until she stood at the side of the bed and the young man could see her. "Oh, love..." she breathed, face tight with pain, as she reached one hand toward the waxy shell that covered half his chest now.

The young man clacked his jaw and swatted at her; Greta flinched, but after a second she moved her hand closer again. This time the young man bellowed—an angry, pulsing sound Jack wouldn't have thought a human throat could produce—and threw himself at her. He might be weak, but he still weighed more than Greta, and he surprised her enough to knock them both to the ground.

"Sweetheart," Greta cried as he struggled with her, "please—I'm sorry, but it's *killing* you, you have to—let me—" Greta tried to get at his chest, but the closer she got the harder he fought her, until finally she found an opening and pulled at the waxy growth.

The young man screamed in pain and shoved her so hard that she fell away from him. The bears started forward, but Greta shouted, "Look, it's coming off!" and they paused. "You have to let me finish," she added, though whether she was talking to the young man or the bears Jack could not guess; for a few seconds the only movement was the rise and fall of Greta's chest and of the young man's, both of them breathing heavily.

Then one bear stepped forward. "I will help you," it said. Greta nodded warily, but the bear circled around until it could hold down the young man's hands. It leaned down to lick his face; the young man clacked and blew at him and struggled to get free, until another bear came and held down his feet, moaning something that might have been "Auberon."

Greta crawled back over to the young man, who glared hate at her, but she just reached around and pulled at the wax she'd already loosened from his skin. He screamed, and Greta winced, but the bears held him still and Greta kept on pulling. The wax clung to his skin and it took a few long minutes to remove it. "Hush, you big baby," Greta whispered fiercely at one point; the bears looked up—startled, perhaps, though Jack didn't know enough about bear society to tell if they'd been surprised by human eccentricity or bear-like behavior—but Greta didn't seem to notice. All her attention was focused on pulling at the wax and making sure it didn't just reattach somewhere else.

At long last Greta gave one final tug and fell backwards onto the floor with a thud. The young man's scream cut off abruptly and he sagged between the two bears. The one who held his hands bent down and crooned something to him; the other let go, and the young man rolled over, and then suddenly he too was a bear.

Greta blinked, but she didn't seem surprised. She did, however, sit very, very still, eyes fixed on the bear she had just saved.

The bear spoke first. "What did you do to me?" he grunted.

"I can't—" Greta gestured to her throat; one of the other bears, the first one to help her, leaned over and breathed on her neck. "Oh..." she said, eyes wide. "Auberon, I—" She frowned and sat up straighter.

"Master Builder?" Someone was speaking to Jack—to his body—and he lost his hold on the castle. "Master Builder?" the bear repeated, but it was difficult to hear over the sudden pounding in his ears, and his vision was strangely blurry, and he thought he heard someone ask if he was all right before he fell into endless nothing.

\*\*\*

Jack woke once, long enough to swallow some broth, and then fell back into nothingness; when he woke again he found himself in bed and the early winter sun stretching, pale and thin, from a narrow window to the edge of his blankets. He tried slowly to sit up and found that, aside from being a bit stiff, he could move perfectly well; even his bandaged hands didn't complain when he put weight on them.

As sudden movement by the wall caught his attention; Greta rose to her feet and put a book down on her chair. "You're awake," she said, smiling. "I was starting to worry."

"Oh, you know," he said, "it's been, what, the better part of a year since I've slept? Figure I was due for a good nap."

Greta laughed, and it sounded like music to him, but even as he smiled he felt a hollow space in the middle of his ribcage.

"Were you two able to... sort things out?" he asked as he got slowly out of bed and found himself shivering at the sudden chill of the air.

"We're working on it." Greta pointed to a massive wooden wardrobe in one corner of the room. "There should be plenty of warm clothes in there."

"Inter-species relationships frowned upon in bear society?" Jack asked as he looked through the wardrobe's contents and recognized his own clothes.

"That, plus a lot of magic and politics nobody had explained to me before. I knew Auberon could become human, but nobody told me I needed to work out for rival magicians masquerading as servants offering candles. Or that promising not to speak of something could be magically binding."

Jack's hand went automatically to his favorite shirt, favorite trousers. Arms full, he turned around again—and saw Greta frowning slightly in his direction. "What is it?" he asked.

Greta hesitated a moment, but then she asked, "Your wife was the storyteller, wasn't she? The one who came for the spring celebration?"

"Yes," Jack said quietly.

"And that's how you know Auberon and the other bears. It was one of her stories you told me in the woods, that's why it sounded so familiar."

Jack nodded. "She never could bring herself to believe you'd hurt him on purpose."

Greta blinked back a sudden brightness in her eyes and said, "You're welcome to stay here, of course, or to come with us, but Auberon needs to get back, deal with—what was her name? Bernadette." Jack put the clothes down on the bed. "We can stay another day or two, maybe, but he's already been gone so long...."

Jack nodded. "I need some time to think."

"Of course."

"Maybe a few hours. You'll know by tonight, though, and you can tell Auberon he doesn't need to wait any longer than tomorrow morning, at least not on my account."

"You're sure?"

He nodded, running fingertips lightly across familiar fabrics.

"Thank you. I'll go tell him and give you some privacy. You have the run of the castle, of course, and the grounds outside."

Jack nodded again. "Thank you." He waited until the door clicked shut behind her and then started to change, dumping his traveling clothes piece by piece in a pile on the cold stone floor.

\*\*\*

Jack sat on a tree stump on the hill where he last remembered seeing Nancy. He'd thought she might be here, that he'd find her gravestone at least, but he'd looked everywhere it might be. He'd even tried to talk to the castle again, but it was... sleeping. So he sat, staring at the sky and seeing her eyes, wondering how the hole in his heart wasn't killing him.

"She's not here," said a bear's voice, and Jack turned, about to see Auberon and Greta. It was only the second time he'd ever seen the bear prince in person, and continued, "Your wife didn't die here, Jack. She left."

"I don't remember," Jack whispered, throat and chest suddenly tight.

Auberon bobbed his head. "Neither do I. But my advisors do; they say she grew sickly and left, to regain her health, but that you were so busy you seemed barely to notice."

Jack's whole body felt suddenly weightless, more like a bird than a man or even a scarecrow, though he hung his head and ran a hand absently through his hair. *Of course*, he thought. *Castles don't have wives. But if she's still alive, somewhere...*

Auberon must have let him sit like that for a few seconds, but then he grunted "Master Builder" in such a tone that Jack had to straighten and look at him. "You have saved my life twice over, now, and I cannot offer you sufficient thanks for that."

Jack took a shaky breath and stood. "I was glad to help. Am glad to help. And I hope I can visit both of you, someday, but right now I think I need to go pack."

"You're leaving," Greta said, smiling slightly, and it wasn't a question.

Jack nodded. "I need to find Nancy. I owe her an apology, and if she'll tell me, I'd like to know how that story ends. I'm sure the knight doesn't make it home, but I think the little girl might, and if she does... well, I'd like to hear it from her."

Greta nodded; Auberon sat up on his hind legs and met Jack's gaze for several seconds. "What do you want done with the castle?" he asked.

"Nothing," Jack answered, forcing himself to focus on this, his last responsibility. "It's its own person, if that makes any sense, and it's calmer now. Though it would probably be nice for it if someone lived in it, and nicer still if the someone were you. It was built to take care of you, after all, and I always feel like buildings get as sad as anyone else about being abandoned or losing their purposes."

Auberon bobbed his head once more, and Greta reached out and shook his hand, and then Jack smiled quickly at both of them before walking past, down the hill, back toward the castle to get ready for his journey. He was ready—more than ready—to go home.

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Up until third grade, Emily Gilman wanted to be a paleontologist. During a reflective period that year, she decided that she liked being able to spell "paleontologist" more than she liked the idea of actually being one, and she decided to be a writer instead. Since then she has attended the Alpha SFFH Workshop for Young Writers (twice), her story "Stay With Me" has received an honorable mention in the 2008 Dell Award, and she's had stories published in *Fantasy Magazine* and *Strange Horizons*. Visit her online at [emilYGilman.dreamwidth.org](http://emilYGilman.dreamwidth.org).

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COVER ART  
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*Beneath Ceaseless Skies*  
ISSN: 1946-1046  
Published by Firkin Press,  
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

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