

Hérons and Heroines

**The Island
The Courtship Gift
The Messenger**

R. C. Smith



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Herons and Heroines

The Island

The Courtship Gift

The Messenger

by R. C. Smith

The Island first published 2008

The Courtship Gift first published 2014

The Messenger first published 2017

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**Do not read this book if you are offended by descriptions
of sexuality and violence.**

The author asks you not to read it just for those descriptions, either.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

R. C. Smith (an assumed name) is a native and resident of Austria, of advanced age and irrelevant gender.

The author's novel *The Journey*, published 2012, is available from the Dunyazad Library's website, www.dunyazad-library.net.

Please also visit the author's website, www.rc-smith.net.

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

The title of this collection of three stories is somewhat misleading. Herons only appear in the third one, *The Messenger*. And maybe you will feel the same about heroines. You'd be wrong, though. It's still heroism you will find in *The Island* and *The Courtship Gift*, even if of a different kind, owing to different circumstances.

I have written *The Island* in 2008, during one of the many long breaks from working on *The Journey*. A disappointed reader, who had liked it at the beginning, disliked the end and said that obviously I had run out of ideas. No, I haven't. This is how the story ends, has to end, how I have meant it to end. You can still think of the end as being open, if you really want to, but it's *your* story, then ...

The Courtship Gift was written in early 2014. Often, when reading one of Sabrina's little stories, I had thought there was an operatic quality to them, and this time I finally decided to carry this idea out. I'm serious about this being an opera libretto — someone should set it to music. For more about it, see the accompanying *Author's Note*.

I wrote the first part of *The Messenger* (which didn't have that title then) in early 2015. Sabrina said she wanted more of it, but, to me, the story had been told. It was more than a year before I had the idea for the second part. I wrote the *Interlude* and the first half of the second part in late 2016. Though, more or less, I knew how to continue, as so often, I procrastinated — there was no hurry, after all, was there? — and when I finally wrote the final part, in March 2017, knowing at the end that time was running out but not aware of how fast, it was too late. She has never read it.

Neither the fictitious name *Al-Magest*, nor the titles *Bey* and *Khan*, as they are used in *The Messenger*, are meant to suggest any realistic geographical or historical background of that story.

The Stardock jewels that appear in *The Messenger* reverently refer to Fritz Leiber's story *Stardock*, which is included in the fourth volume of the Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser series, *Swords Against Wizardry*.

THE ISLAND

1.

When I woke up, I was alone upon the island.

I was alone, and I knew it was my own fault. I had overslept, I had missed the early dawn deadline when all had to assemble at the beach, to get into the boats.

Had I been there, they would have been obliged to take me. Staying behind on the island during the winter meant certain death, or certain enough death, and no one, whatever their status, could be sent to their deaths without a cause and without the proper proceedings.

But, as I had not shown up in time, they would not have hesitated to load into the boat in place of me a few bags of much more profitable objects — no slave girl in the Queendom is worth her weight in semi-precious stones, rare fossils or exotic spices, those riches that the island yielded, and that made the yearly trips across the sea worth all the efforts and the dangers.

I was alone, and I was without any possessions. I had the clothes that I wore — a slave girl's summer dress, designed to be worn open in front, though it did have a few ribbons which could be tied to keep it closed, and a short leather jacket without pockets to protect against the chilly evening breeze, but not against the winter cold. This was all — as a slave I did not have shoes, my feet were bare.

Walking barefoot had been the worst thing about being a slave, at first. Worse than the whippings, the hard work, and the rapes. This has been a long time ago, though. The whippings had become less as I had learned to obey. The hard work I did not mind. And the rapes — well, a slave girl also has to learn that she cannot be raped, she can only be used. Over time, my feet got used to walking on rough surfaces, though ragged rocks under my soles still hurt them, and my body got used to

being used. Fortunately it did — that was what it was good for, after all. Also this got less, as there came younger ones, with larger breasts.

The huts in which the expedition had spent the summer were still standing, but they were light buildings made of wood, erected anew each spring, not meant and not able to survive the autumn storms and the winter snow. And, they were empty — there was some makeshift furniture in them, like the huts themselves only built to last one season, but except for some half-eaten leftovers from breakfast, which I ate as I found them, there was no food left behind, no clothing, no cloths, no tools, no household stuff, nothing of any value, or of any possible value to me. Of course not.

Well, I knew there was a cave in a low hill near the settlement where some heavy iron tools were kept, wrapped in oil cloths to protect them against rusting — tree saws, sledgehammers, crowbars, even an anvil — but, not only had I no right to them, and might even endanger next year's expedition if I lost or damaged any, but also I would hardly be able to use them, least of all to any conceivable good purpose.

No, I was alone, and I had nothing.

Except a dress, a jacket, and a whole island to myself.

Mine for half a year — a slave girl's own island! And for a month or two of that half year, until the autumn storms would ravage the island and then the Arctic cold and snow set in, I might even survive. Water was not scarce here, and the vegetation would provide enough food.

So, what was there to do but to enjoy those two months and to make the best of them?

And, never to give up hope. What did I know? If I kept on searching, I *might* find some way to leave the island? A seaworthy boat, hidden somewhere, on which I might *try*, even with chances ever so

slim, to reach the continent? To face punishment and pain, of course, but to survive?

No, I knew there wouldn't be such a boat left behind.

But then, a new idea came to me: I had, of course, never been to the forbidden part of the island: the mountain range in the West, and whatever may lie behind it.

Forbidden ... by whom? to whom? and why? These were not questions for a slave girl to concern herself with, my duties had been here in the settlement, I had never given that part of the island any thoughts. But now, as the day went by and the sun followed its path which, as it did each day, would finally make it sink behind the mountain, this forbidden area began to exert a strange and growing attraction upon me.

What was my choice? To stay here, in the place that I knew, to live from the fruits and nuts that the trees still bore, and to know that I'd die when the weather changed?

Or, to explore the unknown, which offered few promises except a probably even earlier death, but where my end was not so predictable, where I might see things I had never seen before, and never would have dreamed to see?

The whole island was now mine, after all!

This first day of my exile I rested, enjoying the hours of leisure after the many exhausting months of work and use. During the night I slept dreamlessly and undisturbed.

And when the sun rose on the second day, I had made up my mind.

2.

There was a creek that ran into the sea close to the settlement, and I followed it upriver through flat terrain, until after several hours I reached its spring at the foot of the steeply rising mountain range that transected the island like a giant wall from North to South, some six or seven miles wide. I knew that on both ends where the mountains reached the sea the terrain was so precipitous that it was impassable, so that the only way to the other side, if there even *was* another side except another steep declivity into the sea, was to cross the mountain. The best, or only place to attempt this was what seemed to be a saddle, right in the middle of the range.

The altitude of this saddle was not high, maybe two thousand feet, but for someone who was not a trained mountaineer there was no direct ascent; crevices, screes and pikes frequently forced me into arduous detours, and often the routes I followed ended in impasses from which I had to retrace my steps and try a different approach towards my goal, a task not made easier by the fact that in the craggy landscape of the slope the saddle often disappeared from my view, and I could only guess at its direction.

The slope was so steep that little vegetation had managed to secure a foothold, so mostly my ascent lead across bare rock — only further up, near the saddle where the ground was more level, trees and larger bushes were growing. Up there I could hope for soil and softer ground below my feet, but I soon realized that long before I might possibly reach it the sharp edges of the limestone would have cut my already bleeding soles to the bones.

I took off my dress, and with the help of a sharp rock tore it into two pieces of cloth which I wrapped around my feet, tying them with

the ribbons that came in quite handy for this purpose. A dress wantonly destroyed, which had been my owners' property — for a moment I smiled at the thought how unlikely it was that I'd live to face the punishment.

From now on my leather jacket was my only garment — as it only reached down to my hips, I would have offered a nice view to anybody climbing up that mountain behind me, but, alas, there were no other human beings, and not even larger animals, for probably hundreds of miles around.

As I kept climbing and the sun first reached and then traveled beyond its orbit's zenith, heat, thirst and exhaustion began to take their toll upon my strength and slowed me down, but I knew I had to keep on going, and finally I gained the top of the scarp — from here on the ground still rose, but much more smoothly, trees and a fresh breeze that came from the West provided shadow and cooling, and patches of soft grass comforted my weary feet. Another half hour or so, and I reached the saddle, and what was waiting for me there was a little paradise — a shallow recess of lush green vegetation, trees bearing nuts and ripe fruits, plants with spicy edible leaves, and a spring. After drinking I sat down for a while on a moss-covered stone next to it, with my feet in the cold clear fresh mountain water, and then I indulged in the pleasure of washing the sweat and exertion of the climb off my whole body.

A wonderful place, I thought — it would provide me with all I needed, should I prefer not to die from hunger and thirst but to freeze to death in the winter's first cold.

But this was still a while off, no need to worry about it now, where each day was a new gift that I was determined to make the best of.

To the left and right the mountain's shoulders rose, but I had done

enough climbing for today. Ahead of me the ground sloped down, at a grade that made it comfortable to walk. Through the trees I could glimpse the sun and the blue of the sky, which at some line that I could not clearly make out turned into the blue of the sea below.

I walked fast, and I had not realized how long and how far down again I had walked, until I got to the precipice. I stepped out of the wood, suddenly face to face with the evening sun that was hovering above the horizon, and a few feet in front of me the ground ended abruptly — fifty feet below me lay a small bay, and, maybe five hundred feet away, the sea. I had finally reached the other side of the island!

I had to admit, though, that from what I could see it did not hold many promises for someone seeking hardly less than a miracle salvation. Could I even get down to that bay? There seemed to be no way to climb down that cliff — maybe, if desperate enough, I could climb around the bay until I stood right above the sea and then dive into the water, hoping not to hit a rock — but how could I ever get up again?

It was then that I saw the rope. It was tied to a strong tree — a thick sturdy rope, with knots at each foot of its length — this, I had no doubt, was a rope ladder that was here to provide access to the bay.

For today it was too late, and I was too tired. This place above the precipice was not as paradisiacal as the saddle recess by far, but it did offer some thorn bushes which bore edible berries, and a thin trickle of water that emerged from underneath a stone, so I was content. I found a small recess with a soft mossy ground, broke off a couple of leafy twigs from a nearby tree to cover myself with, rolled up, and fell into a deep sleep.

~

When I woke up the next morning I needed a while to remember where I was, and I missed the rays of the morning sun, until I realized that here on the western flank of the mountain it would be late in the morning until it rose over the ridge. By the color of the sky it was still quite early, which suited me fine, and after a frugal breakfast of water and berries I went over to the rope, unwound it, and let it fall down the precipice. As I had been confident it would, it reached down unto the pebble-littered sandy ground of the bay.

I climbed down easily, ignoring the aching muscles of my legs, and walked the short distance towards the shoreline. The sea was calm, clear and inviting, and despite the water being freezingly cold I took off my jacket and went in, and swam out as far as I dared, cautious of temperature loss and possible dangerous currents. Turning around and scrutinizing the coast, my small bay in the middle of the cliff line that stretched to both sides was the only place I saw where I could get back on land — it seemed that my expedition had reached a dead end indeed.

I swam back, got out of the water, jumped up and down to dry and get warm, smiling at some imaginary watchers, put on my jacket again, and walked back towards the rope, when I saw something I had not noticed before: the dark narrow shape on the bay's northern wall was not a shadow cast by a protruding rock, it was an opening!

Its lower end was some five feet above the ground and easily reached, the aperture itself was high enough that I did not have to bend my head, and wide enough for me to walk through without having to squeeze. Of course I went in without hesitation.

Inside, after the end of a short curved tunnel, it was pitch black dark. I knew that after a few minutes my eyes would be able to see in the dim light that crept in through the narrow opening, but out of

restlessness, or out of cockiness, I did not wait but stretched out my arms in front of me and proceeded into the darkness.

I kept on walking with careful steps, and finally my hands touched something — something round — with a hole in it — another hole — a jagged edge — oh my god! A *skull!*

I emitted a shriek and retracted my hands, and then I dared not to move until my eyes were finally able to penetrate the darkness, and then I found myself not just inside a cave, but inside a nightmare.

The wall in front of me was *covered* with skulls. I turned around, the entrance was now to my right; to my left still inscrutable blackness, and in front of me, on the opposite wall, blurred rotund shapes that could only be more of those skulls. But, what really caused the horror that I felt, was the dark looming figure that instinctively I knew to be the ghastly idol of some dreadful death-bearing deity, and in front of it a large block of stone could be nothing but the deity's heathen altar. Even though the idol faced the entrance, not me, I felt as if its fiery red eyes were staring straightly into mine, its full attention directed towards me, its intense burning presence piercing my brain.

I stood transfixed, unable to move or even to breathe, until I pulled all my strength together, resumed my breathing with a piercing scream, and ran towards the cave's mouth, not caring about the uneven ground or possible obstacles, just *out* as fast as I could.

Not even thinking about the height of the entrance, haunted by all demons of hell as I emerged into the daylight, I fell down the five feet, jumped up, ran a few steps, tripped over a boulder and fell flat on my chest, the pain and the impact and the lingering shock from what I had seen in the cave taking my breath away again, and for a few seconds it got dark before my eyes. When my breath and my sight returned, and I tried to get up, I saw the man standing in front of me.

He was nude, and he was beautiful. His skin was the color of bronze, and there was no hair on him, except the straight black hair that fell from his head down to his shoulders, held back from his forehead by a thin cord. His body was that of a warrior, slim but muscular and strong. His dark eyes looked at me as I lay before him on my side, first at my face, then this gaze moved down and rested upon my bare shaven crotch. I watched him in awe. I saw the knife he held in his hand, I saw his penis grow to a full erection.

I stood no chance against him. I slumped back, and then, without thinking, I turned to lie on my back. I shut my eyes, and waited for his penis or his knife to enter my body. Or both.

Suddenly and unexpectedly I felt a wave of arousal shaking me, I felt my vulva opening up, I felt my heart pounding, and my breathing becoming faster. I felt deep shame that he saw me like this, and the shame added to my arousal. I opened my jacket to expose my breasts and my erect nipples to him. When I could not stand the strain anymore, I opened my eyes again. He was not there. No one was.

I jumped up and ran towards the rope. I climbed up the rope faster than I had ever thought I could, filled with an irrational fear that was worse than just fear for my life, I screamed while I climbed, but still I felt the sensual touch of the rope between my legs, the pressure of each knot against my crotch, and when I reached the top and pulled the rope up I could not help from making it run across my thighs again, and when I had pulled it up completely, I coiled it up, and then I lay down on my belly upon the heap of rope with its knots, and pressed my crotch against it, and moved my pelvis in small circles, until a series of orgasms quenched the fire that was flowing through my veins.

I had masturbated frequently, from my childhood to the time at the

University, but to a slave girl it was not allowed, and I had soon learned to adhere to the rules. So, this had been the first time in many years now, and I enjoyed it deeply, the orgasms and their afterglow, even though, as soon as my thoughts became clear again, I was thoroughly confused by what had triggered my arousal.

Also the fear came back, though it was not as strong as it had been, it did not border on panic anymore, it had no irrational depth, it now just felt like the natural reaction of someone doomed to die to stumbling across such a persuasive display of death, and the reasonable wish to get as far away from it as possible.

Which, I had to admit to myself, on a small island could not be very far.

And the nude bronze-skinned warrior whom I had seen? I decided not to think about him anymore.

3.

What could I do now? Was there another place on this island that I could try to go to, not back to the main part to wait for the winter to kill me, not back to the cave of skulls to wait for whatever horrors were lurking there to overcome me?

I had little hope to find anything better, but then I had little else to do but explore my surroundings. It was still rather early in the morning — my climb down, my swim, my visit of the cave, my encounter with the mysterious stranger, my climb up, my masturbating — all this, measured by the sun's inexorable progress on its eternal orbit, had not taken much time.

From the point at which I stood, the rim of the precipice above the bay, the only passable route led back to the saddle, and after wrapping

my feet in the shreds of my dress again I took it. From the saddle, I could turn left to the North or right to the South — in both directions the ground rose steeply, and progress would be difficult, but not impossible.

I drank water from the spring and ate some of the sweet fruits, and then I arbitrarily chose one of the two directions, South, and then I just kept walking, or climbing where it was necessary. After a while, it was past noon, I got above the tree line, and I had a great view over most of the island — I enjoyed it, but it did not tell me much I hadn't known before. I could see the summit in front of me, and I reached it after another hour or two — I did not try hard to guess the time, as it had little importance for me.

When I arrived at my goal, I saw that I had not gained anything useful — below me lay the sea, no land or islands in sight, and in all directions but the one I had come bare rock sloped down steeply. To an experienced climber these rocks might provide a viable descent, but if I were to try it, I would very probably fall to my death — and, there was nothing to make me believe that down there would be anything worth taking the effort, and the risk.

Turning around, I could see where the saddle was, and the intersection that led to the precipice above the bay, and behind the saddle I could see the other shoulder of the mountain range rising to about the same height as the one upon which I was standing.

From what I could see, this other shoulder held no promises that it might have more to offer than this one had, but still I felt the urge to visit it. Checking the position of the sun, I decided I'd be able to reach the summit before the night, and maybe even make it back to the saddle — if not, the thought of spending the night in the open, the

hard rock below me, the crescent moon and the distant stars above, held no fear, as long as the weather was mild and calm.

This, in fact, was how it turned out — when I had reached the northern summit and found it to be identical, in almost every respect, to its southern twin, I saw that dusk would fall soon, and anyway I was so exhausted that I thought it better to rest for the night than to descend the cragged path with weak legs and in near darkness.

The night was uncomfortable, I was hungry, thirsty and cold, but it was beautiful too, to see the sun sink into the sea in the West, to see the almost full moon take its path across the sky, to be so close to the stars of which there seemed to be so many more here than I had ever seen before, and finally to see the sun rise from the sea again in the East.

My own mountain, on my own island, I smiled, even though I knew that they would not be mine for long; nothing would.

I rose with the sun, turned towards it and took off my jacket, and spread my arms to take in its rays with my whole body, then I did some exercises to get warm, put on my jacket again, and started my descent towards the saddle — what I would do once I got there, after drinking and eating a breakfast of fruits, I did not care to think about.

What it was that caught my attention, already back down below the tree line, I cannot really tell. The route that I had followed I thought of as a path, but it was not a path made by man, it was just as if the mountain and the trees themselves suggested a trail for the wanderer to follow. And here, branching off to the left, was something that looked like a trail leading nowhere.

Nowhere was as good a place to go to as any other to me, so I turned left, and climbed down a scarp overgrown with thicket, and then I stood at the mouth of a small cave. I went in, and waited until my eyes adapted to the darkness, to be relieved that it held no skulls or

bones or heathen idols, but also to be disappointed that it held nothing useful, either. Just a small cave, a good shelter against a thunderstorm, but no place to survive a winter.

And then, again I cannot say what made me look closely into the dark recess next to the opening, I saw the lamp. An oil lamp with a glass cylinder, nothing special about it, except the fact that I had found it here. It was filled with oil, and there was a box of matches lying next to it.

I struck one of the matches on a dry piece of rock and lit the lamp, and then I started to explore the little cave again, aided by the light I now held in my hand. And indeed, what before in the darkness had seemed to be only a shallow niche in a back corner, the lamp's light revealed to be a narrow corridor, leading further into the mountain.

I had to crawl, I had to hold the handle of the lamp between my teeth, I grazed my naked knees, I bumped my head against the low ceiling — and I had to laugh, thinking once more what a sight I'd be from behind, and I almost let the lamp drop, and when the corridor got even lower I started to worry whether I'd ever be able to crawl back out in reverse, or whether I'd die slowly and horribly stuck in this hole, and then I was through.

To my confusion, despite the lamp there was darkness all around me. How could that be? But it only took my eyes more time to adapt, then I saw it: the subterranean hall that I had reached was *huge!* Two hundred feet long or even more, nearly half as wide, and, at the center, almost as high. The walls and the ceiling were cragged, but the ground was flat and smooth. And, along one of the walls, boxes were stapled — I looked at them closer — they were *food*. Canned bread, canned meat, canned vegetables, canned fruit juices, there must be *tons* of them. And more lamps, and oil canisters, and boxes of matches, and

blankets — piles of blankets — and, yes, there was also a batch of can openers! Nothing else, though — no dishes, no cups, no clothes, no tools — but, to survive I did not need any of these, did I?

I looked at the canned food again — these were civilian provisions, not military. I had not found a secret navy base, as for a short moment of panic I had thought I might have, in which case I would survive the winter only to face execution. No, in all probability this was an emergency shelter for the expeditions — a place where, should any calamity prevent them to leave in time before the winter storms set in, all men and women could survive.

I did a quick calculation — yes, the food would suffice for them all. Not for the slaves, though. Well, it would be too expensive to stock this repository and renew its content every few years, on the off chance it were ever needed, if it had to provide food for the slaves, too. And, this explained why I had not known about it — it had not been meant for the likes of me.

I took half a dozen blankets, spread them on the floor to make a bed, sat down on it, and cried. Whatever this was, into whatever place I had stumbled here, it meant I was safe, here I could spend the winter and wait for next year's expedition to arrive. Could the savages who had brought the skulls and the idol to this island find me here if they returned to perform some dark ceremonies in their cave? No, I did not think so — why would they even search? And, had they ever found this cave before, I was sure they would not have left it so tidy and unspoilt.

Another issue — whatever food I took would surely be considered theft, and my back, breasts and thighs would amply taste the whip for it. But, as I myself was property, I also had the obligation to keep myself alive, as long as it did not cause disproportional loss, so after my punishment I would be forgiven.

After my punishment ... there was only one thing this meant to me now: I would *live!*

I ate, I drank, I lay down, and, with so many rules already broken, I started to masturbate again. A few more strokes of the whip, for which I would have to spread my legs, when I admitted to this offense — but what did I care about pain in the future now? I did not reach an orgasm, though, until at last, no matter how hard I tried to keep him from my mind, the nude warrior entered my thoughts again, his bronze skin, his knife, his erect penis, and the memory of how I had lain before him, naked, helpless, and aroused.

4.

Was it the secret desire to meet the savage warrior again that made me go back to the cave of skulls? Or was it the urge to confront my irrational fears — after all, I had begun to study archeology and anthropology at the University, and neither the sight of human bones nor of human artifacts should send me tumbling into a panic. Or maybe it was simply the prospect of the endless months that I would have to spend enwombed in a cave, with nothing to do but keeping the body alive by ingesting food and drink, that made me want to fill my mind with new sensations as long as it was possible, something for my thoughts and fantasies to dwell and feed upon in the upcoming time of loneliness and darkness.

Whatever it was that made me go back, go back I did. And this time I already knew what was there, and I was determined not to panic but to investigate the findings with a rational mind, drawing upon whatever scientific education I had received, determined not to succumb to delusional encounters of any kind again.

And one more thing was different this time: I had a lamp with me now!

The hike from the cave of cans to the cave of skulls I could do with bare feet, so I unwrapped my feet again, and the half of my former dress that had served as my left shoe I knotted into a satchel that I filled with a few cans of food and drink, and with an oil lamp and a few matches. When climbing down the rope I hung it around my neck, and so I arrived at the bay shortly after noon, feeling well prepared mentally and physically to investigate the place that had horrified me so much only the day before.

Despite my determination, in front of the narrow dark opening I hesitated, considering to take a little snack before entering the cave, but this attempt at delaying what I had come for failed due to the fact that I had forgotten to bring one of the can openers with me. So, I lit the lamp, braced myself, and entered the cave.

Even with the lamp, all I could see at first was darkness, but then my eyes adapted, and I took in the same scene that I had seen once before, only I saw it more clearly now: the skulls on the walls, the altar, the idol, but this time all this did not seem to be so frightful to me, and neither did I scream nor did I run.

I walked up to the altar — yes, I was sure that this was what it was — and had a closer look at it. It was an almost perfectly rectangular block of stone. Its sides were raw, but the top was smooth and carefully polished. The color of this surface was dark, darker than the original color of the rock from which the stone had been hewn, reddish-brown, irregular, as if blotched — blood, I thought with a shudder, as if the stone had been *drenched* in it. I touched it with my hand — it was dry, of course, but I could not say whether I touched stone or a coating of

blood or of something else, and I do not think that I really wanted to know.

Near the four corners there were holes two or three inches of diameter that led across the vertical edges, close to the top, connecting the short and long side faces. I took in the altar's size, and another shudder ran down my spine — a vision appeared in my mind of a human sacrifice, a naked girl stretched out upon the stone, spread-eagled on her back, her strained ankles and wrists tied with ropes that were threaded through those holes, and a nude priest was approaching her with a knife in his hand, and then the voices of many men and women filled the cave, chanting, shouting, laughing, and then they were standing in front of me, crowding the altar, blocking my view of the stone and the tied girl, and then I heard a scream, and then, as suddenly as this vision had appeared, it was gone.

The scream had been my own, I realized.

And the priest — had it been *him*? In the flickering light of the oil lamp I had not seen his face clearly, and I could not say for sure.

I took a few deep breaths to quiet down, and then, staying where I was, I looked across the altar at the idol. It was a life-sized figure in a comfortable sitting position, made out of dark polished stone — black marble, it seemed to be, though I knew there was no such stone on this island. As I was not standing at the center of the altar I was looking at the idol slightly from the side, and so I could see how the body of the deity merged into the solid block of stone upon which it sat, or rather, how it seemed to grow out of it, a three-dimensional alto-relief, with a fully elaborated front side, from its head to its feet; the arms rested close to the upper body and thighs.

Most striking about the figure was that it was both female and male — it had full breasts, and it had a penis, a huge penis that was fully

erect, proudly pointing upwards, and below the penis, visibly because the idol's legs were slightly spread, it had a scrotum that was divided, and in between the halves there was a vulva, the pubic lips open in arousal, and I saw the dark opening of a vagina.

And the face, that had scared me so much when I had seen it the first time, with its fiery stare — the eyes were indeed inlaid with a dark reddish stone, but there was neither life nor fire in them, and in the light of the lamp its expression seemed peaceful now, not threatening, but rather — how could I call it? Expectant. And alert.

I turned my head away from it, to look at the skulls — they were everywhere, on the left and right walls, there must be hundreds of them. I went and inspected some of the skulls closer. They all rested in niches that had been cut into the rock, and they were all undamaged, complete with lower jaws and teeth. From their sizes, they were all of grown-ups, and, to judge from the state of the teeth, of rather young ones — not past my own age, the unpleasant thought came. I was not an expert, but some of the skulls seemed to be rather new to me, while others seemed to be older, and some very old, maybe several hundred years.

Several hundred skulls — several hundred years ... another chilling thought forced itself upon my mind: was there a skull for each year? Something that had begun a long time ago, and maybe was still going on? Was there another skull due this year? Who would the unlucky victim be who would have to die for it, if he or she had not already died?

I stepped deeper into the cave, behind the altar and the idol, where the light from the cave's mouth did not reach. I had not been close to its back wall yet, assuming there even was one and the cave did not extend further and further into the mountain.

But yes, soon I saw that there was a back wall indeed — and by the light from my lamp I saw that it held a surprise!

The wall was smoother than the side walls, and, across its width of maybe thirty feet, it was covered with pictures. Simple drawings, no colors, only black — probably drawn with sticks dipped into soot — but clearly legible, and, if showing none of the artistry that the idol displayed, they were still done carefully and with attention to details. Arbitrarily I started to read the pictures from left to right, and this proved to be the right direction.

The first picture showed three boats out on the sea — open boats, outrigger canoes, each with one small triangular sail, and a crew of paddlers sitting in a row behind each other — I counted their tiny heads, there were exactly twelve in each boat.

The next picture (or was it still part of the first one?) showed an island — *this* island, this must be the silhouette it presented to someone approaching from the West. Then there came a diagram with lines and circles and half-circles that I did not understand, and then again a picture with the boats, and the crews pulling them ashore — yes, this was the bay in front of this cave! The sailors of the first boat could be seen clearly, they were of both sexes, and they were all nude; there was no reason to assume that with the two other boats it would be different.

I looked back at the diagram, and suddenly I realized that it was not difficult to read at all — there was the Sun, the Earth, different phases of the Moon, lines that indicated the Sun's and the Moon's paths — it was a calendar. This must be the summer solstice, this the first full moon to follow it, this the second, this the third ... and this was the rising Sun ... and this line led to the picture with the arriving boats —

yes, this was the date and the time, the morning of the day of the third full moon after the summer solstice!

The third full moon — I did a quick calculation. Yes, there was no doubt — the boats were going to arrive tomorrow! Only one day — but I felt safe for now. Was it careless to trust them not to be early one day? To my own surprise, I easily shrugged that thought off, and went on to study the pictures.

With the next one, the horror began. It showed a scene of torture and rape, and so did the next one, and the next ... All the victims were female, and their sufferings upon the altar were shown in detail: the cuttings, the flayings, the burnings, the breaking of bones, the rapes ... and then, in a sudden revelation, I understood that these pictures did not show the tortures of many girls, but of a single one, of one who had to suffer it all.

Her agonies must be beyond comprehension, and the pictures showed that, whatever was done to her body, she still lived. She still lived when there was nothing more left of her but her bleeding torso, her breasts long gone, but also her arms and her legs — and in another horrible picture, one that showed a scene outside the cave, one of her legs roasted over a fire, while a woman cut off slices of meat from an arm, and several men and women stretched out their hands to receive their shares.

She still lived, and they raped her again, not sparing her mouth, and the final picture showed her with the idol — I was not quite clear about it, but I had already seen enough, more that I had wanted to see. I turned back to leave the cave, but then, passing the idol, I halted. I stepped closer, and watched in fascination how by my lamp's light the huge penis cast flickering shadows on the cave's opposite wall.

I had not noticed *how* big the penis was, how long its shaft. And its

head, it looked more like the head of a mushroom, its rim protruding over the shaft's diameter, and curved like an umbrella. A woman forcibly impaled on this instrument would have her cervix penetrated, and then she would be stuck — oh my god, I understood the last picture now!

I saw the dying girl, or what was left of her, her mutilated arm- and legless torso one single bleeding wound, I saw her stuck upon that phallic stone spit that invaded her vagina and uterus in a terminally violent sexual act, I saw her shaken by convulsions, I saw her bleeding debreasted chest heave in a desperate attempt of her broken ribs to suck in another painful gasp of air, I heard gurgling sounds emerge from her throat, I heard her trying to form words to come out of her mouth together with the flow of blood, I heard her speak those words, I heard what she said, and though I could not believe it I heard her clearly, there was no doubt about it, I heard her say "Thank you!"

The upper part of her torso fell forward from exhaustion, her face coming to rest on that of the idol in what looked like a last passionate kiss, and still she lived.

All the nude savages stood in a large circle around us now, keeping their distance, enclosing the altar, the idol, the dying girl, and me. They were silent, their faces were solemn. Some of them masturbated slowly, but otherwise they did not move. Time seemed to be frozen. Then, slowly, one of them, a man, turned towards the cave's mouth and in a measured stride walked off, and when he had left the cave the next one followed, equally silently and slowly, and then the next one, and the next, until they were all gone.

The ceremony was over, and soon the impaled girl would be dead, and then the birds and the insects and all the other small agents of nature would devour what had been left of her flesh, until nothing

would remain of her body but her bones, and then her skeleton, not held together anymore by tendons and muscles and tissue and cartilages would fall to pieces and finally be free. And now I saw, in confirmation of this harrowing mental scene, the bones that were lying on the ground on both sides of the idol — her ribs, breast bone, hip bones, shoulder blades, vertebrae — the skull ...

“Be careful not to touch her skull, it is sacred!”

I had not heard his voice at our first encounter, but I knew who the speaker was, without having to turn around. I felt my knees getting weak.

“It must not be disturbed, before we have determined its proper place upon the wall.”

I turned around now, and now my knees gave in. The lamp slipped from my hand, fell to the floor, and went out. I felt his arms catching me, keeping me from falling, letting me softly glide to the floor. I was now kneeling before him, his erect penis touching my lips. I opened my mouth and took him in, and my mind went blank, overwhelmed by desire.

And then I felt his hands upon my head, pushing it gently back, and he withdrew. “Not yet,” he said. With soft force he turned me around, made me face the idol, guided my head — and then it was the idol’s stone penis that my mouth enclosed, open as wide as possible to accommodate the cold hard glans that pressed against my teeth, my tongue, my gums. There were no hands to hold me now, I was alone.

I stayed like this, my feet pressing against the altar, my hands resting on the idol’s thighs, my head impaled on its sex; I did not move, I did not make a sound, I cried silently — for how long, I do not know.

Finally my tears dried up, and I raised my head, and started to move — not easily, all my muscles had cramped. My left foot touched

something that was lying next to the altar, half hidden in a small crease — not a bone, and not the lamp either, but something sharp and cold.

In the near dark I grabbed for it, glad to have something to distract my mind. It was a knife. I held it up so that some light from the entrance fell upon it — on the slightly curved blade the color of which made me think of his skin, on the smooth sturdy hilt of polished black wood, and on the large glass crystal that was embedded in the hilt's end.

Was it such a knife that he had carried the first time I had seen him? Was it such a knife, was it *this* knife, the unfortunate girls were dealt their fates with upon the altar? I sat down upon the altar, facing the cave's mouth, my feet dangling. I still wore my leather jacket, but my ass and legs touched the cold stone.

I licked the blade clean, careful not to cut my lips or tongue, then I drew it across my thighs, and once more, higher, and then I let it touch my crotch. I did not cut deeply, and I hardly felt the pain, but I felt the blood flowing down my legs. With an effort, I stopped. What a place of madness this cave was. With even more effort I got up and walked towards the light, and through the opening, and I was out again, in the bay, under the blue sky, the clear water of the sea before me. I took off the jacket and entered the icy water — the salt stung on my cuts, but it also healed, and the water washed away the blood, and the chill cleared my mind, and when I got out I felt almost all right again.

I put on my jacket, and found the knife lying under it, I had taken it with me without thinking. I looked at it again in the bright sunlight.

Yes, I had seen right, back in the cave, the blade was bronze, and the hilt was polished ebony. And the glass crystal — the glass crystal — again my legs threatened to fail me, I stumbled towards a rock, and sat down, my back resting against it. The glass crystal ... I closed my eyes,

I waited for my heart to regain its step, I opened my eyes again, and the crystal was still there. And it was still the size of a small sea-bird's egg. And it was still a diamond.

5.

I did not sleep much that night. Back in the cave of cans, lying on a soft bed of blankets, covered with two more, enshrouded in darkness but with a lamp and a box of matches within reach, and with the priceless knife next to me, I should have felt relaxed and secure, but my thoughts raced and sleep did not come.

The stone was not mine, of course; I was a slave, after all. It would not make me rich. But still, for finding a treasure like that and giving it to my owners, *its* rightful owners, I would be entitled to a reward. A small reward, for them, compared to the inestimable value of this marvelous stone. But for me, more than I had dreamed of for many years. I would get my freedom back!

What would I do with it? To be *free* — what a wonderful thought! But when I tried to enjoy it, tried to think of the future that lay ahead of me now, tried to envision all the possibilities that I would have once I was a free woman again, my imagination, as well as my rational mind, failed me. What would I really want to do, who would I really want to be? And what of this could I actually hope to achieve? And how? A ceaseless procession of unfocused images of future *me's* swirled before my eyes in the dark, until my head swirled with them, disoriented and confused.

With an effort of will I stopped those racing thoughts. There would be time enough to think them slowly and carefully in the forthcoming

months. To calm down I tried to masturbate, but it made the cut across my vulva hurt and even to start bleeding again, so I gave it up.

Why did I feel so uneasy? Whatever my life would be, once I was free again, it would be better than being a slave. Or would it? This thought crept up at me from behind, unanticipated, uninvited and unwelcome, yet suddenly it was there. Did I really, truly, with all my heart, want to be free? Or was there a comfort in being a slave, a quietude, a deep satisfaction, a secret desire fulfilled that I had never been consciously aware of?

I chased this thought away. Who in her own sane mind would not rejoice at the prospect of losing her chains?

I masturbated now, never mind the pain and the bleeding — I needed that orgasm! And, I became aware, for this orgasm I needed *him!* Again I was kneeling in front of him, but this time his hands that held my head did not push me away but pulled me towards his crotch, this time his penis stayed in my mouth, throbbing with arousal as I worked on it with lips, tongue and teeth, this time his moans of ecstasy were so loud that they drowned out my own, this time his hot sperm spurted out so richly while his penis pressed against the back of my mouth and his grip did not relent that I almost suffocated, swallowing as hard as I could, desperately gasping for air, knowing he would not let go of me, knowing he was completely absorbed in his own lust, knowing it meant nothing to him whether I lived or died from it.

This time, it was perfect. Only, this time it was not real.

And then, when my mind slowly returned from my own ecstasy in which it had been so breathlessly lost, when I was capable of thinking again, another thought began to take shape, and it was an uncomfortable one.

I would have to tell where I had found that stone, that was obvious.

But equally obvious was what a treasure like this would provoke: greed. Where this one had come from, many more must be. And once we'd be looking for them, we would find them.

We would come in peace, of course. We would offer them beautifully colored glass in exchange for their drab uncut colorless stones. We would offer them things they'd never dreamed of, like liquor and guns. And only if they did not trade with us fairly, we'd have to use our much bigger guns on them.

Nightmares of conquest and carnage haunted the uneasy sleep into which I finally fell, pictures coming alive that I had seen in history books long ago, piles of disemboweled bodies cut open in the search for hidden gems, burning forests and villages and rivers of blood flowing through corpse-littered scorched barren landscapes, and through those scenes of terrible terminal destruction I was straying, naked, my hand clutching by its blade a knife with a broken hilt, searching for its owner whom I knew to be still alive among all those dying and dead, to push the blade into his heart to relieve him of this unbearable pain that I had caused.

When I awoke from those horrible dreams a pale glimmer from the direction of the cave's entrance told me that dawn had arrived.

I could not stay in the cave — I felt it was safe to go to the bay one last time, though this time of course I would not go down, I would watch the sea from the vantage point on the rim of the precipice, just to make sure that I had read those drawings correctly, to know that they really had come.

I stood on the rim of the precipice, next to the tree with the rope, before the sun had risen above the mountain behind me, and as I had expected I found the bay still as empty and deserted as it had been.

I looked out over the sea — did I see three small sails on the horizon, or was it only the glistening of distant waves?

As I strained my eyes to scan the horizon, I knew he was standing next to me.

Before I turned around to look at him I took off my jacket and let it fall to the ground. I wanted to be as naked as he was, when we faced. The chilly morning breeze on my bare body made me shiver — or was it his gaze that caused the goosebumps all over my skin?

This time his penis was not erect. Also, his hands were empty.

“You forgot your knife,” I said. “You should be more careful, if the wrong people find it, it can turn against you and kill you all.”

He shrugged. “Our fate is in the hands of the gods.”

He took the knife out of my hand, and held it against the inner side of my left breast. The blade played with my breast, circled it, made it swing, then its tip touched my nipple, caressed it, then it moved to the other breast and did the same there. It did not cut the skin. I did not flinch, and my nipples got hard.

“Good,” he said, and handed me back the knife. “Bring it with you to the cave.”

“Oh no!” I said, “I will never go down there again. You cannot possibly think that I would?”

“But that’s what you are here for,” he said. “Didn’t you know it?”

It took a while for his words to sink in.

“Oh my god, no! I thought ... this horrible ceremony ... I thought that you’d bring this wretched girl with you?”

“Did you really?” he asked. “No, we meet you here, or we come here in vain.”

“Oh my god,” I said again, “so you are saying that you need me? *Me*? You ask me to suffer and to die for you?”

“*Need* you? *Ask* you? You want it to be made easy for you, don’t you?” he said. “What else do you expect? Gratitude? Respect? Admiration? *Love*? That’s a lot of things to demand, without giving anything.”

“But you — you *want* me to give?”

“I said this is what you are here for. I said this is what we come for. This is what many will die for. I said nothing about *wanting* anything.”

“Die?” I asked.

“The sea is dangerous on the return trip, of three boats one or two may get back.”

“So why do you take this terrible risk?”

“For you,” he said.

There was a moment of silence.

“Are you in one of those boats?” I finally asked. “Will *you* — this ceremony, all that I’ve seen, is it like this, was it all *real*?”

He did not reply. I looked at his beautiful bronze-skinned body.

“If I do it, will I meet you there?” I whispered.

He turned away.

“Please, *wait!*” I shouted.

He was gone.

I could see the three approaching boats quite clearly now. It was time to creep back, to hide behind a bush as long as I dared to watch, then to pick up my jacket, sneak off, away from the precipice, into the wood, and then hurry to my hiding place and larder, cover my traces, crawl into the dark safety of my cave.

It was time.

I folded the jacket, and carefully weighted it down with stones — it was made of good leather, I did not want it to be blown away by the

storms. I took the rope, and wound it several times around the tree. I threw it down, its end was now ten feet above the ground.

I took the knife between my teeth and climbed down the rope as far as it went, then I jumped — its end hung several feet above my head, safely out of my reach. I went to the cave, and laid down the knife at its entrance. A few feet away, I sat down. The sun had just risen above the precipice, and its rays felt pleasantly warm upon my naked skin. I put one hand between my thighs, closed my eyes, and listened to the sounds of the waves, and the birds, and the wind.

THE COURTSHIP GIFT

A South Sea Cannibal Opera
by R. C. Smith
based upon ideas by S. Ireland

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The main part of this story is based upon a story idea (included here as an appendix) by my friend S., and is set in a world that has been created by her, though in several ways adapted to fit my own literary purposes. In her original concept, this world occupies its own universe (and therefore is much larger in scope, richer in detail and more varied than it is depicted here) — for the purpose of this story, I have connected it more closely to our own reality and located it on our planet. I thank the Creatrix of that world not only for the inspiration she has provided, but also for her attentive and patient proofreading and editing, doubly needed since neither is English my first language, nor have I ever truly been to Brinala. The character of “Lady A.” I have introduced in homage to Mary Kingsley (1862–1900), who has written about her adventures among cannibals in her fascinating book *Travels in West Africa*.

R. C. Smith

PART I — THE WRAPPER

Editor's Preface

I present here, for the first time, both to the general public and the scientific community, a faithful transcription of a set of three remarkable documents which I happened to find, entirely by chance, in a small antique book store in Trieste, on one of my recent visits to this town. These three documents were a letter, a short essay, and a literary text in verses. All three documents were written in what seems to be the same hand on the same type of paper, the folded sheets were tied together by a string. Unfortunately, the envelope that once had contained these sheets was not included.

I am not a scholar, and can not decide, or even form a strong opinion, whether the letter and the accompanying texts are genuine, or a forgery, or possibly a hoax. Assuming they are authentic, here is what little, without further studies, we can tell:

The author of the letter and the essay, and the translator of the verses, is an English lady whose first name begins with "A"; the three documents were posted in New Zealand in May 1890 (for whatever reasons, the exact date is not given); and the addressee, though he is addressed only by the initials "RB", can be no other than Sir Richard Francis Burton, explorer, adventurer, author, translator of "The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night" and, at the time, British consul to Trieste.

Burton died from a heart attack on October 20, 1890. The letter with its two attachments obviously reached Trieste, but whether before

or after Burton's death, I have no way to decide. We know that Burton's widow, Isabel, destroyed most of his unpublished manuscripts, disapproving of their erotic content and fearing that they might cause a scandal. The verses of the third document would, from this point of view, certainly also have deserved destruction — why they escaped it, and how they finally ended up in a dark store room of an antique book shop, is at present entirely unknown.

I restrict myself here to presenting the content of the documents which I have found, and refrain from any further comments, and from any attempts at evaluating them, for which I am not qualified. I am, of course, willing to provide the original sheets of paper for serious scientific examination, but even before we have heard the opinion of the scientists I can say that this opera libretto, whatever the historical truth behind it may be, is a fascinating work of literature, unique in its kind, and I hope that it will find the readership and the attention that it deserves. Be warned, though, that, even by today's standards, the libretto contains rather extreme descriptions of violence and sexuality, and also of cannibalism — if any of those may offend you, I would advise you not to read on.

The Letter by Lady A. to RB

Wellington, May 1890.

Dear RB,

I hope you have received my previous letter, written during the days aboard the ship that took me back to New Zealand from Brinala, in which I have given you a detailed account of, as I call them, my two years among the Cannibals, even though, as I have stated, I have never actually put a foot on one of the Cannibal islands — had I done so, I would probably not be sitting here in my hotel room now, writing to you. Nonetheless, in the archipelago you are never far away from them, and often, either standing at a ship's guardrail or on a lookout close to the shore, I have seen naked Cannibal warriors of both sexes, paddling their elegant and seagoing outrigger canoes with powerful strokes. And more than once have I felt a tingle, not only down my spine, from an appraising glance, quickly cast at me out of such a canoe, as it swiftly passed ...

From that previous letter you already know how it came that I wound up in Brinala, how I fared there, how I learned the language, and how I secured my journey back to our civilization, and much of what I have learned about the archipelago, its geography, its history, and its inhabitants and their culture. What I have not mentioned in that letter, though, is a matter of some curiosity, which during my stay has been exerting an ever increasing fascination upon me, and which, judging from what I know about your own interests, may also attract your attention. This curious matter, something that no one would ever expect to find in such a remote and savage part of the Pacific, is the

Brinali opera! What I hope to achieve, though, is more than just to arouse your interest in this curiosity — my enthusiasm, which hopefully you will come to share at least to a degree after you have looked into the papers that I send you here, goes so far that I actually want to organize a performance, back home in England, with the necessary participation of native Brinali musicians, actors and singers!

Two things are obvious: first, that such a performance could only be given in private, to a small circle of selected connoisseurs and friends, and second, that it would involve considerable financial expenditures. The latter issue, fortunately, would not present a problem, as I have inherited a fortune which is considerably larger than I can possibly spend during my lifetime, and as I am without relatives to whom I feel obliged to pass it on. I would also be able, I think, to use the contacts I have made in Brinala, to find the required performers willing to embark on such an adventure, and to organize their journey around the globe to England and back, if they wish to return. What I lack, though, are the right contacts at home, and the knowledge and experience which are needed for such an undertaking, to organize a performance and its audience, nor do I know any person, apart from you, whom I might possibly approach for assistance in this rather delicate matter — someone who has to be competent, trustworthy and unabashed, who has to know the right people, and, hopefully, who might sufficiently find pleasure in the project himself, to contribute willingly his good efforts.

Therefore, my dear RB, I put all my hopes in you, and appeal both to your curiosity as an explorer and a man of letters with certain distinct inclinations, and to your chivalry towards a lady who asks for your help as she wants to indulge in one of her curious little whims. Enclosed with this letter I send you a first draft of a short essay which

I have written about the subject, and — it may be called the object of a rather unhealthy obsession for a member of the gentle sex, but still, it is currently my most prized possession — the result of hard work, long studies and many hours of great delight — a copy of my own translation of the libretto of a genuine Brinali opera! The musical score, or what sketchy notes I was able to make, I did not yet have time to copy, so I cannot include it, but I will send it to you at a later date.

I must conclude this letter now, the ship on which it is supposed to start its long journey that will ultimately take it to Trieste and into your hands will sail in a few hours. I have some business to attend to that will keep me in Wellington for a few more weeks, but then I will try to embark on my journey back home to England as soon as I can. Please send your reply to my London address, where, hopefully, I will already find it waiting for me when I arrive.

I hope that you are well, that you make good progress with whatever your current literary projects are, and that you enjoy your life in Trieste, where I know the interests of the Empire to be in good hands with you. Please also give my best regards to your lovely wife!

In lasting friendship,

your

A.

The Essay on Brinala, by Lady A.

The Archipelago

Brinala is an archipelago in a remote region of the South Sea, situated to the East of New Zealand, from which it is many days of sea travel away, but which is nonetheless its closest neighbor. The archipelago consists of dozens of larger and a great number of smaller islands, all of which are inhabited, unless they are so tiny as to be only rocks barely protruding from the surface of the sea.

The climate is subtropical and mild, with regular and sufficient rains, and long periods of undisturbed blue skies and calm sea in between them. Due to a meteorological peculiarity for which I have no explanation, the sun, without giving any less light or heat, seems to be *milder* than would be expected at this latitude — it does not dry the soil, does not parch the leaves of plants, and even I, with my pale northern complexion, never suffered from sunburn, no matter how many hours I spent outdoors, not always clothed in ways that would be considered decent by my British compatriots.

The islands offer perfect conditions for human habitation, especially since their inhabitants have learned to avoid the most dangerous single pitfall of confined and initially favorable environments, which can reduce them to places of misery, disaster and decline, namely, overpopulation. The soil is fertile, vegetation is lush and plentiful, the sea abounds with fish and all kinds of seafood, and even the rocks provide nourishment as they are home to large colonies of seabirds, who are easily caught and whose eggs can be collected. Among the fauna of the islands there are no poisonous snakes, and no large

carnivores — the largest land animals are pigs and goats, which are kept for food in some parts of the archipelago, but about that later.

Traffic with the outer world barely exists, and is mostly confined to ships being blown off course and meeting their ends on one of the archipelago's many reefs — the ensuing fate of their passengers and crew depending on the exact location of their shipwreck, but about that, too, later.

The Population

All inhabitants of Brinala, the Brinali, are of the same ethnicity. They largely conform to our idea of exotic beauty — olive-skinned, dark-haired, dark-eyed, sensuous, athletic and lithe. The centuries of occasional shipwrecks have left their traces, though: some of the Brinali have lighter skin, lighter eyes and lighter hair — I've even seen a few redheads! — while there are also some whose skins are of a much darker brown, or even black. The Brinali, while generally putting high value on human beauty, pay no more attention to different colors of skin than we do to different colors of hair, the only distinction important to them to establish affiliation to a certain group being the place of birth.

Not only are the Brinali of the same ethnicity, they also speak the same language, with minor local variations between the major islands. Nonetheless, they are divided into two distinct and strictly separated cultures — for lack of better names, I call them by their most characteristic features: the Cannibal and the Slave culture, or, the Cannibals and the Slavelanders (though, strictly speaking, also those who serve as food in the one case, and those who serve as slaves in the

other, are part of their respective cultures, if at the bottom of their social orders).

The Cannibals are divided into tribes, the Slavelanders into queen-domes (Brinali rulers with few exceptions being female), with both of these divisions corresponding to the major islands, so that both cultures consist of what might be called island-states. The smaller islands are usually affiliated with one of the larger ones, sometimes retaining various degrees of independence, with affiliations often changing through politics, economics, personal relationships, or, most frequently, local wars. Within each culture, traffic between these tribes/islands/states is frequent, and their members often intermarry.

While each of the two cultures looks down upon the other, and while quite frequently there are skirmishes, raids and armed conflicts between them (as there are between tribes or island-states of the same cultures), all in all they get along with each other remarkably well. Cannibal and Slavelander islands are spread all over the archipelago, without major conflicts about territory — wars over small islands are usually fought within the same culture. The general contempt that each culture feels for the other does not keep them from trading, whether in minerals, manufactured goods or humans, nor from mating, though close personal contacts or even romantic relationships between members of the different cultures are extremely rare, and usually do not end well, at least not for one of the pair.

The Cannibals are what we would call “savages” — they build their habitations from wood, bamboo and palm leaves, practice no agriculture, know no organized division of labor, and, one could say, mostly spend their lives feasting, fishing and making war. They do not know sexual morals in our sense, but walk naked all day and have sex whenever, and with whom ever, they desire. Their dealing with

foreigners, whether from within or from without the archipelago, is usually straightforward: they eat them. They also eat the captives they make in raids or wars, and they eat members of their so-called “protected tribes”: populations of small islands, who live on what vegetation and sea provide, and whom one particular Cannibal tribe “protects” from raids by other tribes. The price that the “protected” pay is that their own “protectors” can use them for food, according to arrangements which they call treaties.

Apart from humans, Cannibals despise the meat of creatures that walk on land, deeming them unclean — they only eat what they call the pure creatures of the sea and of the air (humans, walking upright with their heads far above the ground, and with a smooth skin that can easily be cleaned with water, seem to qualify as pure enough). And one more thing deserves to be mentioned: their human victims always die in pain, after severe torture — the Cannibals maintain that this not only increases their appetite, but also improves the flavor and tenderness of the meat, and, most of all, pleases the Goddess. The Goddess, by the way, as the highest or only deity, is worshiped by both cultures, but this is not the place to go into the details of the Brinali religion.

Different from the Cannibals, the Slavelanders are what we call “civilized” — they have towns, their houses are built from stone and are comfortably furnished, their main roads are paved, they use money, they have writing (though, like most primal civilizations, they use it for administration and business purposes, not for writing literature), and they are clothed, at least in public, often in elaborate garments made of precious fabrics, even though their clothes do not necessarily cover the parts of their bodies that we would consider to be the ones most deserving of coverage. Their sexual morals, I regret to say, are hardly better than those of their savage Cannibal kin.

The Slavelander culture is ruled by laws, many of which concern their institution of slavery, so that the queendoms are sometimes called the Slavelaw lands. While all their laws are strict and the penalties severe, like in all other societies there are those who are above the law, and those who transgress, with or without being found out and brought to justice.

While they eat sea food, birds and bird eggs like the Cannibals do, they also hunt small indigenous land animals, and, as a main source of their diet, they raise pigs and goats, which have arrived at the archipelago on board ill-fated European ships. They strongly despise cannibalism, which is also forbidden by their laws, though it is rumored that on some remote islands one can indulge in this particular forbidden pleasure, if one really so desires, and has the means to afford it — let me just say here that I have heard rumors ...

I could easily write many more pages, or even an entire book, about the Brinali and their world, but this is not the place for it, nor do I have the time now — therefore, let me come to the subject of the Brinali opera!

The Brinali Opera

The Brinali language is very melodious, and the Brinali people have a natural affinity to music — it is, therefore, not surprising that their singing is often very pleasing to our ears. What is surprising, though, to a degree that at first I hardly trusted my ears, is to hear them sing melodies that are reminiscent of nothing so much as of Italian Baroque opera. There is an explanation for this, of course: some time in the late 18th century, a ship fell victim in the archipelago to storm and reefs, which had on board an Italian opera company, on their way to a tour

through Australia, which they never reached. Many of the passengers and crew drowned, while others had the bad fortune of landing with the ship's boats on a Cannibal island where, after the natives had mated with them and (in the case of female passengers) had waited for the resulting children to be born, they unavoidably ended up in the Cannibals' bellies.

The occupants of at least one boat, though, and fortunately among them several of the singers, were lucky and reached the shore of a Slavelaw island, where they were given a cordial welcome, after which, as is their wont, the Slavelanders carefully assessed the skills and possible uses of their new slaves, and turned out to be delighted at the artful singing some of them knew to perform, of a kind that they had never heard before — it seemed to them that in this singing they heard the voice of the Goddess. They embraced this new vocal art eagerly, incorporated it into their own culture, and the unique art form of the Brinali opera was born.

While the arias sound strikingly familiar, in other regards the Brinali opera is very different from ours, and probably draws from local traditions which date back to long before the arrival of the Italian opera singers. The Brinali know only few kinds of musical instruments, namely, several types of drums, pipes, flutes and simple string instruments which resemble lyres, and the music that is played on them sounds entirely strange to us — amazingly, though, after some getting used to, it turns out to harmonize well with the belcanto-like opera vocals.

Brinali operas are always performed outdoors, under the open sky. The stage is a simple raised platform, and, with few exceptions, the only scenery is a large table, which can serve a variety of purposes. On this stage, all the main characters appear in duplicate, dividing

the singing and acting between them: the singers, always at the right side of the stage seen from the audience's perspective, and the pantomimic actors, which also may include a few extras who do not have corresponding vocal roles, at the left side.

Now I have to come to the part which, I am afraid, may severely scandalize the sensibilities of our compatriots: all the performers, including the musicians who are located at the back of the stage, are stark naked (or nude, which in Slavelaw society is a very different matter — slaves are naked, free people are nude — but here is not the place to elaborate on this distinction). Only when they step off the stage, during scenes in which they do not take part, do those of them who are not slaves don light gowns.

And finally I have to mention one last peculiarity of Brinali opera performances, which, if they had occasion to watch it, would certainly scandalize our compatriots even more — but let me just say that to a Brinali, the pantomimic acting at the left side of the stage when it comes to scenes of sexual intercourse, torture and death, is no more offensive than, for instance, it had been to a highly civilized Roman spectator at the circus games to see a gladiator or a naked slave bleed to death in the arena ...

The Courtship Gift

“The Courtship Gift” is one of the most popular Brinali operas, and during my two years stay in the Brinala archipelago I have seen at least a dozen performances — all of them, of course, on Slaveland islands, to which the Brinali opera, like all higher forms of Brinali art, is confined. Allegedly the plot of “The Courtship Gift” is based upon true events, though I allow myself some doubts as to whether this is

in fact any more the case than with the plot of, for instance, *Romeo and Juliet*. What is true in both cases, though, is that these dramas convince the audience that they *could* have happened — and thus “The Courtship Gift” gives us valuable insights into both the Brinali Slavelaw and Cannibal societies.

(It must be taken into consideration, though, that the Brinali opera is strictly a Slaveland art form, created by Slavelanders, and aimed at a Slaveland audience, who, as a whole, have little if any first-hand experience of life among the Cannibal tribes. Note, for instance, the aria of the Cannibal Warrior in the first scene of the second act, where he elaborates on their own culture to the Cannibal Princess — clearly this is done for the benefit of the Slavelander, who listens, like our own public might do, with a mixture of revulsion and fascination.)

As a work of art, “The Courtship Gift” exemplifies many of the characteristics of the Brinali opera. A Brinali opera always consists of a sequence of arias, which to a large part are soliloquies — if they are to be understood as being voiced aloud, the counterpart at whom they are directed is always addressed in the first line. In other ways, too, the opera takes care to help the audience follow the plot: each character, at their first appearance, introduces herself or himself, and the first aria of each scene always explains where and when this scene takes place. The Brinali opera, like most of Brinali poetry, is in free verse, the length of the lines varying according to dramatic purpose; in my translation I have attempted, as far as possible, to stay true to both the rhythm and the meaning of each line.

Let this work, which I have brought back from my two years in Brinala, take you to this unique place, with its magic, its horrors, and its beauty — but take this trip at your own risk ...

PART II — THE COURTSHIP GIFT

The Courtship Gift, opera in 3 acts, with 2 scenes each.

Cast, in order of appearance:

Toy

Mistress

Male Cannibal Warrior

Cannibal Princess

Male Ship Captain

Act 1, Scene 1

(Toy, Mistress)

Toy:

How soft and strong are my Mistress's thighs!
How good tastes her love-cup between them,
even when she is not yet fully aroused
by the workings of my lips, my teeth and my tongue!
How lucky am I,
to have been given the task of pleasing her!
How deep is my love for her!
I would do anything to give her pleasure,
I would gladly give my life for her,
should she ever so desire,
should she ever honor me
by offering to take it.

Mistress:

My toy is pleasant to look at and to touch,
with her slim body,
her small and firm breasts,
and her long flowing hair.
Her skin is smooth,
her lips are full,
her eyes are dark and large.
She is skilled in giving pleasure
with her fingers and mouth,
her tongue never tiring;
she is devoted to me,
willingly caters to my wishes and follows my orders,
and she never flinches or pleads,
however severe the pain
from any torments and punishments
which I hand out to her,
for her own education
or that of others,
or when my mood so directs me.

.

Often her ministrations
have given me strong and pleasurable orgasms.
Today, though,
as often during the last days, weeks and months,
my mind is distracted by thoughts of another girl,
one whom I do not possess,
one whom I have only seen once,
but whom I have to make mine,

or happiness will forever elude me.
From the window of my stately house,
I have seen her paraded through the street
that leads from the port to the Queen's palace,
in front of a group of captives,
taken in one of those skirmishes
that erupt every now and then
in the waters and on the islands
of our beautiful archipelago,
for no particular reasons but to exercise skills in fighting,
and to take captives, to kill them
as a deterrent to our enemies,
or to make them our slaves,
or, as the savage Cannibals do,
to sacrifice them to their Goddess
and to eat them, at their ghastly ceremonies.

.

This captive girl was from one of those savage tribes.
She walked in front of the group,
naked, her wrists bound behind her back,
but despite her bonds,
and completely ignoring the taunts and jeers from the crowd
and the rotten fruits and fish
that were thrown at her and her comrades,
she walked with such poise, such dignity,
letting humiliation not take away anything
from her stunning beauty,
which she displayed to us
as if from her own free will,

and not forced by the commands of her captors,
not to flaunt, but to share with us,
unselfconsciously,
the gracefulness of her body,
which nature and self-discipline had given her.
She did not lower her eyes,
but looked around,
at the people and buildings around her,
with interest,
and though not knowing the fate that awaited her,
whether she would live another day or not,
and though still bleeding from a battle wound at her side,
neither fear nor pain showed in her face,
and neither awe of nor contempt
for the enemies who had overwhelmed and taken her.

.

I saw her only for the time it took the captives
to walk by my house,
and only for one short moment,
as she looked up,
our eyes met,
but this moment was long enough
to burn her image indelibly into my mind,
and ever since,
I know that there is no happiness
for me without her.
I have learned that she is the daughter of a Cannibal Queen,
and, as a Princess, rules over her own small island.
Brought to our Queen's palace as a captive,

she was not made a slave, nor was killed,
but was treated with respect owed to her standing,
tortured with care not to cause permanent injuries,
and raped not only by the Queen's guards,
but also by the highest dignitaries of the court,
before she was brought back to the harbor,
and given a canoe of her own,
in which she departed, her release
a political gesture towards her mother,
the powerful Queen
of a fierce Cannibal tribe.
This girl, so unlike any other
who has ever caught my eye,
I have to make her mine,
and a plan is forming in my mind
of how I can achieve this.

Toy:

I can feel, smell, and taste with my tongue
that my Mistress is beginning to lubricate,
proving the onset of sexual arousal,
whether evoked by my ministrations,
or by pleasant thoughts of her own.
I am happy for her and will increase my efforts
to let her enjoy a strong and satisfying orgasm.

Mistress:

There is only one way I can think of,
how to win me this Cannibal Princess,
and this will need another girl to die for me.

For my plan to succeed
she has to die willingly,
even though her death will be slow and painful.
It has to be a girl who is really devoted to me,
who is skilled and attractive,
and who will not flinch from pain and death.
Whom, better suited for this task, could I find
but the toy who this very moment
is eagerly at work between my thighs.
It's a pity that I have to lose her,
but her life will be a small price
for me to pay,
for winning my wish with the girl I desire.
In fact the thought that I will send this toy,
who is pretty and has always done her best to please me,
to an agonizing death,
is heating up my sexual arousal!
When I think of the tortures she'll suffer to serve me,
I feel my orgasm building up!

Toy:

I hear my Mistress breathing heavily,
and now she grips my head with her strong hands,
causing me sweet pain as her fingers entwine my hair,
and her nails dig into the skin of my scalp.
Ripping out some strands of hair,
and drawing a little blood with her nails,
she presses me against her body,
and grinds my face forcefully against her crotch.

I am close to drowning in her joyful wetness,
and do not fight for air,
because to die for her Mistress's pleasure
is the best that a toy can ever hope for.
I feel her orgasm coming,
as my mind sinks happily into the blackness of suffocation,
my life resting in her generous hands.

Mistress:

Ah! My climax! My orgasm!
My Cannibal Princess!
My toy whom I will send to her death!
Marvelous spasms shake my whole body,
my mind is filled with pleasure and joy!
I am happy! I will win my wish!

Act 1, Scene 2

(Toy)

Toy:

I am alone
in the small room at the top floor
of the storehouse,
close to the harbor,
that belongs to my Mistress.
From the only window I have a view of the sea
that will carry me to my death.
It is calm, and deep blue, under a cloudless sky,
from which the mild rays of the benevolent sun
shine upon our world,
giving life and warmth to all its creatures.
These are a few days of rest for me,
to recover from the ordeal
from which my whole body still aches,
before, recuperated, I will embark on my journey.

.

On our last day together,
my Mistress has explained her plan to me,
and told me all that I'll have to know and to do,
to help her win her wish with the Cannibal Princess,
and thus to prove myself worthy of the honor
of having been chosen to give my life for her.
And after having given me the instructions for my death,
my Mistress, in her generous kindness,
summoned a new toy girl,

smooth-skinned, lithe, and graceful of movement and demeanor,
and made passionate love with her
in front of my eyes,
calling her the joy of her eyes, her lips and her love-cup.
It was hard for me to suppress my tears,
which, of course, I am never allowed to shed
in front of my Mistress,
when I saw the affection that she showed
for this other toy,
but I understood that she did it to comfort me,
so that, setting out on my mission,
I would not be troubled by thoughts of how she might miss me,
once I had died for her.

.

And then, in her final act of kindness,
to prepare me for my mission,
and to help me not to fail, from inexperience,
when having to gallantly bear the suffering
which will inevitably prelude my death,
she ordered me to be brought to this storehouse,
and here to be tortured and raped,
for three days without intermission,
by a skilled torturess,
who knew how to inflict pain
while avoiding to cause serious damage,
and by all the male slaves and laborers at her command,
brawny men with huge sexual appetites,
few opportunities to satisfy them,
and little restraint when such an opportunity

was offered to them.

Their penises, hundreds, one after the other,
and often two or three at the same time,
entered my mouth, my vagina and my anus,
while others spilled their sperm
all over my face and my body,
and hands forcefully groped my breasts,
my arms, my legs, my butt, and my sides.
I have led a sheltered life as my Mistress's toy,
subject to her whims and occasional cruelties,
when she needed to vent some frustration
or deal with bouts of bad mood,
but also protected by her,
for she is not one who is prone
to wantonly destroy her property.
Not used to severe, overwhelming pain,
and never having been ordered to perform,
nor having particularly longed for,
sexual encounters with members of the male sex,
I was close to being broken
by these sexual assaults and the tortures
and the near unbearable agony they caused,
but I held on to my knowledge
that I suffered as a service to my Mistress,
that I had to gain strength from my sufferings,
which I would need
to bravely bear pain that would be far worse
in the pursuit of her plan,
and these thoughts of my Mistress and her need for me,

helped me to survive this ordeal,
in body and mind,
which she had ordered for my benefit,
in her generosity.

.

Looking out of the window
and across the sea
in the direction away from the midday sun,
when I strain my eyes
I think I can see a tiny speck
in the far distance
where haze blurs the line
at which the blue of the sea
merges with the blue of the sky,
and this speck,
if it is real and not just my imagination,
would be the island of the Cannibal Princess,
to which I will travel
tomorrow at sunrise
when the winds will be favorable.
I will board a vessel,
a seaworthy ship with a sail
on a deck that spans two narrow hulls,
a ship that belongs to my Mistress,
which sets out on a trading mission
to one of the remote islands
of the archipelago,
and this ship will carry me
until we get close enough

to the island of my destination,
and at that point,
at the discretion of the ship's captain,
I will be thrown into the water, naked,
and a wooden board with me,
upon which I will climb,
to paddle it with my arms,
so that, before my strength is exhausted,
and before the darkness of night covers the sea,
I will reach the shore of the island,
at the one point where it is accessible,
and there, being met by the island's guardians,
I will reveal to them my mission,
petition them to let me meet the Princess,
so I can let her know that I have come
on the behalf of my Mistress, who desires her
more than anything else,
and who sends, as proof of her affection,
and to argue her case,
me, her toy,
as her courtship gift.

.

I know I will die,
as meat to be eaten,
after much pain and abuse,
far away from my Mistress,
but dying for her,
and by her orders,
privileged to have been chosen,

what more could a slave girl, a toy
full of love for her Mistress,
wish for in life,
and desire from death?

Act 2, Scene 1

(Male Warrior, Cannibal Princess, Toy)

Male Warrior:

My noble and revered Princess,
who has recently returned from the island
of the despicable Slavelanders,
who dwell in stone,
who eat the impure meat of the land,
and who do not, like we do, restrict themselves
to eating the pure meat of the water and air,
and who do not eat the purest of all,
the meat that walks upright and talks,
that which carries in it the divine spark,
that which delights all our senses
during hunt, preparation and consumption,
the meat that we eat at our feasts,
which satiates our hunger,
but also increases the strength
of our bodies and minds,
by which we please the Goddess,
whose commands we all follow
in life and in death.

.

I, as you know, have the honor
of being the commander of the troops
that watch over the large southern bay with its sandy beach,
which is the only part of our island
that is easily accessible from the sea,

where therefore we have constantly to be watchful,
not to be caught unaware in an attack
by one of the many tribes who try to raid our island,
as each of the tribes raids the others,
in honorable attempts to take captives,
whose meat they will eat,
from whose skins they will make leather,
from whose bones they will make tools,
whose skulls they will display as trophies,
and from whose blood they will make libations
to the Goddess, honoring her commands,
all this after making their captives
suffer prolonged torments,
to let them prove their fortitude,
and give them a chance to die bravely,
to increase the honor of their own tribe,
that of their captors,
and that of the Goddess
to whom we all owe our gratitude,
so that everyone wins.

.

Three days ago, when the sun had already set,
but the near full moon gave light from the cloudless sky,
the sentries who watch the sea from the cliffs
that delimit the bay on both ends,
gave signals that they spotted an object,
and swiftly we progressed towards the water,
male and female warriors,
with knives in our belts,

and spears and lit torches in our hands.
Not long did we wait before the silvery light
glistening on the surface of the dark sea,
the life-giving, all-encompassing water,
the sacred incarnation of the Goddess,
revealed to us a naked girl,
lying on her belly upon a wooden board,
paddling with her arms towards the shore.
Reaching it, she crawled off her primitive craft,
emerged out of the water wading on her knees,
and kneeling before us in the sand
she said she was sent to you as a gift,
but asked for the privilege of being brought to you alive,
for she had a message to deliver to you,
my revered Princess,
before willingly giving to you
her body, her life and her meat.

.

Such privilege must certainly be earned,
so we had to test whether she was sincere,
and whether she was worthy
for you to lend your ear
to her words
before lending it to her screams.
We let her prove her sincerity and her worth
by making her sexually please us the whole night
and the next day and night
in all conceivable ways,
but taking care not to harm her,

in case she was worthy of being brought to you,
while we taunted her with tales
of her upcoming tortures,
which always last longer and are more severe
for meat that has caught the Princess's attention,
and how she would be prepared and eaten,
still alive at the beginning,
her sufferings delighting the participants
at the feast.

All through her ordeal
she stayed unfazed by our taunting,
and remained eager in her sexual ministrations,
proving herself to be skilled in pleasing the girls,
and, at first, less skilled with the men,
but she learned with the experience,
as I can attest to,
which, though of little importance for you,
betokens a laudable attitude.

.

All in all, we came to the conclusion
that she had proven herself to be worthy
of being brought into your presence,
so, after letting her rest a day and a night,
that she might gain strength for the walk,
on this morning, the third after she arrived,
we blindfolded her and gagged her mouth with a cloth,
which, as the blindfold, and most of the cloth we use,
was woven from the hair of female captives and meat girls,
all parts of their bodies being useful to us

in life as in death,
and we bound her wrists behind her back
with straps made of tanned girl hide,
and then three of us set out with her
along the path that leads to our village,
prodding her on with the tips of our spears,
not allowing ourselves to rest
until we had reached our destination,
and so we stand before you now,
that you may receive this our captive
who claims to be a gift for you,
and proceed with her
as you desire.

Cannibal Princess:

My faithful warrior,
commander of the troops that guard the bay,
you have acted wisely,
and as your reward
you will sit next to me at the feast
when we consume this meat
which the sea has brought,
and you will be allowed
to take a cut of your choice,
and I will also give you the honor
of letting you please me
with your penis and tongue.
As for the girl,
she looks pretty enough

for me to enjoy her.
Remove her blindfold and gag,
but leave the straps that tie her wrists behind her back,
and I will take her with me
into my hut
where she can prove her skills
at giving pleasure to women,
and if I am content with her ministrations
I will let her deliver her message
and explain her mission,
before deciding the date
and the details of her death.

Toy:

O merciful Princess,
surpassing in beauty and strength,
judiciousness and generosity,
be assured of my gratitude
that you have deigned to receive me,
I will do my best to be worthy
of your kindness and trust.
I will please you with my skills
as well as I can,
and my body is all yours,
but I hope that the message
which I bring from my Mistress,
will please you even more.
For this noble purpose,
she has sent me to die.

Act 2, Scene 2

(Toy, Cannibal Princess)

Toy:

Magnanimous Princess
to whom I now belong!
The life of a toy is rich
in occasions for gratitude,
which she deeply feels
each time that her Mistress
by a glance or a gesture,
or even a word,
or the infliction of pain,
gives her to understand
that she is owned,
that she is her Mistress's property,
to be used or disposed of,
as it pleases the Mistress,
and that this toy
is thus an object of value,
and by her efforts and suffering
makes a contribution
however small
to her Mistress's happiness.
Being your property now,
noble Cannibal Princess,
it is your happiness
which I long to increase
by giving my life

and by relating to you
my former Mistress's message
of which I am convinced
that, if you heed it,
it will change your life
in an unforeseen way
that will lead you to happiness
you had never envisioned
nor expected to reach.

.

But first let me thank you
for your generous kindness
which you have shown me.
After we had entered your hut
you showed me the favor
of letting me please you
with my lips, teeth and tongue,
but then, after your first orgasm,
as I do not need them,
having been well trained
in submission and obedience
you removed the bonds from my wrists,
freeing my hands,
which I would never use other
than for giving you pleasure
or to carry out your commands,
and you let me use my skills
with my hands and fingers,
adding to those of my mouth,

to renew my efforts
and bring you once more
to the height of sexual pleasure,
which, as I can tell,
by the looks that you gave me,
were increased by your thoughts
of the tortures I will suffer
and of which parts of my body
you will deem worthy
to satiate your hunger
and delight your palate.
By the strength of your orgasms
you enjoyed these thoughts
and my ministrations,
showing that there is some worth
in my body and skills,
both now in your possession,
which increases my confidence
that you will consider favorably
the words of the woman,
who has sent you this present,
and the offer she makes.

.

The noble lady who sent me,
my former Mistress,
is a most remarkable woman,
outstanding in virtues, beauty and wealth.
One of the most renown persons
in our Queendom,

she is a close acquaintance
of the Queen herself.
For a short moment
you have looked into her eyes,
as she gazed out her window,
when you were led past her house
which you surely remember,
as it is the largest
of the whole street,
second in splendor only
to the Queen's palace itself.
You have certainly pondered,
looking at this stately mansion,
how rewarding it must be
to live under its roof,
enjoying its safety and comforts,
and to be close to its Mistress,
so dear to everyone's heart
who has ever had the good fortune
of being admitted to her presence.
And while you harbored these thoughts,
as you must have certainly done,
without any hope of ever
having such dreams fulfilled,
she, looking down from her window,
admiring your beauty and poise,
saw you looking up,
and when meeting your eyes,
desire overcame her,

and genuine love.
From this moment on,
she knew she had to win you,
and that you deserved better
than to live as a savage
on an uncivilized island,
among a primitive tribe,
without any comfort,
or the accomplishments of our culture,
and with feeble protection
from blood-thirsty enemies,
the vagaries of nature,
or the wrath of the Goddess,
when you fail to appease her,
due to the limits
of your dire conditions.
Much better than this
is the life that she offers
to you whom she loves
and whom she deems worthy
of being taken into her house.
And so she has sent me,
to make you this offer,
to serve as her messenger,
and her courtship gift.
As her personal slave-girl,
her cherished love-slave,
her most prized possession,
you will live in comfort,

and often she will call you
to eat from her table
and sleep in her bed,
close to her warm body,
with her large and firm breasts.

.

Free from all care and worries
is the life of a slave-girl,
and that of a love-slave
is the most rewarding of all.
To know that her life
is in the hands of her Mistress,
who relieves her property
from all needs and obligations,
except to give pleasure,
endure pain uncomplaining,
and obey her commands.
With the love that a slave girl
naturally feels for her Mistress,
as you will soon come to see,
to serve her is not duty,
but the highest reward.

.

Gladly I die
for her who has been my Mistress,
and also for you, the fortunate one,
upon whom fell her love,
happy to know that my death
will bring together

the two of you
in mutual joy.

Cannibal Princess:

Your tongue has valiantly endeavored
to please my clitoris, as well as my ears,
its success with the first task
having won it my permission to proceed with the other.
I have listened to all you had to relay,
and have no further need for you now,
until the feast, at which you will receive my reply.
The feast will be held at the next half moon,
six days from today,
and you will spend the time until then
together with two of our captives, a man and a girl,
in a bamboo cage, which serves as a larder
in which we keep our meat alive and fresh,
and where the three of you will be available
to whoever wants to take their pleasure with you,
until it is time to start preparations
for your meat to be eaten.
Put your hands behind your back,
for me to re-tie them.
It is done. Leave the hut now
and leave me to my thoughts

.

I am alone now. Night has fallen,
I lie on my back, on my soft bed of leaves,
looking up at the roof, and seeing the holes

that the last storm has rent,
which I should mend before the next rain,
and through these holes I see the stars,
and I see the moon, bright in the sky,
one day after its fullness.

My thoughts drift to the island of the Slavers,
to which I have been for one long day,
to the large town of stone with the Queens palace,
and its many stone houses,
and to the woman, who lives in one of the richest,
who sends me a gift and who says that she loves me,
and wants me to come to her as her slave.

I try to imagine her life there, in comfort,
and how she longs for a girl
of whom she has caught but a glimpse.

How empty she must feel!

And my thoughts they drift on,
to the two things that matter,
a life that is free,
and an honorable death.

Act 3, Scene 1

(Male Ship Captain, Mistress, Toy)

Male Ship Captain:

My esteemed Mistress, praiseworthy and prosperous,
whom I faithfully serve as the captain
of one of your merchant ships, well built
and kept in good repair, so that it may safely carry
the goods that you trade with, to increase your wealth
and to provide our island with all that we need.
On our way back to our harbor, with a precious cargo
of spices, rare stones, pearls and slaves,
sailing not far past a Cannibal island,
we scanned the waters, ready to fend off any attack
which those savages might attempt with their canoes,
despite the defeat that we've recently dealt them,
when we spied on the waves an unexpected sight.
On top of a wooden board, to which she was tied,
lay a naked girl, paddling the board with her hands,
on a course towards our island, which, however,
the wind and the currents would have kept out of her reach,
especially as we could see she was wounded and weak.
I brought the ship about and after a short deliberation
decided she did not pose any danger,
so we took her aboard as shippers should do
with all who are at sea and in peril.
We tended her wounds as well as we could,
and then, to our surprise, while she would not speak,
nor would she eat, she asked with gestures

for papyrus, ink and a brush, and wrote a long letter,
which she rolled into a scroll, indicating that its words
were meant to be private, but on the outside, to our
even greater surprise, she wrote your name.
Then she fell into a deep sleep, but she is still alive,
kept under guard in one of your store-houses,
until you decide what we should do with her,
since, saved by your ship, she is now rightfully yours.
Here is her letter. A sense of foreboding
fills me when I touch it. With your permission
I now return to the ship, to unload the cargo,
and await your orders regarding the girl.
May my Mistress prosper, as she deserves.

Mistress:

The foreboding is mine now. With shaking fingers
I open this scroll. I know from whom it is,
though I hadn't even been aware she could write,
when I bought her to serve for my pleasure,
and so knows the Captain, though he has the kindness
of pretending he doesn't. But things like these
can never stay secrets, the whole island will know.
My body feels cold, shivers run down my spine,
but I must know what happened, what she has to report.
So, here it is ...

Toy:

My venerated Mistress,
I have no tongue left
with which to give you the direful news,

so I write with my hand,
to tell you that I have failed,
that I have brought you disgrace,
instead of bringing you joy,
and that the pain that I suffer
from wounds all over my body
can never relieve me
of my sorrow and shame
of still being alive,
when only my death
would have brought you your wish.

.

Let me tell from the beginning.
The Princess received me,
as you had wisely envisaged,
and I courted for you,
praising your person,
and as instructed I told her
about your generous offer
to take her as your slave,
and always staying with the truth
I explained how her life
would become so much better,
if she accepted your courtship,
and, having been told
of all that awaited her,
your love and your presence,
and splendor and comfort,
how could she possibly not?

.
After she had listened,
and I had given her pleasure,
I spent some days in a bamboo cage,
with two other captives, a girl and a man,
from one of their protected tribes,
giving pleasure to the villagers,
as they demanded,
through the gaps between the bars.
Then we were marched to the beach
on which I had landed,
where they hold their feasts,
which begin when the sun sets,
and last through the night.
Fires were burning, and there was a huge crowd,
singing and dancing and beating their drums,
eager for our tortures to begin,
our agonies, as I was told, improving
the flavor and tenderness of our meat,
but also, I think, increasing their appetite.

.
The girl was first, but before she was tortured
they gave her a wooden pole, eight feet long,
entirely straight, with a pointed tip,
and she took it and danced, in beautiful motion
to the rhythm of the drums and the singing,
an enticing dance, captivating and sensual,
as the drums beat faster and the singing got louder,
until, exhausted, she collapsed on the sand.

What they did to her then, I cannot say,
because she was hidden by those around her,
but I heard her screams,
knowing she had to strike a difficult balance
between screaming too much,
which would be to her shame and thus
dishonor her captors, and not screaming at all,
which would make her seem contemptuous
of her captors, and thus dishonor them too.
She seemed to do well, for I heard laughter
that sounded content, and those who used me,
while I lay spread on the ground,
seemed pleased with the feast, as it unfolded.
Finally she was taken by four men who held her
stretched out between them, by her legs and arms,
while two more supported her back and her shoulders,
and a seventh took the pole, to spit her
through her vagina, slowly and carefully,
pushing the spit lengthwise through her body,
while she kept screaming,
until it emerged through her mouth,
her head bent backwards,
ending her screams, but not yet her life.
Thus spitted, they turned her
over the fire, where her life then soon ceased.

.

The man was next, and this time
I could see more of his tortures.
He, too, screamed, and his screams

mingled with his torturers' laughter,
the merriest laughter being that of the girls,
who had their fun with his penis and testicles,
using their teeth and sharp pieces of shells.
To prepare his meat they wrapped him
in succulent leaves, and then dug a pit
into which they threw stones, hot from the fires,
and then, still living, they lowered him down,
and covered the pit with pebbles and sand,
his screams finally dying away, as his meat
slowly started to cook in the underground heat.

.

Then it was my turn. The flickering fires,
the torches, and the half moon in the sky,
threw their light on the faces and the naked bodies
of the men and the women who gathered around me,
some covered in blood, all showing their arousal,
penises erect, labia open and glistening with moisture,
and unexpectedly I felt a strange excitement
to be at the center of their attention,
to be the object of the desire
of all those people, savages,
but beautiful, noble and strong,
and to be deemed worthy to give them
from my own body, that which is most precious,
that which sustains the circle of life,
food. That was what I now was becoming,
and a deep satisfaction filled my mind and my body
so that I neither feared death nor pain.

Up to this moment, after first I had met her
I had not seen the Princess, but now
she stood before me, naked as the others,
looking at me with an expression
which I could not read.
She did not speak to me, but to those around her,
she said, pointing at me,
this had been given to her, so only her dagger
should cut it, and with these words
she passed around the dagger she held, made of obsidian,
both hilt and sharp blade, of one perfect piece,
intricately carved, a tool of rare royal splendor,
and one by one, with this blade they cut
into my body, first removing a breast,
then cutting slices of meat from my thighs
and from my ankles and buttocks,
the first one cut by the warrior to whom
the Princess had promised my tastiest part,
then others followed, and with sticks
they held my meat over the fires, where soon
it became ready to eat, and they ate it,
letting me see through the haze of my agony
and of my arousal, how much they relished
what I had to give. The wounds
they cauterized with their torches.
Fire singed me between my thighs, and a girl
sliced off my labia, and then
the Princess herself, who had so far not touched me,
made me open my mouth, cut out my tongue,

and rubbed it between her legs against her clitoris
until she was pleased, then she held it, using a stick,
over the fire, and when it was done,
chewing with relish, and further pleasing herself
with her hand, she ate it. And finally
she spoke to me, saying, this
was what my tongue was best for,
and now
she would give me the answer to what I had been sent
to ask her, and taking the dagger
firmly into her hand, she carved
lines into my belly, bleeding and deep.
With all the pain that I was already in
I could not make out the pattern she carved
by tracing the movement of her hand
through the new pain,
but when she was finished I managed
to raise my head and look down
on the part of my body that had become her sheet
of writing, and I saw what she had written,
and while I had managed
to remain silent so far, except for a few moans,
now I screamed, spitting out
the blood from the stump of my tongue,
I screamed like no one ever, I think,
had screamed before, no matter how cruel
the tortures they suffered, I screamed
not from pain but from the horror
of what she had written, of what I had seen.

The rest

I do not have to tell, as it is obvious
from how I was found, on the water,
by the kind captain of your splendid ship.
When I started to scream, they turned away,
eating the meat of the other two victims,
paying no attention to me in my misery.
Once the sun had come up,
upon the Princess's orders,
they laid me upon the board on which I had come,
which they had kept,
but now I was tied to it, as of my legs
there was not enough left to support me,
and then they put the board on the water,
and pushed it away from the shore,
the outgoing tide aiding their effort,
and with my arms, which they had spared,
I paddled in what I hoped was the direction
of our island, not expecting to arrive
as I knew it to be far beyond my reach,
but waiting for death, not to erase my shame
which would be far beyond death's power to do,
not to end my pain, which I bear when I must,
but to give me blessed relief from my awareness
of my failure, and of the sorrow it brings.
I am in your revered hands now, and though I cannot
ask you for mercy, a toy that has failed
and that has become useless,

still I hope that from you I will receive,
in whatever way it may please you most,
that which has been denied to me twice,
death, which will end my unwelcome life,
a life that has been reduced to a message,
a direful one, carved into my body,
the single word which now is all that I am.

I shudder —

darkness surrounds me —

the word that she carved —

two letters —

No.

Act 3, Scene 2
(Mistress, Toy)

Mistress:

No!

No!

Nooooooooooooo ...

My courtship rejected.

My hopes gone.

My dreams shattered.

My honor lost.

I am destroyed.

The laughing stock

of all who know,

and *all* will know.

Rebuffed,

the noble Lady,

by a savage Cannibal girl.

But worse,

much worse,

rebuffed

by the girl I love.

I had not thought

that this could happen,

but even less

had I thought the pain

could be so strong.

The toy has failed.
Having failed her Mistress
she cannot live,
but I feel no hate
for her who has brought me
sorrow and pain.
I will grant her more
than the death she desires,
more than she can hope for,
refused as food,
damaged beyond repair,
disfigured and repugnant,
useless as a toy,
the shame of her failure
written on her skin,
worthless alive
and as worthless in death.
But there is one place,
one group of wretched people,
the slaves, the lowest of the low,
who toil in the depth of the pit of the quarry,
sleeping between the stones, the few hours
they are allowed to sleep,
starving on water and stale bread,
to them, even a girl as damaged
and worthless to others, as my former toy,
would be welcome for what pleasure
she can still provide,
and while eating human meat for us

is strictly taboo, a deathworthy crime,
an abhorrible thought,
they, not bound by any rules or laws,
for any punishment would only hasten
their deaths which they desire
as their only hope for escape,
will welcome her meat
to enhance their meager diet.
Not for their sake I will give her to them,
but for her own, so that her death
will be graced by a purpose.

.

So much for the toy. By my mercy
her broken path will be mended,
the circle of her life
will be properly closed,
though she is only a toy,
and her life and her death
are of little importance.
But what about me?
How can my own path be mended,
my circle be closed,
my agony allayed,
my honor restored?
Whom can *I* call on for mercy?
Who can heal my wound,
put an end to my misery,
when all has been lost?
I have to think ...

My gift refused, by the one I've courted,
sent back to me, with the word no
carved into her belly ...
Sent back to me ...
Oh Goddess, what fool have I been!
How could I have thought
that a girl like the one I desire, savage but proud,
a Princess among her tribe, could ever be won
by sending a gift, while I, who claims
to be a noble woman, remain behind, not ready
to give myself, to face my fate.
What an insult this has been to her!
How grateful I am to her,
who, with one word, has opened my eyes!
I had not been ready before,
but I am ready now, I feel elated, and for the first time
in my life, I think I'm truly happy!
Tonight, I will put all my affairs in order
and tomorrow morning, I will sail out
the way I had sent the toy, riding a wooden board
from ship to shore, naked, unarmed,
at the mercy
of water and winds,
to reach the merciless island
before nightfall, and like the toy
I will be taken to the Princess. And then ...
But what is then, is up to her, I cannot know it
and neither do I need to know.
All that I know is that I have to follow

where love leads me. I will kneel
before her, humble and aroused, and I will say,
in life or death,
I'm yours.
This,
and only this,
will close my circle,
will mend my path,
will soothe my pain,
will give me peace.

Toy:

I hang from my wrists,
tied to a long rope,
as I am lowered
into the depth of the quarry pit.
Looking down, I see the grim faces
of the quarry slaves,
turned upwards in hungry anticipation
as they watch the descent
of a bound naked girl,
wounded but alive,
into their hands,
their tools, and their teeth.
In the wise order of things
they have been given this place
of hardship and toil,
and here I will join them,
by my Mistress's orders,

to finally die.

I have only one breast,
no tongue and no labia,
and large chunks are missing
from my buttocks and legs,
but to those wretched creatures
who live without hope
for anything but death,
that which is left of me,
my hands, my mouth,
my ass, my vagina,
the meat on my bones,
the tears that I cry,
will still be of use.

My thoughts should be with them
to whom for a few hours
I will bring a short relief
from their perpetual misery
with my body and my pain
and my own welcome death.
But instead of them,
I think of my Mistress,
and of what I have heard about her
by those who have cared for me,
and tended my wounds,
so that I have lived
through the past days
to die here in this pit

by my Mistress's mercy.
At dawn she has sailed out
to offer herself
to the girl whom she loves.
The message I brought her,
inscribed in my body,
had been only one word,
but from this one word
she has learned who she is,
what it means to love,
what it means to die,
and what she must do,
for one finally
must be true to oneself.

.

I have reached
the bottom of the pit.
Hands touch me,
stones,
penises,
prybars,
knives.
I am soaked in sperm.
Now they begin
to tear me apart.
My skin opens up.
Blood pours out.
My bones break
and so do my teeth.

My vagina rips.
More blood.
Pain engulfs me.
Now one eye is gone.
Now the other one
too.
I still can hear
the grunts
of their delight.
In the darkness
and agony
I suffocate
from what they put in my mouth.
I feel my life
drain from my body.
I think
of my Mistress.
I die
content.

APPENDIX

Within SL

The Humiliated Courtship Gift

S. Ireland

December, 2013

I am a young slave girl, totally in selfless love with my beautiful Mistress. She is long of limb and of hair, buxom, and has a perfect complexion, which is lightly and evenly tanned. She bought me for a few coppers as I danced naked on the block in a slave market somewhere a little while ago.

She uses me for her pleasures, sometimes tying me to an ornamental grille in her bedroom when she makes love with her free lovers, because she knows this torments me emotionally, to see her give herself completely to them, as she never gives herself to me. She sometimes hands me to her male harem, or her guards, for a gang rape while she watches, for her amusement. I love her totally throughout, and in some cases, I love and crave her torments, too.

I am, this day, licking her labia, slowly and lovingly, as she croons to me about her latest desire. It is to possess and to love a young girl, still free, who lives on another island. My Mistress is courting her, hoping to take her a willing slave.

I cannot imagine why this project would present any difficulty, for anyone offered the position of love slave to my Mistress would accept

in a trice, would they not? At least, in *my* mind. But, I say nothing, I just keep licking and suckling, and listening.

“So ...” she says,

“I will send her a gift, and perhaps, that will attract her into my cage ...

“She is a Cannibal, and despises all who are not ...”

“Will she hurt your non-Cannibal slaves, Mistress?” I whisper.

“Do not worry little toy, *you* will not be caged with her!”

I am still concerned for Mistress’s other human property, but I know that she is very wise, and I relax and assume she will take care of things for the furtherance of her pleasure. Perhaps she will enjoy one slave torturing and eating all the rest? I do not know. But, I love her and do not care.

“So, I will send her a gift ...” Mistress continues. “A human gift, for her pleasure, as a token of my affection, and my favor.”

“Who can you trust for such a mission, Mistress?”

“Why *you*, my favored little toy!”

I am overwhelmed that Mistress will send me on such an important mission!

“Thank you, Mistress!” I gasp.

“You will paddle a surf board with your arms, naked, unarmed, vulnerable, to her beach ...”

My Mistress begins to lubricate, and as I continue to lick, she talks, and I listen.

“You will say to her, ‘I do not eat of the longpig. Do as you will with me.’

“Then, you will submit to her, and follow all her orders, explicit or implicit, for the sake of love of me.

“You will be taunted, humiliated, sexually used roughly, sex-tortured, gang-raped, and finally, death-tortured, killed, and eaten!”

My Mistress becomes excited with these ideas! I continue to lick, as I become excited, too, in harmony with her, my great love.

Finally, with my last instructions for my terminal actions, Mistress sends me on her mission, away from her forever.

After Mistress’s male guards have gang-raped me all night, taunting and humiliating me, as training for my adventure, I set out upon a surf board emblazoned with Mistress’s picture and name. I go as ordered, naked, vulnerable, willing.

~

I navigate to the girl’s beach, and surrender myself up willingly for the taunting and humiliation and all the rest.

They do taunt me, throw offal at me, and humiliate me in many ways. I revel in it, for it is for my Mistress, and it is kind of fun.

They torture and sex-torture me, and I love that, too, although as it continues, I am hurt and increasingly afraid.

They taunt me for not eating longpork, as they feast upon a man and a girl who they have taken captive, killed, and cooked. Then, during a gang rape, they begin to cut me.

They cut out my tongue, drain it of blood, cook, and eat it. They shred one breast and eat that, they cut off and fry my labia, and they cut me at random places and roast and eat what meat they can hack from me.

But, during all this torment, they do not hit any vital places, and they quickly cauterize all my wounds, so that I do not bleed out.

Finally ...

The girl, laughing at me, cuts the word “NO!” into my still-untouched belly skin.

She pushes me back onto the surf board, and with help from her Cannibal friends, shoves it into the surf. With the flat of her foot, she pushes and kicks my ass to impel me.

“Go back to your precious ‘Mistress,’ *meat*, as a lesson!”

~

I go, as ordered. To my beloved Mistress. A failure.
Humiliated.

THE MESSENGER

PART I: THE PUPIL

1.

The Bey

What I remember most clearly from my first visit to the Bey is not the huge garden with its statues, fountains and flower beds, not the magnificent facade of the palace with its marble columns and its gold-covered turrets, not the grand staircase with its cordon of guards on each side, grim-faced motionless men in leather, their hands on their shiny swords, it is not the audience hall with its stained glass windows, its elaborately laid parquet floor, its precious carpets, its crystal flower vases, its gilded candelabra, its sumptuous upholstered chairs and benches, not the Bey's exquisitely carved silver-studded ebony throne, and not the imposing figure of the Bey himself — all this I remember, but from my later visits, not many of them, always in the company of my father, first as a child, unnoticed by the Bey, later, when my breasts had started to form, eyed by him, with cursory interest, but never explicitly acknowledged, never spoken to. No, what I remember from this first visit is the girl. My father's meetings with the Bey always were private audiences, there were very few people present, one or two of the Bey's advisors, a servant at a discreet distance, a few guards who kept to the background, after having searched my father for hidden weapons — at my first visit it certainly had been the same, but, as I've said, I do not remember it. I only remember *her*. Naked, of course. I think now that she must have been a recent present to the Bey. Naked, slim, fair-skinned, small-breasted. All her hair was shorn, on her body

and her head, even her eyebrows and her eyelashes. Both her arms were cut off at her shoulders. Her lips and her labia were sewn shut. She did not look deformed, though, the amputations and the sewing had been done carefully, with attention to her delicate beauty. She reclined, almost comfortably it seemed, utterly immobile, with one leg sideways to allow the viewer's gaze to travel between her thighs, on a small rug-covered recamier. What I remember most about her are her eyes. Huge, dark, wide open, unblinking, they looked at me, her huge dark eyes looked into mine, and I looked back at her, my whole body as immobile as she was, for the whole time that my father and I stayed with the Bey, or so it seems to me in my memory. Even then I understood that the Bey had made her a token not so much of his power, but of his spiritual sublimity, his elevation above the profanities of common human needs — he could afford, without missing something, without thinking twice, on a whim, to take away such a beautiful girl's hands, mouth and vagina, to take away all her *uses*, to have his acceptance of her uselessness displayed. Only later did I understand that her suffering was her use for him. But even then, on this first visit, as our eyes locked, young as I was, I felt a strange stirring between my legs. I saw her only one more time, a few weeks later. I noticed the differences. She was still beautiful, but she had lost weight — restricted to liquid food, she was more skinny now than slim — but what had changed most were her eyes. They were still huge but they were not dark anymore, they were bright, shining, sparkling, reflecting the dancing flames on the candelabra, and they were not looking into mine anymore. They were not looking anywhere at all, they had been replaced by exquisitely cut crystals. I do not remember if I kept looking at her, or if I turned my gaze away — maybe this audience only lasted a few minutes, as some of the later ones did — but I remember that when

we left, before anyone could stop me, I walked over to her and ever so lightly touched her, with the tips of my fingers, on her thigh. And I remember that in this night, when I touched myself, I had my first orgasm.

2.

The Tutor

As I have said, I never saw that girl again, nor did I see any other one like her, nothing ever reminded me of her when my father took me with him on his visits to the Bey, but of course I did not need to be reminded, and I did not need to be at the Bey's palace to think of her, I thought of her all the time. To the Bey, obviously, she had just been an idea, a fancy, something to be tried out once, to be savored for a moment, to be dismissed, to be followed by the next idea, the next fancy, and yes, in his gardens, at his palace, over the years, I did see some of those, who meant not more nor less to him than she had done. To me, they meant nothing — they were part of the scenery, they lived, they suffered, they died, under eagerly watchful eyes or alone and forgotten — but she, she, she had become my obsession. I learned to stay still. To take off my clothes, to recline on a not too uncomfortable piece of furniture, in a not too uncomfortable but revealing pose, to keep my eyes open, and to stay still. There was no one to reveal myself to, there was no one into whose eyes to lock my gaze, I looked into emptiness, into a corner of my large room with its sparse furniture, high ceiling, large windows, bare walls onto which the sun drew its patterns, shadows of the huge old trees outside, but I defied the temptation to look at the patterns as they moved, as the wind blew through the leaves and branches, as the sun moved slowly across

the sky — I looked into nothingness, as I stayed still, as I looked into her eyes, into her dark eyes, and into her crystal ones. Sometimes, though it scared me, I settled down opposite the big mirror and, for hours, looked into my own eyes. I never sewed my lips or my labia, but, occasionally, to prove to myself that I could, I pierced them with sewing needles. I had my two arms, but I learned to get through whole days pretending they were gone, not using them, keeping them tucked away behind my back, though sometimes I cheated. I had my eyes, real ones, not crystal ones, but sometimes I kept them closed, for a whole day, and I cheated only rarely. I did not shave my head, but for my sessions of staying still I hid my long dark-blond not quite golden hair underneath a plain white scarf, and when the hair on my body began to grow, between my legs and underneath my arms, I regularly removed it, with the wax from molten candles. The most important thing to me, though, the essence of my being her, was to be absolutely still, for hours. When I had gotten through a particularly demanding self-imposed task without cheating, I rewarded myself by touching myself between my thighs. Sometimes, though not always, I did it in front of the mirror.

I had time for these games, I was alone most of the time. My mother had died not long after my birth, I have no memory of her. Her tomb is in a hidden corner of our garden. There is a whispered rumor that her voice had been heard from the tomb for many days after my father had buried her there. The tomb is built of granite, only half immersed into the earth, with small ventilation holes in its padlocked heavy and now rusted iron door, so she might have been heard had she still lived, but I have never met anyone who whispered that they had heard her themselves, only that they had heard the tale. I have always shunned that part of the garden, but then, I mostly stayed inside the

house anyway, where it was cool, and safe, and quiet, and where I had my privacy. My father was gone most of the time, on his voyages, trading, or on one of his missions for the Bey. We only had a small staff of four — three women and a man, none of them of any interest to me — for the large garden and the house, which was big and old and not in the best repair and gave them enough work to do, so they were happy enough to disobey my father's orders and obey mine instead, which were to keep me alone as much as possible, and never, ever, intrude on me without warning and outside our prearranged times and locations. It helped that I knew, and they knew that I knew, that they were lazy and kept long breaks when my father was away, and (as I soon found out) regularly cheated with grocery and maintenance bills. It really was an arrangement to both their and my own benefit. Food they were to leave in an anteroom of my quarters — the staff lived in an outbuilding, and the house was large enough, with my father and me as the sole occupants, for me to have my own suite of rooms. From time to time I let them in to clean my rooms. They always praised me for how tidy I kept them, and how I always carefully put away all my toys. I had many toys, my father was quite generous in this regard, from every journey he brought me pretty dolls in garments of precious fabrics, and doll houses, and carved animals, and wooden ships, and carts with real wheels, and castles complete with warriors, handmaids, artisans, court-jesters, princesses, princes, towers, turrets, balconies, draw-bridges, dungeons, and moats. It was little effort for me to keep all my toys neatly stowed away, for I never played with them and never took them out.

When my father decided it was time for me to have a tutor I was worried, but I soon found out that I had nothing to fear from him. He was a young priest, looking even younger than what his years must

have been, lean, tall, dark-haired, mild-voiced, mild-mannered, mild-faced, and dressed in a black cassock. A castrate, as fit his profession, but, while having a melodious contralto voice, he showed nothing of the physical features, softness, flabbiness, obesity, that are generally believed to go with the loss of the male sexual organs — and he had lost them completely, by his own hands, and proud of it, penis and testicles, as I later had ample opportunity to see. I was happy to find out, almost on the first day, that he was as uncomfortable with the idea of our spending eight hours a day together, six days a week, for the benefit of my education, as I was. The agreement that we soon reached was that we had one meeting Monday morning, where he told me the syllabus for the week, and a second meeting Saturday evening where he satisfied himself, mostly by trusting my assertions, that I had mastered it. What he did in the time between I neither knew nor cared about, but what I did, unencumbered by annoying watchful or helpful eyes, but with full access to my father's huge library, was to read and to learn. When I was through with my week's curriculum (usually by Monday afternoon), I grabbed whatever books attracted my fancy, and eagerly absorbed whatever they had to offer me. I spent less time now sitting absolutely still and staring at empty corners, or into my own eyes in the mirror, though I still did it, but many more hours I now spent sitting still and staring into books. Still naked, of course. I could not sit *absolutely* still, for my eyes had to move as I read, and I could not pretend not to have arms and hands as I needed them to hold the books and turn their pages, but I pretended they were not part of my body, they were purely some ingenious mechanical devices for book-reading, and I could not use them for anything else, like, for scratching myself when some spot on my skin itched, or for holding a glass of water to my mouth when I got thirsty — violations of sitting still

that were not allowed anyway, but being without my arms made it easier to resist the temptation. And as before, to that other temptation, when I had been good at keeping my own rules, I often gave in, with almost as little motion, and with the same solemnity, and patience.

The change that came was sudden and unexpected. All those hours of sitting still, learning, reading, or silently abandoning myself to self-absorbed passion, demanded a compensation, and about twice a day I raced up and down stairs at full speed, along corridors, through flights of rooms, ending up in my bedroom where I threw myself upon my bed, against my bed, beating and kicking with all my force whatever soft targets it offered of mattresses, pillows and blankets, until I fell down exhausted, covered in sweat, utterly out of breath, but strangely exulted. If the house-keepers, whom I did my best to avoid, ever knew about it, they never mentioned it (and of course I never did it during the rare weeks when my father was at home). As a matter of course I kept these exercises from my tutor — like my exercises in immobility, like masturbating, like my own thoughts and dreams, this was part of my private life, not meant for the eyes of an intruder, and he would not have been less an intruder than anybody else. Until, one day, I made a mistake, or maybe he did — strangely, I never tried to work out exactly how it happened — one day, he was in my sitting-room, the room in which we usually met, and through the open door to my bedroom he saw my breathless violent desperate cushion attack. I became aware of him only after I had exhausted myself, and realized that he had stood there, watching me, for quite a while. I looked at him in horror. Too weak to scream, too weak to run, too weak to grab some clothes and hide my nakedness, all I wanted to do was die. I knew I had nothing to *fear* from him, I hadn't done anything evil or forbidden, but I had been *invaded*, and nothing could ever undo that, could it? I looked

at him in horror, and I expected his face to show silent contempt, suppressed or open ridicule, blank incomprehension, concern, guilt, embarrassment, denial, before turning away and leaving me to my misery — as the seconds passed, I pleaded with him, silently, to leave, but he did not turn, nor did his face betray any emotions. The silence, the tension, became unbearable. “You do not know how to fight,” he finally said. Of course I didn’t, even though I had leafed through some books of martial arts. “Do you want to *learn*?” I do not remember when I had last cried before, or if I ever had, but now I cried, and I did not feel ashamed. I did not really understand why I cried, either. “Yes,” I said, “I want to.” “We begin, then,” he said, taking off his cassock, underneath which he was naked. I wanted to protest, I was exhausted, I was emotionally shaken, I was not prepared, surely we could wait until tomorrow? But I knew that at this moment I had learned my first lesson, and I looked at him, and he bowed to me, and with as earnest a face as his, I returned his bow.

From that day on, my life changed. We exercised twice a day, three hours each, six days a week, except for the irregular intervals of time when my tutor was taking his leave — and, of course, except when my father was present, who, fortunately, showed little interest in the details and the progress of my education. (His interest in me, incidental enough as it was, was of a very different kind, after all.) We exercised with dummies which we built from blankets, pillows and cords, but mostly we exercised with each other. I learned the five paths — the path of the mind, the path of the body, the path of environment, the path of the opponent, the path of combat. “By teaching you the five paths, by teaching them to anyone outside the brotherhood, I break a solemn oath,” he once told me. We had never spoken more than the absolutely necessary before, and we still did not speak much, but

unavoidably we were closer to each other now. Before, I had not even cared about what to call him, now I asked him for his name — I was still very young, I was not aware that his name might not be the correct form of address. “Call me Al-Magest,” he said. I looked it up at my father’s library, it meant something like “the master, the source of knowledge.” It was good enough for me, my tutor had a name now, I never showed him but secretly I was proud of it. He hardly spoke about himself, and I never asked, but I learned that he was an exile, of his country, of his family, of the brotherhood — wherever, and whatever, they were. Even less I learned about his present life — like, where he went and what he did when he took his leaves, or even where he lived (which my father must have known, I suppose, but I never asked *him*, either). We did not have time for idle talk, of course — my training, incessantly exploring the limits of my physical and mental powers, transgressing them, expanding them, testing them anew, took all our time and breath. He never spared me, my body was constantly covered in cuts and bruises, and more than once I suffered broken bones (which he taught me how to treat, as he taught me many other healing skills) — I took up weird ostentatious sports, like climbing trees in our garden, falling down with conspicuous clumsiness, to account for my injuries when I feared they might become too noticeable even to casual and uninterested observers. During all the time, I never flinched, I never hesitated. I took my lessons with the same determination with which I had exercised immobility, and I still saw before me the still and silent armless girl with her dark and crystal eyes.

I learned. The years passed, and I learned, and I grew up. By the time when my father took me with him for the final visit to the Bey, my breasts had already grown to the size where I wished they would stop growing — I had never found large breasts to be beautiful or de-

sirable. The Bey, I suppose, felt differently, for he looked at me with a discernible lack of enthusiasm, as I stood before him naked. This had been the purpose of the visit, to let him look at me. Except for my too small breasts, I think I didn't look that bad, though. Even my skin was mostly unblemished and unbruised, as Al-Magest had left several weeks ago, and not yet returned. I kept up my exercises in his absence, but, bereft of a training partner, mostly regarding the first two paths, mental and physical self-control, and they didn't bruise me that much. My knowledge of the third and the fourth path helped me, without *doing* anything (and there wasn't much I could have done), to pass the Bey's scrutiny. "She will do," he said. Maybe it would have been better for me if I wouldn't have done, if I hadn't passed — should I have tried to fail? *Could* I have failed if I had tried to? I do not know, but as I stood there I was very sure that, whatever bad not failing might bring me, failing would easily have brought me worse.

So, whatever my own part in it finally had or hadn't been, "she will do" it was. I would do as the Khan's wife. As *one* of the Khan's wives, of course, but as his main wife, his public wife, for one year. The Khan took a new wife each year, from one of the provinces, to strengthen their ties with their ruler, to proudly display, for everybody to be seen, the unity of his empire, embodied in his august person. Why I had been chosen I did not know, but there probably had not been that many girls to choose from, once the Khan's decision had fallen upon our province for this year. The Khan's bride must come from a good and well-connected family, but not so good and well-connected that others might view their promotion to being the Khan's new in-laws as a threat to themselves — my father, I think, fit this perfectly. She must be young, but not *too* young, she must be reasonably pretty, she must be unattached — a teary-eyed bride lamenting the separation from her

lover would be a nuisance — and she must be educated and confident enough to be presentable, to be able to perform her representational duties. And, it was the Bey who had to choose her and approve of her, and who would suffer the consequences if he chose badly — so, given that he knew me, and given his close ties with my father (of what nature they were, I never knew), I seem to have been a logical choice. There were no further questions, no further tests, my father must have vouched for me.

We left the next day. I did not regret leaving my home, I had never really considered it my home anyway. I regretted that I could not say good-bye to my tutor. “Will you do it for me?” I asked my father. “If I see him,” he replied. There was one more question I had. “What will be after that year?” I asked, as we set sail. “Do not worry, they will find some use for you,” my father reassured me.

3.

The Father

The voyage across the sea, on one of my father’s merchant ships, took three days, or three weeks, or three months — three moments, three eternities, three times to learn. The cabin I shared with my father — his cabin, on his ship — was small, simply furnished, and fitted the austere personality that my father had made himself to be, or had made himself up to be. Ten by twelve feet, a bed, a bench, a table, two chairs, a cupboard, a chest of drawers, a washstand, a door, a small porthole near the ceiling, an oil lamp, two chamber pots, a flap next to the door for putting them out when they were filled, blankets, a few pillows, some plates, cups and cutlery, a jar with water, a bottle with wine, a huge trunk with our baggage. The furniture, the floor, the walls and the

ceiling were from the same wood, nondescript, dark, sturdy, stained. This was our room. For the whole voyage, except for one occasion, one that I would have preferred to avoid, this was where I stayed, to where I was confined.

“Three lessons you will have to learn,” my father told me, after we had come aboard and settled into our cabin — three lessons, three skills I needed to possess, before becoming the wife, if only temporarily, of the most powerful man in the Empire. I took off my clothes, and my father locked them into the trunk.

The first skill I had to learn was how to please a man. So far, my father had often enough pleased himself with me, and in various ways, but on these occasions all I had to do was to allow him the unimpeded use of my body, and not to interfere with his seeking of pleasures. This was, I think, what he preferred, not only from me but from any woman he sexually employed, but more than silently indulging passivity would be expected from the Khan’s wife, and, whatever his personal preferences were, my father was competent enough as a teacher. The sea was calm, I hardly felt the movements of the ship, I ate, I slept, I learned. I hardly felt the passing of time. What I learned was to use each single part of my body for a man’s sexual benefit — my fingers, finger tips, finger nails, toes, toe nails, hands and feet, arms, ankles and thighs, my hair, my forehead, my eyelids, eyelashes, cheeks, nose, lips, teeth, tongue, my throat, my shoulders, my armpits, my nipples, my breasts, my belly, my back, my ass, my vulva, my vagina — I learned to use them tenderly and with force, to do the expected and the unexpected, to grip and to release, to give and to withhold, to arouse, to tease, to satisfy, and to arouse again, while never, never, ever seeking gratification for myself, or allowing it to happen. This, sometimes, seemed the hardest part, though at other times it was easy enough. The only male

body, the only penis to practice with, was my father's. The sailors and the captain could not contribute to my education, because I had to remain pure, for my future husband. My father had brought a small blue flacon from which, unless it was time for us to rest, he poured a few drops of a colorless liquid into the palm of his left hand and licked it up after he had ejaculated, which allowed him to continue my lessons with little interruptions. He told me, but only once, that this potion put a great strain on his body, that it drained his life from him, that it could cost him years of his life, that he was doing it for me. Not feeling grateful to him would have been unkind.

The second skill that I had to learn, to make me a worthy wife for the Khan, after I had sufficiently mastered the first one, was to bear pain without flinching. After I had mastered the first part of my education to my teacher's sufficient satisfaction, this second part seemed to demand very little from me. My father would not do any damage to my body that might still be visible when I would be handed over to the Khan, so the pain I had to bear was mostly that of needles, even if my father knew how to use them with good effect, upon my nipples, my clitoris, or underneath my toe- and fingernails. I had to learn, he told me, to stay still, without movement, without a sound, when the pain threatened, when it approached, when it set in, when it grew and lasted and did not stop growing, but staying still was what I had already learned, what had filled a major part of my life, all those years since he had first taken me to see the Bey. And pain, I shrugged it off, it was just pain, an opinion held by a part of my mind, which I simply disagreed with, disengaged from, as I had learned to do, over the years, in my fighting lessons, of which my father had never known. But then, just before I felt complacency to set in at how easily I mastered this task, just before I began to wonder if by not showing a need to learn

I might be upsetting my father's educational program and if, for his benefit, I should let him hear a suppressed moan every now and then or let him see an involuntary ever so tiny twitch of my face or my hands or whatever part of my body his needles were about to go in, just then I learned that I had to learn, after all. "It's no good if you block out the pain," he said, "you have to admit it, allow it, feel it, and still not flinch." And then, when he held the tip of an awl against my exposed clit, when he slowly but steadily increased the pressure, when his arm strained, when the awl's slightly bent tip carved a deepening dent into me where it hurt most, when it finally broke through the skin and entered me and twisted and entered deeper and kept twisting, then I allowed the pain, and it washed over me in a sea of flaming agony, engulfed my whole body, overwhelmed me with its unexpectedness, turned me inside out, washed me away, threw me against a rock of splintered glass and let me lie with broken bones and a broken mind, and I welcomed it, and embraced it, and invited it in, and clung to it, and refused to let it go, and when, after a far too long eternity, the flames had subsided and my mind and body had again composed themselves, and I found myself where I had been before it had started, my father said, "You closed your eyes for a moment, but otherwise you have done well."

"Let me try again," I said, and he let me.

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If I could have chosen one of the three lessons to avoid, it would have been the third one. Not because my father said it would be the hardest — I knew it wouldn't be that hard for me, but it was a lesson I didn't feel I needed, and this made it seem so pointless, such a waste. From the cargo of twenty-four slave girls I had to choose one who would

die — slowly and painfully, while the others had to watch, and while I would watch, too. Now that I had learned to bear my own pain, according to my father, I had to learn to bear that of others. “But they are your merchandise,” I said to him, in a pointless attempt at dissuasion, “they are *valuable*, aren’t they?” “Less than you are,” my father replied. “You are worth the expenditure. Education comes at a price. What do you think Al-Magest has cost me?” For a short moment I thought he meant he had *bought* him, but he was talking about my tutor’s fee, all those years. But, I suddenly understood at this moment, the Khan *had* bought me. My price certainly covered my upbringing, my education — the part my father had ordered, and the part he didn’t know about — and a hefty surcharge. I had been an investment, which had paid off, or would pay off if the Khan was satisfied with the deal. A dead slave girl was a negligible quantity in this business. When he asked me if I was ready, I said yes, and we went. It was the first time that I left our cabin since we had come aboard. My father did not want me to be naked in front of the crew. I put on a simple white linen dress. I hadn’t taken much clothing with me, or much of anything.

I knew that slaves often suffered terrible conditions on board of merchant ships, but on this ship this was not the case, at least not for the girls. The cabin in which they were kept was some ten feet wide and fifty feet long, and it was above the water line — on one side it had portholes through which light and fresh air came in. On each of the long sides there was a bench on which twelve girls were sitting next to each other, naked of course, their wrists chained to bolts above their heads, their ankles chained to bolts on the floor, their mouths gagged. All but one that is, who was their minder. Except during the night watch she was unchained, and she had a key to the locks — not to the door, of course — and one girl after the other, three times a day, was

unchained by her for fifteen minutes, during which she could take out her gag, stretch out her cramped limbs, sit down on a small table at one end of the cabin to a mug of water and a bowl of not very appetizing but nourishing mush, relieve herself over a hole at the opposite end, and, once a day, clean herself head to toes with a wet towel. The sailors were not allowed to touch them — all they could do was watch them through several small windows — and only the captain and the officers, every now and then, entered the cabin to enhance a chained girl's diet with their sperm.

And in this cabin I stood now, accompanied by my father, and several of the sailors. It struck me how similar the girls looked — long black hair, white skin, supple limbs, slim waists, large firm breasts — they looked as if someone had chosen a model, and ordered two dozens of the same type. Maybe this was how it was, or maybe it was just this year's fashion in girls. Only their faces were different, and their expressions. They knew why we were here, why I was here. I should have chosen quickly, randomly, to get it over with, but I looked from one to the other. In some faces I saw defiance, in some I saw apathy, in some I saw fear, in some I saw sorrow or even tears, some seemed to be close to fainting. Some avoided my eyes, some looked down, some looked at me pleadingly, some stoically, some tried to charm me with a smile. It was not only death I'd bring to one of them, but hours, many hours, of unspeakable agony. The silence stretched. "This one," I finally said, pointing to the one whose sad despondent expression had told me that she had already known, had always known, that the choice would fall upon her.

The men unchained her and removed her gag, then they gave her a potion to drink that would paralyze her vocal cords — her screams would be silent. While we waited for the potion to take effect she knelt

before us, thin, pale, slightly trembling, resigned. One of the men pinched her nipple, hard, and she opened her mouth, but only a light wheezing sound came out of it. It was time then, and she knew it, and her soundless scream rang in my ears, and in that of the other girls. About the men's ears, I do not know.

The first thing they did was to break her arms and legs, then they laid her down on the floor — only now I saw how dark with stains it was — and began to rape her, some of them not paying attention whether they caused agony in her broken limbs, others paying attention and deliberately straining and twisting them, and when they were through the others came and raped her, one after the other, and by the time *they* were through, some of the first ones had already regained their strength and raped her anew, and then, when they had satisfied themselves, they brought out their knives — strange knives with blades that were curved at their ends, sharp-edged on the inner sides of the curves — and, wielding them like huge claws, not stopping the rapes, they began to cut her, to rip her apart — slowly, expertly, not letting her die, not yet, not yet. “You can stop it,” my father said, had already said it before it had begun. He sat next to me, we had been given two stools to sit on, he did not participate in the rapes and tortures. “You can stop her pain, her torture, at any time, by simply walking away. When you leave, she dies. She suffers only as long as you stay and watch her suffer.” Hours passed. She tried not to move, as every movement increased her agony, she could not scream or speak, but her eyes spoke of her pain. I did not walk away, because I knew it was a test — learning my lesson meant I had to stay, and meant that I had to understand that I had to stay; had I failed, the lesson would have been repeated, with a different girl. But I also did not walk away because, as I had known, it was not that hard for me pass this test.

In the books from my father's library, without flinching, I had seen worse. By the time that the potion began to lose its effect she was too weak to make much sound, and ultimately, her eyes now gone, too, she became unresponsive to the men, the blades, and the pain, and, at last, they carried her away — to the galley, I suppose, where the cook would find a final use for her — and they wiped the blood from the floor.

It was too late in the day now to have the girls unchained, one after the other, so they missed the day's noon and evening meals, but the one who was their minder went to each one now with a cup and gave her water to drink, and cleaned up under her if she had not been able to contain her bowels. None of them looked at me now. Did they detest me for having caused the death of one of theirs? Did they silently thank me for having chosen *her* and spared *them*? Had the many hours of the agonizing spectacle drained all emotions from them? They did not turn their heads as my father and I left their cabin, and returned to our own, where a meal waited for us, and the night.

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The remaining days of the voyage we mostly spent in silence. I had learned my lessons, or given a good enough impression of having learned them, there was nothing more on my father's agenda. He did not seem to be inclined to talk about the future that awaited me, or about any other topic, and neither was I. Among the few possessions I had with me — if they still were my possessions, if they ever had been — there were a few books, and I spent the time reading.

We arrived on a late evening. I saw little of the harbor, except that it was big, and I saw even less, or nothing, of the town. My father led me directly from our cabin to a carriage that waited for us where the ship had docked, and in which we were the only passengers. The windows

were hung with dark drapes, as we drove from the harbor to the Khan's palace. It was for my future husband to show me his country, his town, or whatever parts of them he might choose for me to see, if he chose so. It was for him now to decide where I would be, what I would do, what would be done with me, and what I would get to see, and some of it, without a doubt, would not be pleasant.

We left the carriage in a dark hall, where mine and my father's ways separated. A valet led me to my room. It was larger than our cabin on the ship, but windowless, and even more sparsely furnished. Comfortable enough for a prison cell, though. A cup with water on a small table, a candle, a chair, a chamber pot, a bed. I drank the water, put my dress on the chair, used the chamber pot, blew out the candle, and lay down upon the bed to sleep. I did not know when the wedding would be — assuming there *would* be an official ceremony — but I knew that the Khan would call for me in the morning. They would give me breakfast and a chance to wash before bringing me in to him, wouldn't they?

4.

The Khan

The Khan received me on the small bed in his huge private bedroom with its thick carpets. There was no conversation, there was only one purpose to my visit, there was only him, and my body. So this was it, now, this was what I had learned for. Soon he was breathing heavily, while I was silently debating my guilt.

I had read all the stories about the brave maiden slayers of strong and powerful men — ravishers, conquerors, oppressors, cunningly seduced to drink themselves into unconscious sleep, or poisoned by

drugs hidden in golden amulets, their eyeballs pierced with swiftly wielded hairpins, their hearts stabbed with slim daggers cleverly hidden in the folds of silken underwear, I knew all those tales, I knew the names of all those dauntless damsels, and from the moment I first heard about their deeds I had despised their perfidious furtive duplicities. I was not like them, I would not be like them. The Khan was wide awake, hardly weakened by the short act in which he had taken sexual possession of his new bride; not inebriated by drink, fatigue or drugs, not distracted by any wiles of what sexual allure I might be able to muster, he was firmly standing on his feet and his hands were free, when I said to him, "I will kill you now." Only after I had said it I realized, with horror, that I had already failed. I realized that here was a man, a seasoned warrior, brawny and tall, hardly past the prime of his years, and confronting him was a slim girl less than half his age and half his weight, naked, unarmed, his sperm slowly dripping down her thighs — but it was too late, there was no way out. I could not take back what I had said, I could not turn it into a joke for he was not a man to be joked with, I could not escape. He raised his arm, not to fight me — this would have seemed a ridiculous idea to him — but to punish me, and this punishment, I knew, after having knocked me down and handed me over to the guards, would make the death of the girl on the ship seem merciful and quick. "I am sorry," I said, more to myself than to him, for he could not possibly understand what I was sorry for, and I was sorry for myself, after all, more than for him. As a mental exercise I went through the five paths — focused my mind, took control over my body, took in my surroundings, read my opponent's intents, deliberated my movements of evasion and attack, but he, of course, was already lying dead at my feet, his windpipe crushed, his neck broken, his head twisted at an hideous angle.

I had not been better than them, after all, it had not been a fair fight, I had not been able to give him a fair warning.

I stepped back, away from him, until my back was against the wall, opposite the small door, and tried to understand, why had I killed him, and since when had I known that I would? He had been the Khan since before I had been born. I knew, as everyone knew, that thousands had perished in his dungeons, and hundreds of thousands had perished in his wars, bled to death on the battlefields, burned to death in the conquered villages and towns, died screaming at the hands of his marauding, pillaging, raping, murdering troops, or starved to death next to their scorched and blood-drenched former fields. I knew this, but who had made me his judge, who had made me his victims' avenger? I was none of this, nor would I have wanted to be. He had bought me, he had raped me, but I had been offered to him, he had only taken what he had deemed rightfully his. For this, too, I felt no desire to be his judge. He might have killed me, eventually, but for the time being I had not been in danger of my life — I *had* not been, but now I was the slayer of the Khan, with nothing to speak in my favor, and no possible way of escape. So, why *had* I killed him, and myself in the process? I found no answer, but I saw *her* before me — the Bey's silent girl, with no hair, no arms, no orifices, her huge dark eyes looking into mine, shining crystal eyes — I stood still, as still as she had sat, and waited.

I had no sense of time, but I think I did not have to wait long — something must have told them that something was not right, the door opened, four guards entered, immediately followed by the Khan's daughter. Huge men with keen eyes and bulging muscles, dressed in black leather fighting gear, short swords in hand, elite fighters, professionals, highly disciplined, well trained. One of them their captain.

They were members of the Khan's personal bodyguard. Their task was to protect the Khan and to carry out his orders. The Khan was dead, beyond protection, beyond giving orders. Others might have thrust themselves at me, the Khan's obvious assassin, knocked me down, broken my arms, or killed me on the spot. They, taking in the situation, seeing that I was naked, unarmed, posing no danger they couldn't handle, froze. The Khan's daughter took a few steps to the side, away from them, and in the huge room she easily stayed some twenty feet away both from her dead father and from me. She was clad in a simple flowing high-necked dress of white silk, with a wide belt of black leather, with large silver applications. I had seen pictures of her, and I had recognized her immediately. She was older than I was, taller than I was, her breasts were fuller than mine, her skin was smoother, her hair was longer, darker and shinier, her stance was more graceful, her lips were redder, her face was beautiful and serene.

As we all stood immobile, my father entered the room — he had been told, he had run from where he had been — he gave me a short glance, then past the guards hurried over to where the Khan lay dead, bent down to him, rose up again, gave me another short look of horror, disbelief, disgust, and scorn, then turned to the Khan's daughter, and said, "What an awful tragedy. What a horrible crime. Do what needs to be done." It was my death sentence, but what might he have possibly done to save me, even if he had wanted to? Slowly, gracefully, she moved. Her left hand went down to her belt, touched one of the silver applications, and I saw that they were not applications at all, but knives. Silver throwing knives. She looked at me, and her arm came up, blade in her hand. I closed my eyes, I did not want to see my death. There was a swift rustling of silk as she threw, then a strange wheezing sound, then a dull sound as from a fall. I opened my eyes again.

The guards had not moved, the Khan's daughter stood where she had stood, my father lay next to the Khan, the knife in his throat, his blood spurting out, drenching the carpet. Then again a slow movement. The captain of the guards, facing the Khan's daughter, sank to his knees. "My Queen," he said.

She had nodded her head, acknowledged their pledge of allegiance, then sent them out of the room. Now she took another knife from her belt, then opened the belt and let it drop to the floor. When she raised the arm with the knife, again the left one, her throwing arm, I thought of closing my eyes again, but I kept them open. She did not throw the knife, she held it against her throat, touched the neckline of her dress, then cut through it, cut down all the way, until the dress fell apart, and with an almost imperceptible twist of her body she let it slide off her shoulders. She was naked underneath. The knife, pointed and double-edged, had left a softly bleeding red line on her body, from her neck to her crotch. The knife still in her hand, she walked over to me. While she looked into my eyes the tip of her knife touched my throat, broke the skin, then went down, between my breasts, across my belly and belly-button, down, down, drawing a bleeding red line on my own body just like hers. At first I did not dare to breathe, then my breathing became heavier. With a flick of her wrist she disposed of the knife, then she took hold of my hand, drew me down. On the soft thick carpet, watched by the dead Khan and my dead father, covered in each other's blood, we made love.

5.

The Queen

The sheets were smooth white satin, the bed was large and soft. Through the open window I saw the blue sky, a more translucent blue than I was used to, beautiful in its novelty to me. A breeze of mild, tangy air blew in. When I raised myself on the stack of soft pillows, the lower part of the window revealed the sea, a darker blue than the sky above it, specked with white sails, busy and calm, endless, eternal, soothing ... Her hand, gently, pushed me down again. “Three days of mourning,” she said, “three days for me to recover in solitude from the shock of my father’s sudden death from heart attack. Three days before I have to take up my duties as the Queen, and begin to console his subjects, my subjects now, for their tragic loss.” She smiled. “Three days in which to succumb to my grief, undisturbed ...” She half bent over me, the tip of the index finger of her left hand trailed the thin red line down from my throat, slowly, unstoppably, not that for all in the world I would have wanted it to stop. I almost winced when she reached my clitoris, not from pain but from remembered pain, not from the shallow cut from her knife, but from the agony of the awl. A scar had begun to form on it, and I thought that it had lost some of its sensitivity, or all of it, it hadn’t been important, but I could feel it now, feel her, as she gently circled it, gently pinched it between two fingers, as she brought her face against mine, covered my mouth with hers, now only touched me lightly with one finger again, and then, with sudden force, thrust into me with her finger nail — screaming agony spread through me — I cried, I gripped her with my arms, my tongue filled her mouth, I pressed myself against her hand, her body, her soul — I sank into an ocean of orgasmic ecstasy.

“I want to be honest with you,” I said to her, later, as we lay exhausted and entwined. “When you stood before me with your knife, and let it run down my body, I showed you my trust, didn’t I? But I did not. At any moment, had you changed your grip and tried to stab me, I could have killed you.”

“I know,” she said. “And I had trusted *you*.” She took my hand, and led me out of the bed, onto the plush white carpet. A comb from her nightstand served for a knife, she touched me with it lightly. “But I want to *see* it,” she said. “Show me.” With a knife I would have had to break her arm, with a comb, and just for demonstration, I could simply throw her to the ground — the thick carpet would protect her from harm from the impact. I moved. A gasp, a sudden jolt, a swirling of space, too swift to register before it was over, and I found myself face-down on the carpet, her knees on my back, my arms bent, helpless in her grip. A moment later I was free, on my back, regaining my breath, and she smiled down upon me, before she bent down and kissed me.

“How ... how ...” My breath had not fully returned, from the fall, from the kiss.

“Trust and honesty, from now on, between us,” she said. She stood up, went to the window, and pulled on a cord that I had thought was there to move the curtains. “I want you to meet someone,” she said. “No need to get dressed,” she added as she saw me look around for my nightdress, which I *think* I had worn when she had brought me to this room? The door opened, and a man stepped in, tall, dark-haired, dressed in soft black clothes, with regal bearing. He regarded me kindly, as I stood there, naked, staring at him. “May I introduce to you,” she smiled at me, “from today on, the Commander of the royal guard. Formerly, the black sheep of the family. My dear little brother.”

He bowed. I just kept staring. I knew now who had trained her, who had taught her her fighting skills. I suddenly knew a lot more now, too, though I would need some time to fully comprehend it. “I ... I am glad to see you here,” I stammered. “I am glad, too,” said Al-Magest.

INTERLUDE: THE HERON

Like a heron rising from the lakeshore, gliding through the mist of dawn, without a sound, looking for prey, gracefully, effortlessly, and deadly.

Who has not heard the tales that are whispered about the messengers of the Queen? That their powers far exceed those of mere mortals? That a messenger can walk through closed doors, or even through solid walls? That she can make herself invisible? That she can pass through a crowd, through a phalanx of enemies, without being noticed? That she cannot be held, and cannot be bound? That she never tires, that she does not need light, nor water, nor food? That she can kill with a flick of her wrist, the touch of a finger, or even with a look? That she can force anyone who confronts her under her will? That, in a battle, she can defeat a whole army? That she knows her Queen's thoughts, and the Queen hers, no matter how many oceans, deserts and mountains lie between them? That she is always loyal to her Queen, and to the cause of justice, but would instantly die if the two ever diverged?

None of it is true, of course, or not in the way that people think, when they hear these tales, or, always whispering, repeat them — whispering, because you do not talk aloud about magic and the forces of darkness, for to those who cannot control them they might bring death and destruction if, inadvertently, ever being summoned.

In truth, there is nothing magical about a messenger's powers. All she does is to combine, and to untiringly practice, the skills of the athlete, the acrobat, the martial arts champion, the escape artist,

the conjurer, the navigator, the pathfinder, the hunter, and the warrior. Plus those of the herbalist, the poisoner, the surgeon, the healer, the torturer, the spy, the courtesan, the linguist, the scribe, and the cryptologist, and a few others, which each messenger chooses for herself, according to her talents and her likings. And, of course, the skills of the diplomat, and those of the military commander, though this, the most deadly of her skills, is the one that she hopes never to have to use. A messenger cannot walk through a closed door, but she can pick almost any lock. She cannot walk through a solid wall, but she can climb it. She cannot make herself invisible, but she can hide in broad daylight, by masquerading, by blending in. She cannot live without water and food, but she can find them in the most averse environments. She cannot kill with a light touch, but with a light scratch from a poisoned finger nail. She cannot force her will upon someone, but she can seduce, she can listen, and she can convince. And so on ... Yes, by the sheer power of her body and her mind, and her training, and her commitment to her cause, the things *are* true that are whispered about her.

And that she dies, when the cause of justice, and the cause of her Queen, ever ceased to coincide? To this, too, there is truth. The very strength that allows her to succeed, to overcome all adversaries, obstacles and dangers, depends upon her readiness to freely give everything, to give her life, if necessary, without hesitation — and any doubts about her cause would weaken her, incapacitate her, and make her fail. And failure, for a messenger, means death. But this is not her weakness, this is her strength.

PART II: THE MESSENGER

The Teller

Here is this story that I've heard — that I've overheard, one late winter evening, at a country inn, one man telling it to a group of people with whom he shared a table. Flickering oil lamps lit the taproom, one on each of the tables and two or three on the counter. The tables were almost as dirty as was the floor, there were no pillows on the ramshackle chairs and benches, from the stove in the corner came puffs of smoke and too much heat. I had had my share of dubious food and cheap wine, but was not drunk — it would not have been a good idea for a woman on her own to get drunk in such a place. I was tired, but not sleepy. I did not want to think — or rather, there were things I did not want to think about. I had run out of things to read. I tried to ignore the sounds — the snores of those who had gone to sleep on the benches, with their cloaks as blankets if they had them, the heavy breathing and the loud or muted sounds of pleasure or pain from those who occupied benches but slept not, the drunken laughter and the sudden curses from the tables where cards or dice were played, the occasional shouts for more beer or wine — the pub catered to both tastes — and among all those sounds, I dimly heard the voice of the story-teller. I had missed the beginning of his story, and, with all the noise, I missed much of the rest, and I never heard the end.

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“Not a good idea *for a woman* to get drunk in such a place?” she asked.

“I understand what you’re saying,” I replied, “but it’s a *fact*, isn’t it? A man risks being attacked when he carries something of value with him, and, clearly enough, in this dump none of them did. A woman invites attack for the ever present value of her female body.”

“But by stating that her body has a ‘value’ other than to herself, you de-humanize and objectify her. It’s the hallmark of a society that treats women as objects, and their bodies as commodities. By accepting this so matter-of-factly, you are in fact reinforcing female subjugation.”

“How do I advocate subjugation by stating that something has value? It’s a simple fact — have gender equality, have a matriarchal society, there will always be more men wanting to rape women than women wanting to rape men — and don’t tell me it’s because women are never violent.” She’d hardly tell me *that*. I deserved the look she gave me.

“But exactly because rape is done by men to women, we have to address the sexualization and objectification of the female body as its cause.”

“Address it,” I said. “Address gravity when you stumble over a tree root and skin your palms. Or keep an eye on the ground.”

“*Gravity*? So you recur to a ‘sexual violence is a force of nature’ position, dismissing culture, politics, everything that constitutes our *humanity*?”

“No, it’s you who dismisses from our humanity all that doesn’t agree with you, but the problem is ...”

“The problem is,” she said, “you have a story we want to hear, don’t we?”

I had another story I wanted to tell first. Another story from a life I hadn't lived yet, but that's beside the point.

I got raped once, by three men. They were rough, and they took their time.

Afterwards, when we all got dressed again — my clothes were torn, but they had to do — one of them asked me a strange question. And I made one of my worst mistakes.

"Was this the worst thing that has ever happened to you?" he asked, and I said no, it wasn't even in the top ten.

"We can still make it." It wasn't so much the words, it was the way he said it.

"And?" she asked, when my silence grew too long.

"I had to accept the inevitable. I didn't have a choice." Not then, anymore.

"So they died," she said, stating the obvious.

And only when they were dead I realized that they had been right, that they had heard right. My reply hadn't been as innocent as I had thought I had meant it to be, to defuse the situation — the disdain, the humiliation, that what drove them to their furor, had been there. Focus my mind — I had failed even at the first step of the first path.

"You still fail," she said.

A cold shiver ran down my spine, and merged with the hot wave that was spreading from between my thighs. I paled — or maybe I blushed. How could I not have understood that I had *meant* those words to kill them?

Not for raping me — I'd never thought of killing them for that, and this was all that I had seen — but for *underestimating* me. Being underestimated can often be essential for survival — but I had wanted to prove that I did not need it to survive *them*. Prove it to myself,

for you cannot prove anything to the dead. And the success of my proof still echoed in the incongruous arousal that I had just felt, when, in fact, I had not proven my strength, but my weakness.

“Good,” she said. “So you finally got a lesson out of their deaths. That’s the one good thing that deaths are for.”

We both had our dreams. Her dream, the one she felt obliged to have, was to set right a world. Setting right a troubled girl was a minor task she casually, and expertly, did along the way. In mine, there was a story that I had to tell.

The Tale

These were the dark years. The forces of greed and corruption had unleashed a chaos that even they themselves had not been prepared for. Fear fueled violence and violence spawned fear, fires raged and blood flowed, destruction reigned, and when finally the fires had gone out and the blood had seeped into the ground or flowed away with the rivers, a formerly prosperous country was lying in ruins.

The Queen had not been able to protect her people, nor to protect herself. The walls of her palace were broken down, the roofs collapsed in the fire, those who still lived were disarmed and dragged into the gardens, or what had been the gardens, where the men died, and the women screamed for days and nights until they died, too. The charred and mutilated corpses lay strewn on the ground, their meat prey to the scavengers, winged or quadruped or sometimes walking on two legs, limbs were torn or cut off, bones were dragged away to hidden feeding places, cracked by sharp teeth, the remains diligently picked clean by insects, and finally, as the years went by, they sank into the earth they had come from, and which took them in again. There was no question, after the worst of the rage had exhausted itself, of ever identifying any of the bodies, whether to gloat over their demise or to give them a decent funeral, and for years men died in drunken brawls over boastful claims of who among them it had been who had raped the Queen in her vagina, ass or throat, cut off her breasts, slashed her sides, made her scream, had heard her beg for her life or beg for death, seen her die, or finally killed her themselves. And of those who knew that she would never have screamed nor begged, those who still lived did not dare to speak.

Many had died in those days of fire and blood, and of those who

survived, many then died of hunger and disease, and many of those who still survived killed and were killed in fights for power, dwindling resources, and territories of scorched earth. But eventually those fights came to an end, and a new order, or what passed for order after the rampant destruction, emerged. The country, once peaceful and united, was fragmented, the pieces ruled by feuding warlords, the people at the mercy of their lords and of the murderous bands of roaming mercenaries those lords lacked the power and the will to control. But still, time passed, and people lived, and survived, and worked, and built, and loved, and had their hopes, and dreams, and desires, and defeats.

And at that time the events had occurred that I had heard told about.

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There was a man, a solitary man, not young anymore, his business had gone badly, he saw no prospects for himself.

There is a legend, which the man had heard, about a distant country in the North, which abounds in jewels of unrivaled beauty, which would be of enormous value in the country where the man lived — if he could make the journey and return, he would be set for life. *If...*

Others had tried before — some had never returned, some had returned broken in spirit and body, some had returned bringing a few pieces of value, but it had turned out that they had acquired them in other places — stolen them, or robbed them, or even earned them through hard labor, but no one had returned from that mythical place — no one still alive at that time, that is. In times long past, a few had made the trip, had brought jewels that now graced the treasure boxes

of the court and of a few wealthy merchants and warlords, and they had brought back the knowledge of that place — what had *been* knowledge, long ago, but now, by the relentless workings of time, had been blurred, reduced to a rumor, a legend, a distant tale.

He knew that his chances were zero, but what had he got to lose? He sold everything he had — little enough — and set out, on foot — the path over the mountain range he had to cross was too narrow and steep for a horse, and he had no need for a mule, not having any baggage to carry but what fit into a bundle on his back. And if indeed he found the gems, what he could carry home in the pockets of his trousers would be enough to make him rich far beyond his needs.

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He must have walked for months, if not longer — as I've said, I hadn't heard the beginning of the tale — and he must have encountered setbacks and hardships and ill fate, and had lost his way, lost his confidence, lost weight, lost most of his hope, when he came to that village where he met the woman.

He didn't go into villages often, the depopulated but fertile country offered most of what he needed without him having to give of what little money he carried, but some things he wanted which nature and deserted ruins couldn't give him, and occasionally seeing a human face was among them. When he wanted to enter a village, he slept at a safe distance, then walked into it in the morning. As a rule, the people he encountered were neither hostile to him nor friendly. The times when people had traveled, had exchanged merchandise and news, had been eager for the foreigner to trade with, to exchange tales and freely share their houses and food and drink and, often enough, their bodies with them, were over. Commerce with the outside world, for what little they

needed from it, was done by trips to the nearest town, a few days away on decayed roads, by groups large enough not to be easy prey to bandits but not so large as to deplete the village from all who could defend it; trips undertaken on foot, with a few donkeys to carry grain and meat and cheese and raw hides to the town, and iron and fabrics and glass and leather back. The peoples' needs were simple, though, and most of what they needed, they made themselves. Tales they no longer had to tell, nor wanted to hear.

In this village, on the day he came to it, was market day. Groceries, livestock, tools, clothes, pottery, the usual stuff, little of which, except for what was edible, was of interest to him. Trade was mostly done in barter, but also in coins, still valid because people still accepted them, even though gold and silver held little practical use. Copper more so, but for this the coins were too small. Most of the goods were simply sold, but some were auctioned, and these — he had seen this in other villages — belonged not to individual villagers or traders, but to the village as a whole. Fruits that had grown on trees on public ground, fish that had been caught in a nearby stream by collective effort, things that had belonged to people who had died without next of kin, or the occasional object that no one wanted to claim ownership of, out of misgivings, superstitious or real. He was already leaving, carrying the provisions he had bought for himself, when, turning his head at the sudden silence behind him, he saw that the last one of those objects to be auctioned was a girl.

He stopped and looked, it had been a long time since he had last seen a naked girl. Tall, long dark hair, a firm if undernourished body, holding herself straight, her posture neither submissive nor defiant, but, it seemed to him from the distance, withdrawn. Far from being remarkable for beauty or strength, she still looked useful, for work as

well as for her owner's pleasure. Over the silence that had fallen he heard the auctioneer name a bid price that seemed very low to him. Since he was in no hurry, out of curiosity, he stayed to watch — it wouldn't be long until she found a buyer. The auctioneer called the bid price again. No one spoke, or raised an arm. The auctioneer called the bid price for a third time, and still there was no one to react, no one to break the strange silence. No one, he realized, was going to buy her. The auction was over.

For a short moment he thought it meant they would set her free. Then he heard the laughter, and knew better. All the men laughed — some just chuckled, others laughed loud, some cheered. Of the women, many stayed silent, their faces without expression, but those who laughed did it more merrily than the men. The girl did not seem to hear, or, if she did, she showed no sign that she cared. She stood still, seemingly impervious to the sounds, to the gazes upon her naked body, to the bodies that would soon descend upon hers, to the stones, or blades, or flames, that would soon, slowly and painfully, destroy it.

The man moved closer, to get a better look at her. From close up, he could see that she was much older than he had assumed, maybe almost his own age. Her body was covered in scars — she must have been a difficult slave, received a lot of punishment. Her eyes did not move, they were still fixed upon an imaginary point at the horizon, but somehow he had the impression that she had taken note of him. What was it that made him stand out, he asked himself — was it that he was a stranger? and then he realized, it was because he was the only man who hadn't laughed. It's because I didn't get the joke, he thought. And then, before he was aware of the words that were coming out of his mouth, he said, "I'll buy her." She still did not react, not even by the flutter of an eyelid — was she deaf? — but several heads turned

towards him. “Don’t,” one of the men said, with strong bare arms and a tired face. “I’m the blacksmith here. We are honest people, and you look like an honest man, too. We wouldn’t want to take advantage of you.”

“What’s wrong with her?” the man asked.

“She brings bad luck,” the blacksmith said. “She has never spoken a single word, nor made any sound. Most of the people here had owned her for some time. She hears, and she obeys simple orders, she never makes troubles, she works hard if there’s hard work to be done, but she — how can I say? — discourages you. I don’t know how she does it, but everyone who’s had her has soon wanted to get rid of her. And, call me superstitious, but since she’s been around, things ... have *happened*.” He shook his head, as if not really understanding his own words. “Leave, or stay and watch, or join the fun, but let her die, it’s better for you, and maybe for her, too.”

“Bad luck,” this was all the man had heard. Here he was, this was where all his good luck had brought him. Bad luck seemed like a promise to him. It took most of what little money he had, but it was spring, and the road ahead was through fertile land, before they’d come to the mountains. They’d survive somehow. He bought her.

The way she looked at him, when he gave the money to the man who held the village till, she seemed to think he had bought her for food.

They gave him a dress for her, ragged and dirty but still a dress, but she refused to put it on. He tore it up, used a strip to bind her wrists behind her back, and stuffed the rest into his bundle.

And then the blacksmith looked at the man, and said, “You don’t have a sword, you need one now.”

“Why?” the man asked. “She’s not that important to me. If they

hold me up, let them take her, I'm not going to risk my life fighting for her."

"This is not how they think," the blacksmith replied. "They see a man and a woman, they take her, they kill him."

"So I need a sword to die fighting," the man said. "I still can't afford it."

"Come with me," the blacksmith said, and they went into the smithy, their eyes needing time to adapt to the darkness, to the faint red glow from the ember, and as they stood a strange thing happened, time suddenly seemed to jump backwards, to a long gone golden age of kindness and generosity — or did it jump sideways, to an age that had never been? "Here on the wall is the first sword I've ever forged, when I was an apprentice with the old smith, when I wanted to see how much I had learned. It's not very good, but it is a sword. I've kept it out of sentimentality. I don't need it, it's not good enough to sell, but I couldn't bring myself to smelt it. And here's a scabbard. Take them."

They left the smithy, stepping back into the sunlight, and into the present.

"Thank you," the man said. "And I am sorry to spoil your fun by taking her away," he added.

"Don't worry," the blacksmith replied, "there are others."

Then the man and the woman he had bought marched off, in mutual silence, he not sure if he could trust the villagers to let them go, until the village, when he turned around, was long out of sight.

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The days that followed were uneventful. When they left the village it was still morning, and by the end of the day he had gotten used to walking with the sword dangling at his side. When he untied her

hands, so she could help with collecting fruits and berries which were ample in these parts, he found that the strip of cloth he had used had come loose, though it still held to her wrists. He tied it tighter when they went to sleep — he didn't fear her when he was awake and had an eye on her, she was a woman while he was a man with a sword whom hardships and years had not much weakened, but prudence demanded not to leave her unbound while he slept. In the morning, the knot was still firm, though for a moment he had a strange feeling that it wasn't the way he had tied it. By next evening, with their walking, it had come loose again. When the strange feeling that the knot wasn't the way he had tied it came to him again the next morning, he decided to put it to a test. That evening, behind her back, he wove a small twig into the knot at her left wrist. In the morning, the knots were how he had made them, only the twig was at her right wrist now. He was a man who took things as they came. He read the message, shrugged, and never bound her again.

His sexual needs were simple — about hers, there was no mention. When he wanted to use one of her orifices she yielded, not participating, but not discouraging his short-lived passion. Whether she herself found some pleasure in these encounters, or, her hands free now, on her own during the nights, I do not know, nor is it important.

She was better than him at finding food. When, as they often did, they came across deserted farmland, where nature had begun to reclaim her territory but trees and overgrown vegetable patches still bore fruit, it made little difference, but in the forests or on the heathlands that they crossed, she knew more plants or parts of plants that were edible, and spotted them more easily. Also, she knew better than he which plants were poisonous, and which animals, small or large, posed threats, and how to avoid them. She was mute, and he, taciturn by

nature and not quite sure as to how much she heard or cared to hear, spoke little to her, but even without words he understood her competence in these matters, and learned to rely on it. Still, when she showed him food that he didn't know, he waited until she ate from it before he did.

Occasionally he still went into villages, to buy with his dwindling stock of coins food that he missed — cured meat, sausages, bread, and sweet cakes made from dough and honey. He did not think it wise to walk into a village with a naked woman by his side, so he told her to wait for him in the wood, at a spot hidden from the barely discernible path they had followed. As a symbolic gesture, to show her what he wanted, he lightly tied her to a tree with the strip of cloth he had used to tie her wrists on the first days. He more than half expected her to be gone when he returned, but there she was, still tied, waiting for him. He offered her a share of what he had bought, and she refused the meat, but took from the bread and the cakes. She then took what still existed from the torn dress, and formed a bundle, so she could carry her share of their provisions — he hadn't thought before of letting her carry his bundle, or maybe hadn't trusted her to do it. He liked the way she looked, walking naked, slightly bent forward, with the load on her back, her breasts small but still large enough to sway in the rhythm of her steps.

He gave himself pleasure with her more often now, sometimes also during the day, when they took short rests from walking. The hair of her crotch, which had been shaved when he bought her, had grown back, which he didn't like, and one day he made her lie on her back while, strand by strand, he pulled it out. As with the other uses he made of her body, she took it silently, unrepulsed, unrepulsing. He himself did not shave his face, but kept his beard in check with an

old pair of scissors which he carried. Not long after he had plucked out the hair between her thighs she started to trim his beard for him, every few days, more evenly and neatly than he had been able to do on his own. When he looked at his face in the mirror of a still lake, he almost liked it.

The attack, when it came, deep in a forest, still early in the day, was sudden and unexpected. She was walking behind him on the narrow trail, her bare feet making no sounds on the soft ground. The wood was quiet, as if it held its breath. And then, in one quick silent motion, she jumped at him, grabbed the hilt of his sword, tore it out of its sheath, and violently pushed him to the ground. He fell, lying with his face down, stunned, the breath knocked out of him by a tree root under his chest — he fought for air, he fought to prop himself up — and then, over his pain and his own ragged breaths, he heard sounds, strange wild noises, screams. When he finally managed to look around there were three bodies, armed, dead, lying next to him. She had killed them. For a moment, she was the only one who was standing — then, as he slowly got to his feet, she handed him back his sword, knelt down, closed her eyes, and bent her neck. The land destroyed, the ancient laws now ruled again, unchallengeable. Having assaulted her owner, she could not stay alive.

“So, she’s kneeling, naked, arms behind her back, head bowed, eyes closed, and he stands before her, gripping the sword, blood still dripping from its blade. Don’t make this sound so overly dramatic. Even blindfolded and her arms tied, she’d still break his arm before he knew she had moved.”

“But she wouldn’t,” I said. Was it really so hard to understand? “He had saved her life at that village, which she could easily have done herself had she cared, but he had not given her any reason to live.

How could he? She had lost all that had been important to her. Had he wanted to kill her, she would have let him.”

“But he didn’t?”

“No.”

When she felt the sword, it was not the blade that struck her neck, but the hilt that touched her hand. She opened her eyes and looked at him, but she did not take it, leaving him clumsily holding it by the blade, his hands red from the blood he had not spilled. She turned to the dead, and from one of them took a sword that was better than his, and also a dagger. One of the dead was a woman — she took her boots, stripped her of her clothes, not much different from a man’s, and put them on, torn by the sword and soaked in blood as they were, and as he watched her dress he realized, the scars on her body had not come from punishments, but from battles. Then she went through the bags of the dead, sorting out the trash from the valuables they had robbed, then discarding it all, even some jewelry, except for the coins — copper, silver, and, though small ones, even some gold. Now that she was dressed and armed, she took his sword, cleaned it on a piece of garment that had stayed unsoiled, handed him a bandana one of the dead had worn to clean his hands with, handed him back his sword, and, finally, gave him the coins she had taken. All the while he hardly moved, only slowly reacting when she put something in his hands, watching her silently, stunned, not sure what was going on, what had changed, what would change now.

“Say, this is not turning into a love story, by any chance, is it?”

“No.”

“Because, you know, all the stories you’ve ever told were love stories, weren’t they?”

“Were they? This one isn’t.”

When they took a rest next to a stream she took off her clothes, to wash the blood and the scent of the dead woman out of them, and off her skin. Seeing her naked, as he had done all that time, suddenly felt awkward to him. When she had spread the clothes on a rock to dry, she lay down on a soft patch of moss, offering herself as if nothing had changed, and to his own surprise, he accepted the offer with little hesitation. As always, she neither participated, nor resisted. Nothing had changed — no, everything had changed, he knew it had — but it was as if she wanted him to feel that nothing had changed. To deceive him? To reassure him? Or, he finally thought, to reassure herself?

But what would she need to be reassured of? He understood now that, from the first day they had been together, neither fear of him, nor need of him, nor force would have kept her from killing and leaving him, and he very much doubted that it had been sympathy, either. Pity, maybe? He was surprised at how little this thought made him reel back. He wished he could talk with her, but this was no topic for asking yes-or-no questions that she could answer with a nod or a shake of her head. Whatever it was, he had to make the best of it, and the best of it was to stay with her, under her protection, as he began to accept that it was.

The days followed each other, as they followed the course that led them north. Food they still found in the woods, on deserted derelict farms, or, rarely, in villages that they visited — together, now, as she was clothed and they both bore arms. From time to time they were ambushed, left dead bandits behind, and took what they needed — what she decided that they needed. Once she suffered a nasty but not dangerous cut from a girl whose knife she had to take out of her hands, to kill her with it. It was a good knife, made from finest steel, strong, sharp and pointed, a knife that could stab, cut and be thrown, with a

smooth hardwood handle and a polished blade that, once she had cleaned it of the dead girl's blood, shone like a mirror. One bunch of attackers had been led by a man with a bow and a quiver full of arrows, which, among the trees, he had not known to make good use of, and now he never would. She took the bow and the quiver, and from that day on, they did not need to go into villages to add meat to their diet.

He stopped using her body, after he stopped finding pleasure in these silent acts. In the nights, he sometimes dreamed now that he heard a woman sing, a distant voice, singing plain but hauntingly plaintive melodies, with words which he could, in his dream, never make out. One night, straining his ears in his dream to hear her more clearly, he realized that he wasn't sleeping anymore, but still heard the voice. The night had been dark when they had lain down to sleep, but now a crescent moon shone through a gap in the cloud and seeped through the cover of the treetops, and by its faint light he could see that the place by the next tree, where she should have slept, was empty. Her things were still there, he saw with a relief the intensity of which surprised him, after his heart had seemed to miss a few beats, but where was she? Had she heard the voice, as he still did, and wandered off through the dark wood to look for the mysterious nightly singer, to see if she was mortal, a demon, or a forest nymph?

He could not go back to sleep, he could not sit and wait, so he decided to follow her. He stumbled through the near darkness, tattered clouds every now and then veiling the thin moon and then unveiling it again, with only the distant voice to give him a vague sense of direction — after a while he realized he would never be able to return to their sleeping place before the day broke, and even then it might be difficult, but it was too late to stop now, he only hoped the voice would not fall silent before he had reached it. It did not — and slowly, it got louder,

slowly, as she must have done before him, he got closer. And then he saw her.

There was a small stream, its banks strewn with mossy rocks — the aisle it made in the wood made the moonlight brighter here — and on one of the larger rocks she sat and sung, in a language he didn't know. She was looking in his direction, she must have heard him — he knew he had no skills of moving silently, particularly not in the dark — she saw him as he walked closer, and then as, bewildered, not trusting his legs to support him, he sat down on a smaller rock, staring at her in disbelief. When she ended her song she fell silent, for a while the murmur of the water running across the stones was the only sound in the wood — a soothing sound, to which he listened, while none of them spoke or moved.

“You *do* have a voice?” he finally uttered.

“I’ve never *said* I hadn’t, have I?” she said, and, in the now pearly light of the crescent moon, reflected by the sparkling waters of the bubbling stream, for the first time ever since he had first seen her, he saw her smile.

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They did not talk on the way back, which, though the moon had almost disappeared now, she found with a dreamlike certitude. Later, as they traveled on, they never talked much, he being taciturn by nature, she by training, but they did talk. And he understood now, that she had been shattered, and, slowly, slowly, she had been reassembling herself. And what she had needed from him throughout this difficult process, and still needed, was that most basic, most trivial of all commodities, and yet among the most valuable, like food to eat, water to drink, air to

breathe — human companionship. And now he realized his own need for it, too.

They had steadily been traveling north, he following the vague idea of where his promised land of jewels may be found, she following his lead — or had she?

She asked him for his destination now, though she already knew the answer. He told her about the land of jewels in the North that he was seeking, his determination, born of despair, to find it or, more likely, to perish trying — amazed at how much he found himself confiding in her, not only his plans, but his hopes and his fears, and his conviction, deep inside, that he was no closer to his goal now than when he had set out.

“It’s not a land, where these jewels are found,” she said, “it’s a mountain. Stardock.”

“You ... *know* it?” he asked, both excited and surprised that she would have actual knowledge of what to him had only been the vaguest of rumors.

“Yes, I know it,” she said. “As well as anyone does. It’s an old fairy tale. A mythical topos of desire. A paradigmatic place to yearn for. Like the Fountain of Youth, the philosopher’s stone, or the golden kingdom of El Dorado. And the jewels of Stardock. These myths not only span the ages, they also span the worlds.”

He did not reply, nor did he doubt her words. “I am sorry,” she added into the silence.

“What do we do now?” he finally asked, not even consciously aware that he had said *we*, as if the land of jewels had been her goal, too, now lost, as if it were obvious that they had a common decision to make, about a plan they would pursue together.

“I need to reach a town,” she said. She had things she had to do

now, now that she had reassembled her shattered pieces, even though she did not know if what she was looking for was any more real than any of the myths that she had talked about. She could not do nothing, though. She was alive, and this meant that she had to try.

“Which town?” he asked. “Where is it?”

“Any town,” she said. In a town, there was the hope that she might find hints, rumors, traces, signs, anything to go on from. “There is one to the north, we should be able to reach it in a few weeks, before winter sets in and makes it quite unpleasant here in the open country.”

Yes, of course, she knew where they were, where they were going. She had known it all the time, he realized it now. Their directions may have overlapped, both heading north, but she had set the course. He doubted the casual way in which she had said “any town,” he was sure that this town in the north was her preferred target, for otherwise, though he had no idea how she would have accomplished it, they’d have been walking west, south, or east, with him willingly following the direction she’d have chosen. He shrugged. It didn’t matter.

In his face she read her mistake, in wording, in inflection, in body language. She wasn’t quite up to her regular form, yet. This was important to know, but he was not an enemy, and not a threat.

“It’s going to be all right,” she said, and he believed her.

~

It wasn’t without hardship nor without dangers, but they reached the town, on a gray and windy day, before the winter would make things harder for anyone without a roof over their heads. For her, the town was the place to go to — if anything was left of the old order, any tiny seed around which hope might begin to crystallize, it would be where people lived and gathered, where none of the old hiding places,

meeting places, dead letter-boxes, caches or hidden signs would still exist, for those had always had to be ephemeral, but the rules for finding them, if any recent ones had been set up, might still apply. And one of the rules had always been, look to the North. For him, the town, first of all, meant rest — he had not expected it, but more than half a year of traveling and surviving had worn him down. Maybe, once he had some understanding of this place, he could look for work, but not on the first day.

They paid the gate keeper, what he claimed to be the official fee for strangers entering the town, plus what he claimed would keep him from having them thrown into the castle dungeons for some crime he didn't bother to name. They still had coins left to rent a room — like everywhere else, due to so many deaths, houses stood empty, and the rents for rooms were low. Neglected and in disrepair and with few panes of unshattered glass left in the window frames, the buildings still had walls and roofs and doors, though not much of the furniture was left, having been used for fuel in the first winters of the darkest years. There were trees enough in the surrounding woods, so that wood wasn't so scarce now, but the craftsmen were scarce who could do more with trees than chop them up for firewood, and the sawmills and workshops had been destroyed, and the carts, and the roads had lapsed into decay, and the horses and oxen had long been slain and eaten. The town behind its walls hadn't seen new destruction in the last few years, only further decay, but the surrounding countryside had.

The coins that were left would buy them food for maybe a week or two. “Why have you always only taken the coins of those bandits who had attacked us,” he had asked, before they had reached the town. “Why not the jewelry?”

She explained it so that he could understand. “It wasn't ours to

take. Never take more than you need, it brings bad luck. And then, the dead bandits' friends will shrug off the loss of a few coins as well as the loss of a few of their companions, but they might feel compelled to hunt down those who had taken the more valuable stuff. And, jewelry is conspicuous, it draws attention to us. Attention is bad. And who knows where they got it from — what if we tried to sell a piece, and someone recognized it? Not worth the risk." What she didn't say was that she had also done it to protect him. She didn't need the jewels, but *he* ... greed, a stupid move, and she'd have to kill him. Take more than you need and it brings bad luck. Not worth the risk.

It was about noon, now. They ate a simple meal — unlike accommodation, food was expensive, with so much of the agriculture in ruins, but there *was* food, which they ate without investigating too closely into what it was, and they even treated themselves to a jar of wine. She saw to it that he drank more than she did — not too much, though. They returned to the room they had found before they had lunch, on the third floor of a crumbling house near the town wall, a small dirty room with a window looking out across a narrow street onto the peeling plaster of the rear wall of some larger building. The window, its glass long gone, could be closed with a wooden shutter, almost a luxury these days, and the main attraction which this room held. The room was empty apart from a very roughly hewn table, a number of pegs on the walls to hang things on, and several blankets on the floor, dirty but not downright disgusting. Severe exhaustion, in combination with the wine, made him succumb to the overwhelming desire to roll himself up in two blankets and lie down on the floor, with a third blanket, which she folded up for him, to serve as a pillow. He slept almost the moment he touched the ground.

She hadn't wanted to lock him in, but she wasn't comfortable with

leaving him, dead to the world, unprotected in an unlocked room. On her way out she spoke a few words to the landlord who lived on the ground floor, a thin, elderly, stern and tight-lipped man. A few friendly words in passing, hardly more than a greeting, accompanied by a nod and a faint smile — so casually spoken that he could not even really remember them afterwards. What he did remember, though, was the ice cold shiver they had sent down his spine, and the absolute necessity, whatever happened, to keep the sleeping man on the third floor from any harm.

She had never been to this town, but, from paintings and engraved maps she had seen, in so much better and happier times, she had an idea of its layout, and that gave her an idea of where to look. The town was built around a steep hill, a rock about three hundred feet high, that some geological quirk had deposited here. At the top of the hill stood the castle, now in ruins. A paved street curved up from the town's main square. After a few hundred feet the houses on both sides ended, and the street, getting steeper, became a path. On the left side, if you walked up, carved into the mountain, was a row of caves, one next to the other — underground stalls that had been shops where on sunny days a steady stream of cheerfully jostling, laughing, shouting visitors, but also more quiet townspeople on a stroll up to the castle gardens, had bought refreshments, candies, shawls, hats, bags, local artwork, antiques and cheap jewelry fake and real, and, generally speaking, useful or useless trinkets of all kinds. Now only a few of those stalls were open, the rest either had their heavy iron-studded doors firmly locked and shut, or had been deprived of their doors, leaving bare gaping holes in the rock, most of them with their walls black from fires that had consumed the shelves, the merchandise, and, it was to be feared, also the merchants. Holes that showed the dimensions of those

stalls, about six feet wide, maybe eight feet high, and hardly more than twenty feet deep.

She paid no attention to the closed doors, but glanced into the open stalls, the empty ones, and the few that were occupied, their owners, whether male or female, hardly bothering to look back at her, their faces empty, knowing that in trying to sell their worthless goods to non-existent buyers they were just going through the motions, passing the time here to avoid having to pass it somewhere else. The wind blew a drizzling rain into her face now. Ahead of her the path led to a wall that had surrounded the castle gardens; the trellised gate in it, through which visitors had streamed to enjoy the greenery, the clean air, and the view over the city, now barred with heavy chains and solid rusty locks.

To her right the ground sloped down towards the town below it, but trees blocked the view. To her left the door of the last of the stalls, of the caves in the rock, stood ajar. She entered, closing it behind her. She was alone.

The room, with its rough walls hewn out of the rock, was almost empty, except for crudely made shelves left and right, displaying rather artless pottery and some pictures, watercolors and charcoal drawings, a few of them crudely framed and standing, others lying in a few thin stacks, the top ones having gathered dust. On the top shelves stood half a dozen burning candles, an astonishing luxury, given how scarce and expensive candles had become. At the back of the cave several coats, worn and tattered, were hanging from a row of iron cloak hooks. Someone must have had quite a heavy hammer to drive them into the rock.

The pottery seemed of little interest, but I took a closer look at the pictures.

“Wait — *I?* Who is ‘I’?”

I shrugged. “She. Her. Me. I. You know that this is my story. I’m telling it. So, do you want me to continue or not?”

Of course they did.

The pictures were of a fairly good quality, of a talented amateur kind. Vistas of the town, landscapes, the stuff that was, or had been, sold to tourists. Something seemed right. Something seemed wrong.

“Come in,” a female voice said, “here is another room where you can see more of my stuff.”

The voice had come from behind the coats. There was a narrow passage, its walls as roughly hewn as those of the cave, bent so that what lay behind it wasn’t visible from where it opened. I walked through. It opened into a vast underground chamber, with stonework walls, arches, and vaulted roofs. Candles were burning on huge iron candlesticks, and on ledges protruding from the walls. Oil lamps were burning on tables, which, apart from a few pillows on the uneven stone floor, were the only furniture. The woman, standing next to one of those tables, was older than I was, simply dressed, not looking much different from those in the other opened stalls that I had seen, only her eyes were more alert, and she seemed more eager to strike up a conversation.

“You wonder at the candles,” she said. “We are in the cellars of the castle, here. It’s a huge system of underground caverns, connected by tunnels and stairs, a labyrinth in which you can get lost and perish, if you don’t first fall victim to one of the numerous deadly traps. Much of it is empty, some of it is crumbling, but if you know where to look, there are things to be found. A huge stockpile of candles, for instance.”

Why did she tell me all this? Again, something seemed right, something seemed wrong, but increasingly I got the exciting feeling that there *was* something.

“Others do not fight you for those hidden treasures?” I asked.

“The castle is haunted,” she said. “They tend to keep away. It’s for their own good.”

There was an undertone of menace in her voice, now.

“It’s you who haunts the castle,” I said.

“Of course,” she replied. “But haven’t you come to look at the pictures, see if you want to buy one?”

I took up a batch from one of the tables and leafed through them, when, suddenly, my eyes fell on one that stood on the floor, leaning against a wall, half hidden in one of the many recesses, but still visible enough to anyone who entered this hall. A charcoal drawing, larger than most of the others. A landscape. The reedy shore of a lake, in the morning mist. A heron, rising from a shallow piece of open water. Above it, as in the direction of the path of its flight, gleaming through the mist and a patchy cover of thin clouds, a crescent moon, and the morning star. There was no mistaking it.

I yelled, as I grabbed a burning oil lamp and threw it, as it shattered on the floor and the oil spilled out and the flames leaped up and consumed the paper, lake, heron, moon, and star. “You irresponsible reckless stupid fool,” I screamed, overwhelmed, hardly noticing how irresponsible it was of *me* to scream, not knowing, with certainty, that no one else but this stupid woman was able to hear me.

I tried to get my emotions under control. What the picture said must be wrong, the Queen couldn’t be alive, could she? But *if* she was, this was not something to be shouted about, for anyone, friend or foe, so plain to see. In either case, displaying something like this was indefensible.

“How could you dare to draw this?” I asked. “You are not a

Messenger.” This was not a question, I had seen enough to know that she wasn’t.

“I had been so lonely,” she replied. “Forgive me. No, I am not. But I have been with one. We had been ... close. And then she died for me.”

“She died for you? You should have died for her.” If anything, I was angrier now at her than before.

“Maybe,” she said. “I was wounded. Alone, all I could do was wait. I have waited a long time for you, my Sister.”

“Don’t you *dare* to call me Sister,” I said. “You are not one of us.”

In her eyes, I could see that she understood even before I did. Not one of *us*. To someone who wasn’t, whoever she was, under no circumstances would I have been allowed to say this.

I didn’t like it at all, from what I had seen of her I didn’t really think she deserved it, but I had no choice. I drew my knife, the shiny steel knife with the pointed tip. “You understand what I have to do,” I said. She knew, and she knew the rules, and she showed that she accepted, by taking off her clothes. She stood before me naked, a bit heavier than me, larger breasts, older, but in a good shape, except that, like me, she had her deep scars. She looked at me as I stepped up to her, and she did not flinch as the knife broke her skin. It was done quickly, with little blood. A tiny trickle down one of her thighs — it had not yet reached her knee before I had stepped back.

“As long as the scars are visible, for about a year, they will show to anyone of the Sisterhood that I have authorized your protection. See to it that in this time you make contact with someone who can do more for you. And now tell me what you know about the Queen.”

I must have blinked because I only sensed, rather than saw, a sudden blurred movement, felt, before I could move, a touch, an impact

that I could not locate, and then she was standing twelve feet away from me, and I saw my knife in her hand.

It did not point at me, it was not a weapon for her, it was a mirror, she held it between her thighs, so that in its shiny surface she could see the cuts I had made.

“Well done, Messenger,” she said. She took another look. “Trained by himself, quite a distinction. But for a Queen’s messenger, you are slow to comprehend.”

It hit me with her first words, the rest I was hardly able to hear. A huge wave of shame washed over me, drowned me, took my breath away — another unforgivable failure, added to my other ones. Slow, so slow, had been my thoughts — yes, of course, I saw it now, she had always spoken the truth, spoken the plain truth when she had admitted that she was not one of the Queen’s messengers, when she said that she had only *been* with one, that they had been lovers, that her lover had died for her ...

“I resign,” I said, my breath just sufficing for these two short words. There were no other words for me to say, now, or ever. For a Messenger, there was only one way to resign, only one person to resign to, only one way the resignation could be received. I looked at the knife that she still held in her hand. I looked at her face as she threw it, and marveled that this was all the emotion she showed when she took a life, a hint of amusement. But it was *her* face, the Queen’s face, so it was well. The knife was a flashing blur at the periphery of my vision. I felt the impact, underneath my left breast, where the heart is. I felt the impact. I felt death. It hurt, but only mildly. I looked down at death just in time to catch the knife as it fell, the end of its hilt having bounced off my chest.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “I’ve said, well done. And besides, what do you think I have spent all that time waiting for? I need you.”

My audience of two applauded. Al-Magest and his sister, my lover, the Queen. Only about a month ago we had met, on the day that our fathers had died, from each others hands.

“A nice story, but did you really have to kill me for it?” she said.

“For that somewhat over-dramatic finale, I think it was necessary,” Al-Magest came to my defense. “And what better thing to give your life for, but art?”

“As long as it happens within the art,” I said. “But you didn’t die, neither of you. You were both badly wounded, and you thought it better to pass on the burden of Queenship to someone else, at least for a while. But I’ve left this out, I wanted to stay with making my point.”

“And you’ve made it,” Al-Magest said.

“So,” his sister said, “you suggest that we build a corps of loyal well-trained fighters, the Sisterhood of the Messengers ...”

“More than well-trained and loyal — unmatched in both,” I interrupted. “Sixty, I think, would be a good number. I want to be one of them.” I needed a *task*. I could not spend my time here, in friendship and love, without something to *do*.

“... as a reserve to fall back on, after a devastating breakdown of order and peace?”

“No, no,” I said. “To *prevent* it. Something like what I’ve described must never happen. We must keep it from happening.”

And so far, the sixty of us, and Al-Magest, and my lover the Queen, we have.

~

“In your story, what happened with the man?” my lover asked, when, for a while, the three of us paused in our discussion of the Messenger project.

“She went to fetch him, and introduced him to the Queen. ‘I owe him my life,’ she said, ‘without him, I would not be here.’”

The Queen looked at him, not liking too much what she saw, but withholding her judgment.

“I am in your debt,” she said. “Tell me if there is anything you want that is in my power to give you.”

His reply came slowly. “I have set out to find jewels, or death,” he finally said, almost as if talking to himself.

“I will not give you death,” the Queen said. She placed a wooden bowl, the size of a soup bowl, on the low table in front of him, then she removed a stone from the wall behind her, took out a leather pouch from the opening it revealed, and emptied its contents into the bowl. “Take what you can carry in one hand,” she said. He had large hands.

He looked at the jewels. Hesitantly, but the Queen made no objections, he took some of the stones into his hand, rolled them around, put them back, took others. He was not an expert, but he didn’t have to be, there was no way he could go wrong. Some of the jewels were among the best and most precious that anyone had ever seen. Others ... there were no words for them, there was no comparison, there were no names for the brightness and colors in which they shone.

“What ... are they?” he asked.

“Stardock jewels.” It wasn’t the Queen who spoke, but the woman who had brought him here, whom long ago he had heard singing, in the moonlit wood.

“But ... I thought ... hadn’t you told me that was a fairy tale?”

“And do not most fairy tales have some truths in them?”

He sat with his mouth open, and with his hand filled with more riches than he had ever dreamed of. He not only saw the incomparable sparkling of the stones with his eyes, he felt it in his hands, he felt it, even with eyes closed, all over his body. He savored the moment. Stardock jewels. His eyes turned moist.

Among the other jewels, he had noticed that there also were some of glass. Well made, but, next to the genuine stones, easily spotted, and almost worthless. Small change, which, he understood, had its practical purposes.

He looked at the Stardock jewels that filled his hand, a long, longing, and thoughtful look. Then he put them back into the bowl. Picking up one of the glass stones, he said, “My Queen, may I keep this for memory?”

“With this memory, where do you want to go, now?” she asked.

“I have nowhere to go,” he replied, not complaining, a simple statement of fact.

“Come with us, then,” the Queen said, “if you wish to. There is work to do. A Queendom to resurrect.”

His voice failed him, but he stepped up to her, knelt down, and kissed her hands, not ashamed of his tears that flowed down on them. He did not see the slightly exasperated glances that the two women exchanged, but he felt the Queen gently withdraw one of her hands, and, comfortingly, lay it on his head. “It’s all right,” she said. “It’s all right. It’s going to be all right.”