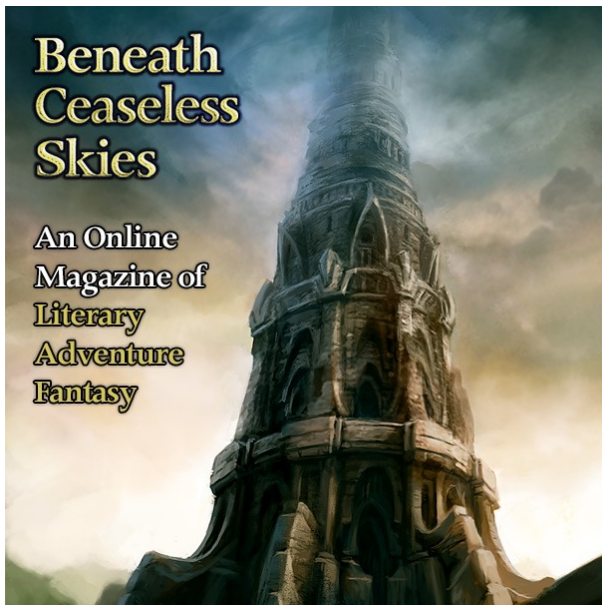


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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## A PLACE TO STAND

by Grace Seybold

“Sleep, child. Sleep....”

\* \* \*

Sharide had been a weaver for ten years. She had never married, and she lived alone in a small stone house at the edge of Skep’s Anvil. Everyone in the village, which was also called Skep’s Anvil like the plateau on which it was built, said that her rugs and blankets were the most beautiful ever made there, with patterns that drew your gaze in and kept it. Like magic, almost, they said.

Some whispered that it *was* magic. Benign magic, like the Lady Adalie’s, but magic still, and not to be entirely trusted. Sharide, in consequence, was left very much alone. Sitting at her loom through the long hours of the day, she had plenty of time to think about her life. It seemed to her sometimes that there must be more to it than this. She wanted to do something important, to leave more behind her than rotting cloth. Not children, necessarily—she liked children, but her lack of them didn’t seem to matter—but some legacy, something that would mean she had mattered. At some times the feeling was stronger

than at others, but it never entirely faded. More and more, as she grew old, Sharide began to believe her life had been wasted.

One grey morning in the waning of the year, Sharide stood up from her stool and opened the door of her little house. She put on her best cloak, the one patterned like a bird's wings, and walked to the edge of the Anvil. Far below, the river foamed around the mountain's feet. Sharide spread her arms wide and stepped out into the air.

\* \* \*

“No,” someone murmured, “that's no good, is it?”

\* \* \*

Sharide was a fisherwoman, working the nets in the river camp. Each year at the start of the fishing season, she and the rest of the Skep's Anvil fisherfolk made the half-day trek down to the mountain's base and set the great nets on their winches. The river was too wild to fish from boats, but the stringing of the nets across the river was an old art, passed down through generations. Sharide was the first in her family to learn it, her parents being weavers, but she had taken to it with enthusiasm.

Two weeks in camp, bringing in the nets, cleaning and gutting and salting the catch and stringing the nets out again, and then two weeks climbing up and down the mountain, ferrying the barrels up to the village. Game was scarce in the

mountains, and the preserved fish was the village's main winter meat.

During the spring and summer, the fisherfolk were active from dawn till dusk. In fall they turned out for harvest with the rest of the village; winter was for mending nets and tents and doing the chores of the winterhouse that the unmarried fisherfolk shared. It was a noisy, friendly, communal existence, and Sharide, though naturally shy and reserved, never lacked for company. She wondered occasionally about the purpose of her life, but the physical labor left her little time for contemplation.

The summer Sharide turned nineteen, a great storm blew down through the mountain passes and riled the river to a seething fury. Trying to take down one of the nets before it was torn away, Sharide was swept from the rocks and dashed to her death against them.

\* \* \*

“Better,” the voice murmured, “but too short by far.”

Sharide stirred, trying to open her eyes. She lay wrapped in something warm, feeling as relaxed as she'd ever been in her life. There was something happening, though. Should she remember something?

“No,” the voice said softly but firmly, “sleep now and dream.”

\* \* \*

When Sharide left home at sixteen to join the Emperor's army, her parents grieved. Had they wronged her somehow, they asked, that she should abandon Skep's Anvil and all her kin? She tried to explain her decision, but in truth she barely understood it herself. She wanted her life to matter, and all the stories she'd heard of great deeds and heroes took place far away from her little village.

Sharide didn't return home for thirty years. In that time, she rose to the command of the Seventeenth Legion and was decorated several times for her part in protecting or extending the Empire's borders. Eventually she lost an eye to a festering arrow wound from one of General Kellisaw's bowmen and returned to Skep's Anvil with her pension and her scars.

There she learned that her father had died within a year of her leaving, in a woodcutting accident. He hadn't been the same since she was gone, they said. Careless. Inattentive. Her mother, grieving, had set out after Sharide and was thought to have died in the mountains, though her body was never found.

Sharide mourned them and tried to settle back into the life of the village, but she had traveled too much to ever be truly comfortable there. She lived alone in her childhood house and died lonely.

\* \* \*

“Not a terrible life for you, all in all,” said the voice, “but your father and mother came to me as youth and maiden, and I won’t destroy the happiness I dreamed for them. You’re a difficult one, Sharide. I can’t even send you away.”

She *should* remember something. That voice. It was a woman, stern-voiced and middle-aged. *Lady Adelie*, she realized. *The sorceress*. “Lady Adelie,” she mumbled.

“You’re just determined to be trouble, aren’t you?” the sorceress asked, but her tone was fond. “All right, stay awake if you like. I’ll need a few minutes to work out another one, anyway.”

Footsteps withdrew. Sharide lay quietly, eyes still closed, memory returning. She was fifteen, and in Adelie’s house.

Every boy and girl in Skep’s Anvil came to Adelie’s house in the summer of their fifteenth year. There were rituals attached to it, feasting and dancing and the like, but the core of it was: they took you to Adelie’s house and left you there. When you returned, you were adult, and you took your place in the community.

It was always the *right* place, too. You left Adelie’s house, and you knew. There were no beggars in Skep’s Anvil, no suicides, no broken homes, no broken lives. Those things happened in stories, or cities, comfortably far away.

“But *how* do you know?” Sharide had asked her cousin Wil, a month before her appointed day. Wil was a year older and had just moved into the river camp. Everyone had thought he would probably succeed his father, the village farrier; Wil had a good quiet way with horses and a sure hand with a hammer. But after the previous summer he had said no, no, that wasn’t the way for him, and he had moved into the winterhouse and begun learning the fisher’s craft.

“I can’t explain it, not really,” Wil told her. “You don’t really remember what goes on. I think I must have spent the night there. I remember sleeping.”

“Sleeping?” Sharide repeated. “You were there less than an hour. I waited outside.”

“Well, I slept anyway.” Wil looked stubborn. “I did. I remember dreaming.”

Sharide perked up, interested. She liked hearing about dreams. “About what?”

“It’s stupid.”

“It is *not*, I’ll bet you.”

“It is. I dreamed I got kicked by a horse. Hurt like anything. I mean, I’ve been kicked before, but this was worse. I couldn’t even breathe.” Wil rubbed his upper arms as though suddenly cold. “Just a stupid dream, like I said. Horses hardly ever shy like that.”

Sharide frowned. “I wonder what it means.”

“Now *you’re* being stupid.” And that was the end of that.

Now, lying in quilts on what felt like a feather bed, Sharide thought she might have been dreaming, too. She couldn’t quite remember. There had been fighting, she thought. A battle. And she’d been *old*. And before that—water? Something about water. It was all disjointed, unclear.

Footsteps returned. “Time to sleep again, child,” said Lady Adelle.

*I don’t want to*, Sharide tried to say, but already she felt herself drifting off.

\* \* \*

The sun rose red over the mountains, and Sharide knew she was well and truly lost. She’d left the rest of the goats with her husband Delwin while she searched for the strayed kid, and somehow she’d wandered up the wrong ravine in the dark. Now, with the kid in her arms and a sleepless night stinging her eyes, she began to try to retrace her steps. It had been a cloudy night, with no stars to guide her, but any fool could follow the sun.

From up ahead, she smelled smoke. Could the woodcutters be out this far? It seemed unlikely, but she followed the scent anyway. Her stomach rumbled. Maybe they’d have a meal waiting—



Someone grabbed her from behind. Sharide screamed, dropping the kid, and tried desperately to struggle free, but she was trapped. “Here’s dinner!” someone laughed, and from out of the trees two other men appeared, grinning. One picked up the stumbling kid, casually broke its neck and slung the body over his shoulder.

“What about her?” the one holding Sharide asked. “Take her to Kellisaw?”

“Nah,” the third man said regretfully. “We’ve stayed here too long already, and the Legion’s going to be on our trail. If we take her back to camp, we’ll be here the rest of the day and then it’s the gallows for the lot of us. Cut her throat.” He drew a knife from his belt.

Mercifully, Sharide fainted before the blade touched her skin.

\* \* \*

“No,” Lady Adelle said with a sigh, “certainly not.” Sharide heard her stand up and begin moving about the room. “I don’t think it’s safe to keep you under much longer, not now. The visions are taxing to the body; you need food, and proper sleep. Wait here, I’ll bring you something.”

“Why are you doing this?” Sharide asked. With a tremendous effort, she opened her eyes. The room was firelit and the windows dark. Lady Adelle, in a blue gown that

brushed the floor, stood beside the fireplace, running her fingers through her silver hair. She looked frustrated, and old.

“This is what I do,” Lady Adalie answered. “I’d like to explain, Sharide. I would. I wish I could be sure you wouldn’t remember this.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Sharide promised impulsively. “Really.”

Lady Adalie smiled. “Just wait,” she said. “Rest. I’ll be back.”

Sharide lay obediently, and dozed, and again there came memory.

“Dreams?” her father was saying. “No, I don’t remember any.” His fingers moved swiftly, braiding the fringe of the finished rug that lay across his lap. “Don’t remember any of it, to be honest.”

“Not at all?” Sharide pressed, disappointed.

“No. I went in pretty sure I was going to be a weaver like my father, and came out thinking the same.” He smiled. “Don’t worry about it, Sharide. There’s nothing to fear.”

\* \* \*

“I came here after the Sundown War,” Lady Adalie said. She sat on the edge of the bed, spooning soup into Sharide’s mouth as though feeding an infant or an invalid. Which, Sharide had to admit, she was. Her arms felt leaden, and she

hadn't even been able to lift the cup of water Adelle had brought without sloshing half of it over the quilts. "You don't know what that is; don't worry about it. Suffice to say that sorcerers were viewed with great suspicion in my country, for awhile. I decided to go elsewhere. The people of the Empire look well on magic, for the most part, and when I came here they welcomed me. That was in your great-great-grandmother's time, I think."

"Are you immortal?" Sharide asked around the spoon. Lady Adelle laughed.

"Not even the gods are that, child. No, I am only old."

"But why here?" Sharide asked. "You could have gone anywhere. One of the great cities. Even the Imperial Court." No-one in Skep's Anvil had ever been to the Court of Jade, but all stories agreed that it was a place of marvels.

"I had seen too many battles," Lady Adelle answered, "too much death. The waste of it, Sharide. The sheer damned waste. I wanted to make a place where lives didn't have to end like that, for no reason. There's a—a kind of deep trance state in which an adept can perceive her own possible futures, given certain starting conditions. I learned how to induce it in others, to discover which ways would be dangerous for them to go. Then I put a suggestion in their minds to put them on a path where they'll live happily."

“You control us,” Sharide said. She thought she should be furious, but she was mostly just tired. “Like puppets.”

“Oh, by all the dead gods, no!” Lady Adelle snapped. She stood up from the bed, her shoulders tense, and walked restlessly back to the fireplace. “This is why I don’t tell anyone what happens here. I steer them clear of paths that will kill them young, or bring sure misery. Beyond that, all their choices are still their own. I’m doing no harm, Sharide. Tell me, would you really rather have lived the life where you fell into the hands of that bandit Kellisaw’s men?”

Sharide shivered. “You know I wouldn’t. But it still seems —” She frowned. “Kellisaw. Don’t I know that name?” She thought back, and after a moment it came to her. “General Kellisaw. We faced him in battle—the Seventeenth Legion did, I mean. One of his men shot me, here.” She touched her eyebrow. “Just a graze, but it got infected somehow, and I lost the eye.”

“You’re remembering more clearly now,” Lady Adelle said, not sounding entirely happy about the prospect. “Yes, he’s the same man. Sometimes our fates are intertwined with certain people, and we meet them on many of our paths. Stay clear of that one, though, if you can. He’s vicious.”

“I never even saw him,” Sharide said. “Either time.”

“The worst men and women are the ones who make other people worse,” Lady Adelle said. She sighed. “I don’t know why I’m warning you about it. I haven’t even decided what to do with you yet.”

Despite her exhaustion, Sharide felt a thrill of fear at the matter-of-fact words. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve dreamed you through dozens of futures, Sharide, and there’s deep grief in all of them. For you, or for others. Normally it only takes me two or three tries; most people can be happy easily enough. But not you. I don’t understand it.”

“You could just let me go,” Sharide suggested. “Let me work it out for myself.”

Lady Adelle shook her head. The firelight made deep crevasses under her eyes, and it was easy to believe she was really as old as she claimed. “No, Sharide. If it were just you, I might consider it, but I have all my people to think of. I can’t let you hurt them. I know you wouldn’t mean to, but it would happen anyway. No, until I find a future for you, I can’t allow you to leave.”

\* \* \*

Days passed. Sharide began to grow accustomed to the visions, or perhaps they grew less taxing as they ranged farther afield. She was able to get up and walk about the house between times, and to sit in Lady Adelle’s walled garden. The

front door was locked to her, however, though Lady Adelle seemed to come and go without the use of any obvious key, and the garden walls somehow resisted climbing. Sharide suspected magic, though privately she admitted to herself that it might be her own weakness as well.

The day Sharide managed to put herself into trance without Lady Adelle's help was something of a milestone. The future she came up with, in which she ran away to the Court of Jade and schemed to marry a minor nobleman, was no less bleak than any other, but nonetheless Sharide was proud of herself for managing it. Lady Adelle, though, was furious.

"You do *not* know the forces you're dealing with," she snapped, tucking the quilts up around Sharide's ears. Sharide, drained from summoning the vision by herself, submitted passively to the sorceress' ministrations. "You could have died."

"That would solve your problem," Sharide murmured.

"Don't be absurd," Lady Adelle said. "That's never been a solution." Sharide was mildly surprised to find that she believed her.

"Well, you can't just keep me here forever," Sharide pointed out. "My parents must be frantic by now."

"They're worried," Lady Adelle admitted, "but not overmuch. I've sent word to them that, you being such a special

and talented child, I must consult with one of my mystical colleagues in the Three Suns Country about you.”

“And they believed you, of course,” Sharide grumbled. Of course they did. Lady Adelle was the kindly patroness of Skep’s Anvil and would never do anyone any harm. Aside from locking someone up because they happened to be an inconvenience. Aside from that.

“Of course,” Lady Adelle agreed, not seeming perturbed. She fixed Sharide with a stern glare. “Now rest. And don’t try anything else without me to guide you. It truly is not safe.”

“I just want to get this over with,” Sharide said. She hated how petulant she sounded, but she was tired of her confinement and wanted to be home, safe, in her own bed, with no sorcery or anything else.

“We both do, child,” Lady Adelle told her. “Rest now.” And she was gone again, back to whatever she did with the rest of her time.

Sharide closed her eyes and began carefully reviewing in her mind exactly what it was she’d done. She couldn’t bring herself to try the trance again just yet, and besides, Lady Adelle was probably watching her somehow. But in a little while, when the sorceress’ attention was elsewhere—

*I will get out of here, Sharide told herself. Soon.*

\* \* \*

Kellisaw knocked on the door of the first house he came to. It was a hovel, like every other building clustered on the plateau, except for the larger house at the far end of the common, which would have done for the home of a middling successful merchant. He didn't want to go there yet. Best to find out how the land lay first.

He didn't know exactly what he was doing in this flyspeck hamlet on the sheerdrop edge of nowhere. But he had a nose for where a profit was likely to be had, and it had never let him down yet. He and his men had been trailing a peddler's wagon—a scrawny prize at best, but it had been a lean summer—when he suddenly sensed danger. He'd ordered his band to fade back into the hills. Whatever was coming, he wanted no part of it.

The men had grumbled a good deal over that one, and it had nearly come to knives. In the end they'd had gone against him, and his second, Datsil, had taken them after the wagon. Which was why they were on their way south in chains, courtesy of the Imperial Legion whose nearby camp the peddler had been on his way to supply, and Kellisaw was here in this squalid little village, hungry perhaps and empty-pocketed but whole-skinned and free. He knew how to trust his luck.

The door opened, and the squint-eyed peasant behind it gaped stupidly at him. Kellisaw put on his most ingratiating



smile. “Have you a mug of something for a poor traveler?” he asked. “I’ve come a long and weary way.”

\* \* \*

Sharide flipped open the cover of a book that lay on the table beside her bed. She had found it there when she last woke up. She was still sleeping a great deal; not surprising, Lady Adelle said, with both of them coming up with visions now. She had tranced three more times on her own. After the second time, Lady Adelle stopped trying to forbid her.

At first, Sharide had suspected it was because the sorceress wanted her gone as much as she herself did. But then another thought had come to her, and this book seemed to confirm it. It lay carelessly on the edge of the table as though left there by chance, but she had learned by now that nothing was left to chance in this house.

*Nothing in Skep’s Anvil, for that matter*, she thought grumpily. But she was tired, and there was little to do while she was resting, and she knew her letters.

The title of the book was *Principles of Light-Bearing*, and Sharide was engrossed in it by the second page. It described how light was the underpinning of the world, and the relation between light and physical things. Sharide didn’t understand all of it, or even know all the words the author used, but the book offered a glimpse of the answers to questions she had

never thought of asking, or hadn't been able to formulate even in dreams.

*Dreams*, she thought. She had dreamed of being a weaver, and a fisher, and a soldier, and many different wives, but the life of a seeker of knowledge had never come to her yet. When next she slept, she decided, she wouldn't merely drift into whatever path was easiest, but would try to find a life wherein she had read this book, and other books, and understood them. The days with Lady Adelle had made it clear to her that there was far more to be known in the world than anyone in Skep's Anvil had ever been told.

\* \* \*

"We don't get many travelers here," said Linnet as he carved the goat. "Tell us the news, friend. How fares the world?"

Kellisaw raised his glass and sipped, doing his best not to wrinkle his lip at the rawness of the wine. The peasants were obviously delighted to have a visitor; he guessed even peddlars and other wanderers were generally daunted by the height and steepness of the plateau. The farmer, Linnet, had slaughtered a goat for their supper, and his broad-faced wife, Sherell, had brought out a dusty bottle of wine from the cellar. Kellisaw supposed he was lucky it hadn't turned to vinegar; the farmers

likely wouldn't have known any better, and he'd have had to drink it anyway to be polite.

"The world is much as it was," Kellisaw answered. "Emperors and kings contend with each other for borders, and we smallfolk try to avoid them. You must find that easier than most do, in such a place."

"Oh, aye," Linnet agreed readily. "No-one comes here."

"A hard life, I imagine, but a satisfying one," Kellisaw continued.

"Better than elsewhere," Sherell said with obvious pride. "We've no sickness here. No children die, nor are born monsters. We've never known bandits or sheep-stealers. The Lady protects us."

*Some god?* Kellisaw wondered.

"We live well," Linnet agreed. "Thanks be to the Lady."

Hungry for news though they obviously were, the peasants responded readily enough to Kellisaw's probing about the village. They raised mainly goats and mountain sheep here, Linnet explained, the ground being too steep in general for cattle. Kellisaw nodded, feigning interest. What difference did it make how peasants lived? Cattle and sheep alike were of no use to him, being too slow of foot to be easily stolen. Horses, now, he'd often made a profit on horses, but there were none to be had here, not even at the manor house.

“Ah, that’s Lady Adelie’s home,” Sherell said when he inquired.

“She’s our sorceress,” Linnet added proudly.

Kellisaw kept his face smooth, but under the table his fingers twitched. *There* was his profit.

\* \* \*

Evenings on the plateau were long and blue. The sun dipped below the edge of the cliff, but its light still lingered in the air until it crossed the lowland horizon, so between sunset and night there was a shadowless hour too bright for stars.

Sharide sat in the walled garden, her book in her lap, another on the ground beside her. She had asked Lady Adelie the meaning of some of the hard words, and the sorceress had provided her with a dictionary in response. The dictionary was, she thought, a marvelous idea; even if she didn’t understand all the words used in the definitions either, just the fact that there was a book that told you how to read other books was staggering. Maybe, Sharide thought, all books explained each other. Maybe they all came together in some vast totality that, if one were able to read them all, would explain everything, everywhere.

It was getting too dark to read, and Sharide closed the book and leaned her head back to look at the sky, comforted by the familiar gathering darkness. There would be half a moon

tonight, she thought. That should tell her how many days she'd been here, but she couldn't bring a number to mind. Already her old life seemed like half a dream, lost among other dreams, other lives.

She might have fallen asleep; she wasn't sure. Her dreams, if any, were confused. She seemed to be wandering, lost. It was no trance, not a true life, just a dream—*but still true*, she thought, and became aware then that she was dreaming. She stirred and struggled in her sleep, and was pulled down again.

A sudden furtive rustling woke her fully and made her glance over at the wall. Against a backdrop of stars, the top half of a face appeared for just a moment amid the vines, then vanished. Sharide blinked, wondering if she'd imagined it. She put her book aside and stood—

A figure vaulted over the wall and landed lightly on the grass in front of her. Sharide managed half a scream, and then a hand covered her mouth, almost choking her. “None of that now,” a man's tenor voice said pleasantly. “Are you the sorceress? Just nod.”

Sharide shook her head frantically. The man's face was partly covered by a scarf, but she had the impression that he smiled. “A servant then? Good. I've no taste for harming servants, girl, but if you scream again I'll have to cut your

throat. If I take my hand away, will you give oath to be quiet?” Sharide nodded, and the man released her.

“What—what do you want?” she managed. It annoyed her, a little, that her voice trembled; wasn’t she brave? Hadn’t she been a soldier?

The man glanced around the garden, and his eye fell on the two books, *Principles of Light-Bearing* and the dictionary. “Now those may be worth something,” he said. He picked them both up, hefted them consideringly, and then tossed them casually over the wall. Sharide winced. The man chuckled. “Relax, girl. The buyer won’t be able to tell if I’ve taken out torn pages or not. I know a boy who has a knack for that.”

“So now you’re leaving?” Sharide asked hopefully, though she knew he wasn’t. It made the thief laugh again, though, and at that moment she knew him. “Kellisaw!” she said without thinking.

His laughter chopped off as though with a cleaver, and Sharide gasped as his fingers dug suddenly into her arm. “How do you know me?” he demanded. “How?”

“You’re Kellisaw,” she said helplessly. “The—” Commander of the Green Company? Pirate captain? Daring smuggler who relieved the siege at Thistlerock? Bandit chief? “The warrior,” she said finally, figuring that was safe enough. In every future where they’d met, he’d been a fighter of some kind. Sometimes

he'd fought for the Emperor, and sometimes for another king, and sometimes for himself. In some futures he'd been an honorable man, and in others merely an expedient one. All her contradictory knowledge of him crowded together in her mind.

"Aye, well, I am that," he admitted, unwinding the scarf from around his mouth. "Though how *you* know me—have we met someplace? I've never been to this village before, I'm sure of that—"

There was a sound from the house. In an instant Kellisaw had ducked behind one of the tall rosebushes, dragging Sharide with him. "Stay very, very quiet," he hissed in her ear.

The back door of the house opened, and Lady Adelie stood there, outlined in light. She was dressed in the blue gown she'd worn when Sharide had first awoken, and a silver chain held back her silver hair. She looked directly at the rosebush. "Come out," she said, her voice light and musical, unworried. "You won't be hurt if you come quietly."

"And I won't hurt your pet if you don't threaten me," Kellisaw responded. He stood, dragging Sharide up with one arm tight around her windpipe and the fingers of the other hand digging into her upper arm. Sharide fought not to gag.

Lady Adelie nodded. "Stay calm," she said to both of them. "This is no place for the shedding of blood. Tell me, fighting man, what do you seek here? What will appease you?"

“Riches,” Kellisaw answered, as though it were obvious. “Magic to sell in the Cities of the Plain. But I’ll trust no gift you give me, sorceress. Step aside and let me enter your house, and I’ll take what pleases me. No-one need be hurt this night.”

“Indeed?” Lady Adalie murmured. “That seems more than fair.”

Kellisaw bowed jauntily without letting go of Sharide’s throat. “Then by your leave, Lady.”

*This is a trap*, Sharide thought, not sure which of them she wanted to warn.

She must have twitched, or communicated her thoughts somehow, because Kellisaw tensed beside her. She realized what he was thinking from what she knew of him: that he would have to turn his back to Lady Adalie as he crossed the threshold into the house, and if she were to attack him, it would be then. So, a diversion, and then a quick run-and-s snatch through the house and out the front door, just like they’d done together in Chowan City—*no, wait—*

They reached the low steps into the house. Sharide felt Kellisaw’s muscles tense, and could have cried a warning, and didn’t.

Lady Adalie moved, blurringly fast, but Kellisaw was faster, and his hand snaked away from Sharide’s neck, his



elbow snapping around and impacting her temple, so quickly she barely felt the blow.

She fell to the ground, momentarily stunned, and in that split-second loss of consciousness a vision came on her, the strongest one yet, and she saw a future where she seemed happy.

She was Lady Adelle's pupil, and later her partner in magic, and later still the inheritor of her place. Sharide saw herself nurturing Skep's Anvil, bringing boys and girls on the cusp of adulthood to her home and searching out futures for them. She saw herself living out the years and decades with Lady Adelle, sometimes quarrelling with her methods but always in harmony with her aims. She saw Lady Adelle dead and buried under the autumn roses, and herself, Lady Sharide of Skep's Anvil, living on for centuries after, never again questioning her role, because she had decided it was right, long ago—

But long ago was *now*, and Sharide lay on the flagstoned path, Kellisaw's bulk blotting out the sky. Behind him, having somehow appeared on the other side of the garden, Lady Adelle lifted her hands, and starlight poured into them. She blurred again, and was at Kellisaw's back. Sharide looked at her and saw herself, her future, choosing people's destinies for them, the lonely sorceress of the plateau. She opened her mouth—

And made her choice.

“Behind you!” she shouted.

Kellisaw, suspicious though he was, recognized the urgency in her voice as real, and turned. He saw the light in Lady Adelle’s hands and dropped instinctively into a crouch, spearing upward with a knife he hadn’t held until that moment. The light vanished. Lady Adelle staggered back, fingers plucking strengthlessly at the hilt buried in her belly.

Sharide scrambled to her feet. Kellisaw was already turning toward her with a second knife, but she spoke a word and the air became clear steel around his limbs. Sharide was delighted, and a little shocked. She had never heard of such a spell, or seen it done, but the memory was still fresh in her mind of centuries of magical study. She gestured, and the air made Kellisaw kneel.

Lady Adelle moaned, and Sharide hurried to her side. The older woman’s mouth moved, trying to shape a spell. Sharide recognized it and completed it; the knife turned to spiderwebs which wove the edges of the wound together. Sharide watched it happen, awed. Already, in moments, the spell had faded from her mind. She couldn’t hold the vision, not much longer.

“I’m sorry,” she told Lady Adelle. “I can’t be like you. I can’t do this to people. They need to make their own way, and so do I.” She touched her left eyelid, and then Lady Adelle’s,

and the older sorceress simply fell asleep—natural sleep, without dreams.

With the last thread of her fading memory, Sharide released the bonds that held Kellisaw immobile. He dropped to the ground and lay there, shivering. “Oh, stop that,” Sharide told him. “I’m not going to kill you.”

“I guessed *that*,” Kellisaw said, still shaken, “seeing as how you saved me from whatever she was doing. Why’d you do that, though?”

“You’ll never know,” Sharide said, with what she hoped was a mysterious smile. She felt more than a little unsteady.

Kellisaw licked his lips. “Yeah, well—whose side are you on, anyway?”

“Mine,” said Sharide. “Come on. We ought to be well away from here by the time the sun comes up. She won’t follow.”

“If you say so.” Kellisaw stumbled to his feet, rubbing his wrists as though they were cold. “We traveling together, then?”

Sharide nodded. “If I’m not mistaken,” she said, “you seem like someone who might want to have a sorceress around.” Not that she really was one yet, the magic of her vision being completely gone now, but she could learn. Maybe they could go to the Jade Court; it was supposed to be a place of marvels.

*And I know your futures, or some of them,* she said silently to the man who now walked beside her, *the futures*

*where you're a good man, and maybe I can make things better, for you and the people with you. If I'm going to meddle with the world, at least let me be part of it, not shut away in a tower somewhere. Lady Adelle says the worst people make other people worse; maybe it works the other way round. It's a wicked world out there; let's see what I can do about it.*

“And maybe you’ll even decide to help me,” she said under her breath, looking at the shaken bandit. She knew he had it in him to be a leader, a general, a power in the world; it didn’t seem so far-fetched that he might be persuaded to use that strength for good. She’d already seen stranger things.

She led him to the path down from the plateau, and the two of them turned eastward. The sun rose ahead of them, shining red and gold along their road. Below the mountains, the world was wide, and waiting. Sharide took a deep breath and walked away from Skep’s Anvil.

And she lived happily ever after.

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## SHADOWS UNDER HEXMOUTH STREET

by Justin Howe

Yengec watched dust motes tumble across the empty apartment. No question about it—Hjel Lotspiech, Longmere’s polisomancer, had disappeared.

The landlady, a towering Northland woman with braided white hair and a wooden hand, stood in the room’s center, watching him. “I told you. He left. He hired some porters last Sootday and took everything away.”

Yengec found that fact hard to comprehend. He’d been to Hjel’s rooms often enough to remember the way the old man had doted upon the overstuffed book shelves, the rustic blackwood furniture, and the walls with their mementoes: the mounted homunculus carcass and the crossed pair of rat-sized spears.

“Any idea where they went?” Yengec asked.

The woman gestured downtown with her wooden hand. “That way.”

Afterwards Yengec stood on Alabaster Street, with Longmere’s crowds swelling around him, his ears numbed by

passing shudderwagons, chittering homunculi, and shouting broadsheet sellers.

“Chaos in the Council Chamber! Wizards battle to determine Longmere’s fate!”

Yengec bought a sheet and hopped aboard a passing omnibus. Hjel would’ve hated to hear those words. He hated the word ‘wizard’ almost as much as he hated Chief Alchemist Jurgen Trenché’s plan to ‘free’ Longmere through selective demolition. Whole neighborhoods would be destroyed as if by some rampaging dragon’s whim. Even the Curio Market District where Yengec rented rooms from a maternal cousin would be destroyed. Work crews had already put up barricades throughout the district’s graying colonnades and wood-frame houses.

Now no one could stop it. Yengec frowned at the crowded streets beyond the omnibus’s window. *Least of all a simple apprentice polisomancer.*

\* \* \*

*Cities bring together vast quantities of matter, both inanimate and animate. On one hand you have the populace with all their dreams and aspirations; on the other you have the elements—fire, thunder, water, earth—the basis for all. The two sides are not distinct. They mix like the currents where two rivers meet.*

\* \* \*

Halfway across the Municipal Tower's lobby, beneath the fresco depicting the First Triumph of His Excellency the Lord Mayor, Jurgen Trenche, the city's Chief Alchemist, fell into stride beside Yengec, their footsteps ringing loud in the arched chamber. He was smaller than Yengec but thicker and better dressed. A homunculus fluttered at his heels, a rat-eyed creature with pink skin dappled by mossy brown fur. Yengec tensed as Jurgen touched his elbow.

"Any news?"

"None." Yengec slid from the grip, but Jurgen stayed at his side. An unctuous smile sat on the alchemist's lips.

"I'm worried. Hjel's a very gifted man with some truly unique ideas. But to disappear like this." Jurgen shook his head. "The same thing happened to his master, Abelard, years ago. He too disappeared without a trace. Be sure to let me know if you hear anything."

"As you wish, Jurgen."

He nodded and they parted, the homunculus skittering away after its master, toenails clicking against the tile floor. Yengec swore twice under his breath. Once for Jurgen and his alchemical rat, and once for Hjel because the old man had left behind this mess.



The day passed in fits and rumbles, like indigestion, the Maps and Wards Department spasming between stagnation and chaos. As Longmere's now-sole polisomancer, Yengec faced a desk sinking beneath a rising tide of reports, notes, and strange correspondence from various city officials, clerks, and homunculi messengers. A hint of the city's spirit resided within the mass of paper, and a polisomancer's job was to find it. However Yengec had not attained Hjel's mastery, and the city's spirit remained opaque paperwork after all. Still he logged each piece, as Hjel would have.

*Vleshite Cultists hold parade to honor sacred egg of ancestral lizard. Alchemical fire erupts during funeral in aerial crypt. Man claims derelict ship rose from river and docked at pier. Aboriginals worried by weak eel harvest; blame resurgent leviathan population.*

No glamour here. No thaumaturgy. No Longmere whispering in his ear.

*We're little more than historians of the quotidian*, as Hjel often said, although he would have dragged Yengec out to interview witnesses.

"Deli-berry." The office homunculus dropped a parcel on the desk, then swallowed the ashbin's contents. The creature coughed-spat the bent paperclips onto its palm and hooked them through its tattered lapels.

Yengec left the parcel untouched and stared at the city's map tacked to the wall. Somewhere among those delineated streets was Hjel Lotspeich. For a time Yengec had expected foul-play, but the trip to Hjel's rooms had freed him of that assumption.

He shook himself from his thoughts and took up the parcel. It was similar to countless others: a simple wax-coated courier envelope with no return address, only Yengec's name written crudely in grease pencil across the front. This one held a thick rectangular object. With a distracted sigh Yengec slit it open.

A book fell with a dull thud onto his desk.

Battered, travel-worn, and bound in ochre leather, its feather-light pages splashed by countless cups of gahveh—Yengec would have known this book even without the polisomancer's sigil on its cover.

Hjel's journal.

The hand was neat, the pages dense with notes and diagrams; Hjel's thoughts on the city mixed with polisomancer's cant.

Yengec stared after the homunculus, but the creature had left. He opened the journal. Reading it was like walking Longmere's streets beside Hjel. Flipping pages, he turned to the final entry.

*“I have done what I can to prepare. The Sarkaja Vine appears. Grundlag has arrived. The Hex rises. The time has come for Longmere to choose her fate.”*

Yengec slammed the book closed. No answers; only more riddles.

He knew the Hex. It was the name of a river, long since buried beneath the cobblestones in Old Town. Ages ago the aboriginals had used it to float their dead out into the harbor. The Sarkaja Vine? Grundlag?

The Vine nagged at him. He'd heard of it recently somewhere. Yengec set the journal aside and went back over the day's log.

The Sarkaja Vine. It was there:

*“Man claims derelict ship rose from river and docked at the pier.”*

The ship's name was *The Sarkaja Vine*.

\* \* \*

*Dreams and aspirations; spirits mixing with raw elements. Longmere's children: paramentals, not cauldron-borne like homunculi but spontaneously generated from the city itself.*

\* \* \*

The docks, Old Town, at the edge of the Eel Butchers' Quarter. Night haze obscured the streets, carried in by a faint

damp breeze off the harbor. Half the piers lay rotten like blackened stumps marching into the water. Decrepit skiffs and creaking barges sat tied to the remaining ones.

Away from the water's edge, two river patrolmen stood beside a fire warming their hands. The flames reflected off their brass torcs and lacquered black breastplates. They appraised Yengec as he approached, gloved hands around truncheons.

"Maps and Wards," Yengec said, fumbling for his identification. He stared at the derelict ship floating beside the pier.

*The Sarkaja Vine* listed with its broken mast at a perilous angle, reeking even at this distance of salt and the harbor bottom. Starfish and sea urchins clung to its sides, its cabin windows black as beetles.

"No way it should be floating," the patrolman said, passing Yengec back his papers.

"Have you been aboard?" Yengec asked. They laughed.

"Bad enough we have to deal with rats and other riff-raff. Don't want any truck with magic."

"No one does," Yengec said. He slid his papers back into his coat and walked to the pier's edge.

"I'll need a lamp," he said.

\* \* \*

*Scuttled hulks in the harbor, barnacle-crusted and verdant with sea moss, their hulls spawning. Bad blood pollutes Longmere.*

\* \* \*

Yengec slid as he landed on the deck. Scrambling, he caught hold of the damp slimy rail, jolting to a painful halt. Hjel's journal swung like a weight in his pocket. From the shore the patrolmen chuckled.

Yengec pulled himself along the rail. The cabin door was his goal, but the deck's slope made walking an awkward uphill climb. Sludge squished beneath his feet. Steadying himself, he kicked aside crustaceans and funnel worms.

"Where are you going?" a patrolman shouted.

Yengec lit the lamp the patrolmen had given him. "Below deck."

They didn't answer, but in the dim alchemical light Yengec noticed them make quick warding signs.

He pried a starfish from the door's handle and, breathing through clenched teeth, took hold and pulled until the door squealed open with a cry from its rusted hinges. Yengec flashed the lamp's beam inside.

The smell was worse here, mephitic. Wooden steps led down to a flooded hold. He descended the spongy steps and stopped on the last possible stair, letting the alchemical light

play upon the murky water. No doors out; nothing. A dark shape floated on the water amid the other detritus. For an instant Yengec feared it might be Hjel, but it was much too small. Using a sodden plank, he swept the shape closer.

It was a homunculus. Its body sundered. Paperclips glinted from its tattered coat lapels.

A splash came from the room's corner. Yengec focused the lamp on the area but saw nothing except the water's undulating surface.

He climbed quickly back onto the sloping deck and ran to the rail. He shined the lamp over the side, catching sight of a pale shape as it dipped beneath the water's surface. It moved too fast to gain a clear look, but if he had to guess he'd have said it was Jurgen Trenche's rat-eyed homunculus.

Yengec returned to the cabin. Something had caught his eye as he ran up the stairs. There on the door's back, the mud had been wiped clean. In the clear space sat a white chalked sigil.

Hjel's.

The old man had been here.

\* \* \*

*Along colonnaded arcades, in parks, in the early hours before dawn, the city whispers to all who will listen. Beside*

*the House of the Crab, beneath the Sign of the Lantern, a rat scratches its own name on the pavements.*

\* \* \*

Yengec drifted beneath the alchemical street lamps, walking the cobblestones. The occasional solitary shudderwagon rattled past, coughing smoke into the night.

Hjel had mentioned the Hex alongside the *Vine*. Yengec decided to scout the street a bit before heading back home. But first he needed to steady his nerves and clear his head from the *Vine*'s stench.

Near Hexmouth Street he ducked into an all-night Yingolese diner. The staff sat hunched over a jackals' board at the counter's far end. Near the door a solitary aboriginal sat with her stilts beside her. A homunculus slumbered in a crate. Its eyelids narrowed to green slivers in its wizened face.

Yengec lingered over his spiced yams and rice, reading Hjel's journal. Occasionally one of the staff muttered in response to some turn in the game.

*Paramentals, not cauldron-borne like homunculi but spontaneously generated from the city itself.*

Paramentals—every polisomancer whispered of them. They haunted cities. Not quite ghosts, but spirits just the same.

Yengec rubbed sleep from his eyes. At least he could say that he was on the trail of two of the three items mentioned in

Hjel's last entry. In the morning he could pull the records on the *Vine* and try to track down whatever Grundlag was.

The aboriginal stood, her leathers creaking. She took up her stilts, paid, and left. Taking it as a cue, Yengec threw his own coins on the table and walked out the door.

\* \* \*

*Rooftops: shingles, tiles, peaks, weathervanes, crooked chimney pots, domes, minarets, and gables. The fog lifts, burnt away by the sun; a homunculus takes wing, its mouth lined with blood and pigeon feathers.*

\* \* \*

Dilapidated brownstones leaned one against the other along Hexmouth Street like battered soldiers under siege. Yengec spotted constellations above the chimneypots: the Arboreal Cat, the Sextant, the star Ayeasha where the serpents were said to have emeralds for eyes. A boarded-off lot showed where a house had stood before being demolished.

Hjel had once said how the Hex could be reached from some house basements along the street. Yengec went to the fence and peered between the slats at the rubble-strewn ground. He tested the boards. Near the corner, one hung loose enough to pull free. He squeezed through the gap.

Shattered tiles littered the churned ground beneath the soles of his feet. Yengec passed broken cabinets and punctured



furniture vomiting coil-springs and horsehair batting. The sunken foundation showed as a black void in the ground ahead. Sweat plastered his hair against his forehead. A footstep crunched behind him.

“Now, if I had to guess I’d say you don’t belong here.”

The voice was high-pitched and nasally. Yengec turned slowly, his heart twisting with sudden panic.

A small man, hollow-cheeked and cadaverous, stalked out of the shadows. A slender blade bobbed in his left hand. “Tell me then, do you belong here?”

Yengec shook his head.

“What’s that?”

“No. I don’t.” Yengec swallowed, his throat dry. “I don’t belong here.”

“That’s right.” The words set a smile on the man’s lips. “That’s right. You don’t.”

Yengec could smell the fetid scent of spilled ale and damp hemp off his clothes. The blade wavered between them. Yengec grew keenly aware of the dark basement hole behind him.

With his free hand, the man began patting Yengec’s pockets and almost instantly tapped Hjel’s journal. The grim smile widened to show a mouth lopsided from lack of teeth. He fished the book free from Yengec’s pocket.

“It’s not worth anything.” Yengec tapped his other pocket. “My money’s here.”

The thief pocketed the journal and rooted in Yengec’s other pocket for the coins. Another figure emerged from the shadows behind the thief, almost as if it had risen from the ground, silent as darkness itself. Tall and massive, it loped forward at a crouch.

*By the Hells.* Yengec’s pulse thundered in his ears. *I don’t want to die like this.* “Please—take what you want but leave me the book.”

“But I want the book,” the thief crooned. He slowly raised the blade. “May as well make this clean and finish it.”

Yengec retreated by instinct, and his foot slid off the hole’s edge.

For an instant he hung in the air, flailing his arms. The thief’s eyes widened, and the second figure rushed closer as Yengec fell. He struck the ground as a scream rang out above him.

Yengec woke to numerous aches and the shadow standing over him. It wore a longshoreman’s coat and cap. Its scent had many layers: rust, wood smoke, and deteriorating parchment. The too-long face, wrapped in rags. Only eyeholes split the covering, dark and shadowed save for brief sparks in their emptiness.

It passed Hjel's journal to Yengec. "Yours. Hjel said."

It spoke with a voice like dead leaves tumbling across cobblestones.

Yengec stuffed the journal back in his pocket. He climbed to his feet, ignoring his body's pains.

"Hjel said? Where is he?"

"Near."

"I want to see him."

The shadow bobbed its head and loped to a grate in the foundation floor, where it took hold of the bars with oddly jointed fingers. It yanked, and the grate broke free from its mountings.

"You're not human." Yengec could barely keep his voice steady. "You're one of them. A paramental."

"Grundlag. My name—Grundlag." It pointed at the dark opening, an ominous black rectangle amid the shadows. "Hjel waits. Below."

\* \* \*

*Alchemical lamps on wet pavements: rainbows captured in stone. Bridge chains after midnight: the unheard music of the city's soul.*

\* \* \*

Yengec's breath emerged from his lips in faint clouds. A pale lambent glow made it possible to see. The tunnel's walls

were made of crumbling bricks and rough-hewn stones, the floor coated with a grimy film. They walked in the gloom, and soon their tunnel emptied into another where water rushed down its center beneath a vaulted ceiling.

“The Hex?” he said.

“Yes.” Grundlag pointed to an arched bridge over the roaring water. “We cross.”

As Yengec stepped onto the bridge something brushed against his face like he’d passed through a cobweb. He waved his hands about but made no contact. Yet each step brought another passing touch. He crowded closer to Grundlag, his scalp tingling.

“Kin,” Grundlag said.

“Kin?” Yengec swatted at the air.

Grundlag nodded its head. “Not born. Not yet. Waiting.”

Yengec paused. “Waiting? Waiting for what?”

“Not time,” Grundlag said without slowing.

The chamber beyond the bridge reeked so thickly of mildew and rot that Yengec covered his mouth. Hollows had been carved into the walls, one atop the other. Each held a shrouded body propped upright, a crude plaster mask affixed over the face. A deeper chill touched Yengec. Nightmares worse than rats flashed in his head. The air was thick, the invisible cobweb strands more tangible. And there was more.

Whispering. The longer Yengec stood silent, the more he heard it, like a breeze drawn through narrow gaps, too faint for him to make out words but loud enough for him to know that someone spoke.

A lamp flickered at the chamber's far end.

"Grundlag? Is that him?"

There was no mistaking the farmland drawl. It was Hjel M. Lotspiech, Longmere's lost polisomancer. Yengec quickened his pace but froze when he reached the lamplight.

Hjel sat at a long stone table, his short gray hair in disarray, his clothes frayed, and his cheeks frosted with ashen stubble. What remained of his possessions lay haphazard in the gloom, the books laid flat with their bindings strained, the mementoes cast widdershins, the once-treasured possessions propped here and there and already taking on the sad squalid pallor of their surroundings.

\* \* \*

*A map is a collection of inadequate reference points: an adaptation of the actual in two dimensions along the axis of the representational.*

*At best, a map is a suggestion.*

\* \* \*

"Who are they?"

"The past," Hjel said.

They walked through the catacombs, Hjel with a copper lamp in his hand, Yengec beside him, and Grundlag at their heels.

“Longmere’s dead and dreaming,” Hjel said. “Our early fathers and mothers. The rich and the condemned. Each one served the city.”

“Polisomancers?”

Hjel nodded. “This is where my master rests. Abelard lies there.” His thin lips tightened. “I can hear him still, speaking to me as if it were yesterday.” Hjel sent a beetle skittering into the dark with a kick.

“What’s the point of holing up down here?” Yengec asked. He pressed his forehead with the heel of his hand and shook his head, trying to dislodge the whispering.

Hjel’s eyes were shadows behind their glass lenses. The dark clung to his wrinkles like ink stains. “My place is here.”

“Here? Hjel, this place is a tomb! Just come back and admit you lost.”

“You don’t understand. It’s no longer about Trenche and his project. It’s about Longmere. The city is changing, but I can no longer hear it.”

They’d stopped in another chamber, and here the water flowed past once more, only now it glowed with a milk-white radiance. Grundlag and Hjel stood in rapture.

“Longmere wishes to choose another,” Hjel said. “Let it be you, Yengec. Not Jurgen. The city has no life for him. It’s only matter, a place to own. You have my journal. Listen to the voices. Let Longmere’s words be yours.”

Yengec found it hard to concentrate on the fluid’s surface. The water shone as if it had captured moonlight in its travels. Shadows swam beneath its surface, and the longer Yengec stood trying to give them shape the more transient he imagined himself to be, as if the water pulled him too along on its course.

“I can’t—” Yengec started, but found it impossible to finish. The whispering was too strong. The words flowed past, dragging him along, and after a time he no longer resisted but allowed them to take hold and carry him away.

\* \* \*

*Like alchemists, cities collect things. Only, the mind of a city is not like the mind of men. Paramentals hover there, caught between manifestation and suggestion, eager to be made incarnate.*

\* \* \*

Yengec sat in a shed rubbing his temples. His clothes were stained with undercity dirt. Grundlag had left him here in one of the empty lots on Hexmouth Street. Even now, above ground, the whispers persisted.

“Longmere,” Yengec said. “I hope you finish with me soon, I want to go bed.”

He remembered the aboriginal from the all-night diner. She’d be out on the mud flats right now, stalking eels. He wished her luck.

“The streets will fight it.”

The voice sounded so clear that Yengec sat upright. *The streets will fight it.* The voice arose from the whispering in his head.

Yengec staggered from the shed, the small building suddenly too constrictive for him. Steadying himself against the doorframe, he searched the yard for Grundlag. There was no sign of the creature, only debris. The shell of a ruined house stood before him.

He felt it all around him now, the ancient waterway that had once drained all this land. Even now it served Longmere, draining away the dreams of the populace. *Like the current where two rivers meet.*

There came a flutter of wings, the scratch of nails, and the next moment sitting in one of the ruin’s empty window sockets was Trenche’s rat-eyed homunculus.

“Yengec.”



Jurgen Trenche stood in the house's shadowed doorway, two stout men at his side. "Strange to find you here. Any word from Hjel?"

"He's gone. He left Longmere." Yengec drew the journal from his pocket. "He left me this."

Trenche stopped. He rubbed a thumb across his lips.

Yengec waved the book before his face. "You want it? You can have it. But it won't do you any good. Not without Longmere's spirit. Do you want that too?"

The guards eased back a step at a motion from Trenche. The homunculus leapt off his shoulder, chasing after a pigeon. Trenche tilted his head back and eyed Yengec with skepticism. "How?"

"A binding. Hjel showed me," Yengec said. He needed to squint as he spoke, Longmere seethed so loudly in his head.

"Can you do it now?"

Yengec nodded, and the seething shifted with the movement. He scanned the yard, searching for something he had glimpsed earlier. A pool amid a pile of scrap: wood, water, brick, rusted wire, and rags. "There."

At a command the guards escorted Yengec to the pool, Trenche keeping pace behind them. Yengec's skin tingled, cobweb-touched. He stood at the water's edge. The pool

reflected the rising light in the sky. The seething wrapped around his thoughts with their cobweb embrace.

It wasn't hard. It only took his surrender.

Longmere's voice was in the bridge chains singing under the wind's touch. It was in the sunlight on sculpted towers, and in homunculi flying to meet the dawn. It was in footsteps on rain-slick streets radiant as jewels in reflected lamplight.

The water bulged, the rags twitched, the metal wire rang out as if struck by a hammer; and they combined.

The men beside Yengec gasped, their faces suddenly pale with fear. Trenche froze in place, his mouth open in a silent "o". Even his homunculus stared, its lips dotted with blood.

The form took on a muzzled humanoid shape atop crooked legs. It drew a coat from amid the pile of rags. A black coat, like a longshoreman might wear. Grundlag. Other forms rose behind the paramental. Constructs of wood and brick, old broadsheet pages, smoky mist held in stasis, captured spark.

One guard screamed, and they fled.

Not cauldron-born but generated from the city itself; the suggestions waiting to be born beneath the Hex's surface. Paramentals. Longmere's children. Yengec's neighbors, now that this city was his home.

Trenche trembled before them, his homunculus scampering to hide behind his legs. "What do you want?"

“It’s not about what I want,” Yengec said. “This is about Longmere. What Longmere wants.”

Trenche twitched his head, his cheeks shaking. The paramentals crept about him. The homunculus hissed and spat.

“Make them stop. Yengec, make them stop!”

“I can’t make them do anything, Jurgen. Longmere doesn’t obey me. If you want them to stop, then talk to them.”

Trenche began to talk and talk and talk, his voice barely audible over his chattering teeth.

But Yengec had stopped listening. He stumbled towards the fence, drifting away from where the paramentals crowded around Trenche. This was Longmere’s decision. Not his. Longmere told him so as the morning sun cast the city’s shadows at his feet.

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## COVER ART

“Tower of Babel,” by Zack Fowler



*Zack Fowler is an environment artist who has worked for computer gaming studios as a Lead Environment Artist and a Level Designer. His main focus is in 3D environment art, but he also works on environment concept art, high-poly 3D modeling, texturing, materials lighting, and event scripting. See more of his work at <http://www.zackfowler.com/>.*

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