

**From “The Lady of Shalott”
by Carrie Vaughn**

The silk thread she wove with had always been there, piled in a basket by the loom. Sometimes in the evening, when the sun no longer came into her chamber, and her eyes grew too weary for weaving, she'd light her lanterns and sort the thread into colors and thicknesses, imagining what pictures she might make of them, what scenes they'd be best for. Then she'd gather them all up and sort them again, seeing different scenes and shapes this time. She'd stroke the fibers, brush the skeins along her cheek. They felt so rich.

Only rarely did she wonder where the thread came from and why she never seemed to run out, no matter how much she used or how long and ornate the tapestry became. She had never taken the whole thing down to measure it — the finished length of it was rolled up on the loom's cloth beam, waiting. The rolled cloth seemed quite thick. Surely she'd woven enough and could finish — bind off the edge, pull it down, consider the whole of what she'd made.

But she never did. She kept weaving because it was all she had. She might throw all her thread out the window just to see what happened, but she never did that either, because doing so would require going to the window, and she did not dare look out. As long as there was always thread in her basket, she would keep on. She hummed to herself sometimes, but apart from that, all she ever heard were sounds that came in through the window. A breeze, maybe. Distant thunder. The music that she knew came from birds. She had seen a bird once — it flew in through the window and perched at the top of her loom. The drab little thing had brown streaked feathers and a black eye. But it made such beautiful sounds, warbling and trilling through its tiny beak. It only stayed for a minute or two, hopping back and forth, fluttering its wings, obviously distressed. When it finally took off and swooped out the window, she almost watched it go, almost looked out to see the sky that must be there. But she did not.

**From “St. Baboloki's Hymn for Lost Girls”
by L. Lark**

“You can talk to the saints,” Naledi's mother tells her, four days before she flees to the desert. “They listen, even if they don't always answer.”

“Why won't they answer?” Naledi asks. She is hammering goat meat with a mallet while her mother stirs vegetable relish. Earlier, Naledi had been plucking pods of tamarind from their neighbor's tree. Tomorrow morning she will wake early to soak the lentils for supper. Naledi's life revolves around food. Her hands smell of earth, always.

“The saints were once human too. They have their own whims. They are distracted easily. One might argue it's not in one's favor to attract too much of their attention. But sometimes, if they're feeling helpful, you might be able to bribe them.”

“With blood,” Naledi says, staring into the mottled meat below her.

“Blood, sometimes. Gold. Herbs. But women like us, we can be more — creative.”

Naledi wishes she had asked her mother what she'd meant, but she'd been served a basket of fried bread, and her mother had let her taste a glass of home-brewed beer. Naledi had fallen asleep drunk, with a pleasant effervescent feeling in her stomach.

“Baboloki! I have your helmet,” she cries now, because she can think of no other offering. The Adze has left behind a trail of trees like broken fingers. A springbok lies flattened along the riverbank. She runs in the direction of the village, following enormous claw-shaped footprints.

“I have the knobkerrie. I have blood. Answer me.”

The swarm of flies floats above her head, unimpressed.

“I can bring you fish. I can bring you a goat. I'll bring you the Adze, if you just answer me.”

The flies grow in density until they are able to form the silhouette of a human. After a moment, Baboloki's features emerge from the mass.

“Did you say the Adze?” buzzes St. Baboloki.

Naledi did, but she does not admit it. There had been long, oiled hairs jutting from the Adze's legs. She cannot remember if she had seen its hooked jaws or only imagined them, strong and sharp like those of a dung beetle.

"Do you want your hat or not?"

"No, no. It looks better on you, and the Adze is the only thing this village has worth offering," Baboloki says. His body has mostly reformed from the swarm of flies, but his hands still dissolve into humming points. "Sacrifice the Adze, and I will bless this land so that flowers may never grow here again."

"I don't know how to kill it," Naledi says.

"You and the knobkerrie were seeds together. Do what a seed does," says Baboloki. For a moment, his dark eyes reflect the volcanic red of the blossoms. Naledi had been afraid of the Adze and its long, clicking limbs, but there is something dark and nasty in the hollow of Baboloki's smiling mouth.

"I will extend the protection of the saints," Baboloki says, before he tips Naledi's pith helmet over her eyes, knocks a knuckle against the forehead, and then scatters, droning.

From "The Dreamers of Alamo"

By Jeremiah Tolbert

"No, no, *no!*" Meldri snapped. "If you combine the essences in that order, you'll ignite the fats of your own flesh and burn like a candle."

Besthamun's pale fingers scooped up the vials and returned them to the case. "Again, from the beginning."

"I don't understand why you can't concoct the mixture ahead of time," Garen said with a sigh. They had been at this for three days, and the complex steps of the mixture's alchemy had eluded him.

"The final compound is unstable. A stray pebble in your sandal could cause it to ignite as you carry it," Besthamun said softly.

Garen took her hand into his. "I burn already, in spirit. What does it matter to me if my flesh does as well?"

She tugged her fingers free and turned away so he could not see her stinging tears. It was nearly certain that she sent him to his own demise with this task. While she had enjoyed his company in her bed these past nights, she could not convince herself that their time together would be anything other than a brief respite before his inevitable doom.

Garen began again, pantomiming the steps to properly combine the elements and essences of the kit. This recipe had come from the deepest recesses of the Dream Library; its mere existence had been the subject of whispers among their fellow scholars, and the scrolls containing it had nearly combusted in the sunlight — a trap laid by the mad thing who had dreamed the notes and then scribed them faithfully. The recipe itself contained many false steps and dangerous combinations. Such dream knowledge, even when functional, was always counterintuitive and dangerous to use, holding its own logic.

Being unable to dream had made Garen unfamiliar with its peculiar non-logic. Even so, Besthamun did not doubt that Garen would master the formula. Every night, after their pleasures, he threw aside her furs and stepped naked out into the cold night air to practice.

She doubted any knowledge could escape Garen's grasp for long; despite the fits of madness he suffered when not presented with a task or goal, his mind was one of the sharpest she had ever encountered. It hungered to understand. In these days, Garen was still more ignorant than wise in the ways of the world (a skillful lover, admittedly), but if he survived into his twilight years, his mind might solve some of the deepest philosophical questions, such as the nature of the Dreamers that visited the plagues upon humankind — from whence did their slumbering nightmares emit? Questions no ordinary scholar could contemplate for long without turning mad, but Garen was already lost. It would only be a matter of degrees for him.

Meldri leaned in and whispered as Garen mimed taking the flame to the tincture of aumsblood. "He nearly has it."

She nodded, and held a finger to her lips.

With a flourish of his right hand, Garen completed the final step. Sweat dripped from the tip of his broad nose, and his blouse was soaked through.

"How was that?" he asked.

"Satisfactory," Meldri said with a sniff, but he could not hide his excitement, his eyes sparkling in the light of the alchemist's flame. Their plan might yet work!

"I say we celebrate," Garen said, and he took Meldri into his arms and kissed him deeply, breaking only to nibble upon Besthamun's neck.

"I suppose you have earned a *brief* respite from your training," Meldri murmured.

From "Without Within"
by Jonathan L. Howard

The sappers were at first blush surprised and then mutinous about returning to the hole to clear it. Bell was an old hand at commanding men who did not seek contact with the foe with enthusiasm, however, and had already settled on the strategy to use. First, he almost offhandedly mentioned how important fixing the breach was to My Lord Fairfax, who was popular with the troops. He leavened this statement of regret with a passing reference to mutiny and what happened to mutineers in that happy time.

Leaving the men's clearly very active imaginations to envisage how unpleasant it must be to finish one's days kicking the air before an audience of grim-faced comrades, Bell moved swiftly on to what a simple job it was, and how, when the fearful chamber was reopened, he himself would willingly be the first man in.

Here he smoothly moved into his third dialectic mode, by mocking a hypothetical bunch of wan cowards who could not bear the terrors of a shallow hole. The men grew quiet, and seemed shamed by the time he finished talking. He decided the time was right to shift from the oratorical to the practical.

"We start now," he said, hefting a spade. "I'm tired of excusing listless work to the governor. This time tomorrow, I want the foundation excavated and surveyed, ready for repair."

The men watched him start digging at the loose earth where the collapse had brought in the sides of the crater made by the exploded mine. The day was wearing on, and they knew the task would take them into darkness. Hensley told one of the lads to fetch brands for the evening, for they would surely need them. Then he gathered the other boys and set them to carrying earth in baskets to the spoil heap. Slowly and unwillingly, the men took up their tools and joined Bell.