

## "Midnight Auction"

(excerpt)

by Peter Kovic

### ONE

There was a scent in the air and he was on the other side of the glass, with a sword on his belt and a saddled hawk on the ledge behind him. I must have left the window cracked before getting in bed because I could hear him say my name. I stepped into my slippers and leaned out.

"We don't have much time," he said, grinning. "Your father's guards."

I should have shut the window and got back in bed. But there was the moon and the stars and the way he shook the hair out of his face, only to have the wind push it right back, and everything Father had done that day, and the day before, and the day before.

"I must be crazy," I said. I climbed out, not in spite of the recklessness, but because it was reckless.

He helped me into the saddle and climbed on behind me. He wrapped his arms around me to reach the reins and the air went out of me, as if something massive pressed my chest, as we soared amidst the hightowers. I felt wind on my face and the muscles in

the hawk's shoulders working beneath us. He lifted goggles from around his neck to his face before plunging us down into the smog.

When I opened my eyes I saw the smokestacks that go day and night, the streets packed with wagons and carriages even at midnight, the canals of black water, the new construction sites, the fortified towers of men like Father, and the teetering pillars where the poor were crammed. We flew over the turrets, cannon, and highwalls, lined with pikemen and archers. Out over the dead countryside, where dirty rivers flow past leafless trees waiting to catch fire, where lonesome animals howl.

It was my whole world and I had only ever seen it from within or from my tower. Even if I hated everything I saw, my laughter was so delirious and joyful it sounded like it was coming from someone else. The equations and chemical formulae I had spent the day learning were swept clear out of my mind.

He veered us away from the crown's highway, where I was used to travelling in Father's heavily-armed caravans. Even at this hour it was clogged with the non-stop exodus of mages and magicians who were too weak to withstand all the new technology coming into the city.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see!"

We set down in the forest, far from the highway, where men and mules waited in a clearing. He shook hands and slapped

shoulders and paid in weathered rupees that bore the faces of forgotten monarchs and conquerors. The men took the hawk and didn't care that I was in pajamas and a housecoat.

The enchanted portal they had waiting for us was an unassuming brass ring, only about waist-high. Ducking through the portal felt less like traveling than like the world around us had changed. Lifeless trees sprouted leaves. Barren earth brought forth grass. The men turned into a pair of horses and the hawk became a bronze nude, which centuries exposed to the elements had only made more beautiful. The dead, featureless plains outside the city gave way to voluptuous, rolling countryside. The distant lights of the smokestacks and towers became the humps of far-off hills, overlooked by a low castle.

"Home," he announced, before I could ask. "Where I was born, where I grew up, and my birthright. Let me help you onto a horse."

"I've never ridden."

"Truly the city breeds strange people."

My foot was in the stirrup and he pushed me into the saddle.

"I'm scared," I said.

"Don't be." He sprang into the saddle behind me. He put my hands on the reins before wrapping his arms around me.

One of the horses was enchanted and knew what I wanted just by holding her reins. He wrapped his arms around me and, just by

thinking it, we were racing through the woods and into a valley, hooves pounding.

We rode past waterfalls that went up and down. We passed trees as thick as houses and hundreds of feet high, alive with the glowing eyes of creatures that called out to us. Birds erupted from bushes. Low things scampered from cover-to-cover. No sooner did a stream appear in front of us than the horse cleared it in a single leap. We crossed a manicured lawn and raced through a rose garden whose flowers glowed brighter than a dozen candles as we went by. I looked over my shoulder and watched their petals close in darkness behind us. Coming after us, riderless, was the second horse from the portal.

He whistled and the second horse came alongside. Our eyes met and he grinned and - with his cape and long hair wild in the wind and his scabbard dangling from his belt - he leapt from one saddle to the other.

"This way!" he shouted. I had been riding towards the low castle with its lights of gold, but he veered into the darkness, just as its music and voices were entering my senses, just as I was beginning to make out the cross atop its private chapel. In the wake of his shortlegged warhorse, the giant white bulbs of nearly-invisible flowers opened and lit up, illuminating a path to a monstrous hedgemaze. Once inside I lost him and found him and lost him again, continually glimpsing him galloping around corners, or on the other side of entire scenes cut into bushes -

hunts and seductions and martyrs - or he was racing up dirt paths or through tunnels cut in the hillside itself. I was breathless with no way to find him save the sound of his laughter. I breathed in the leaves and the flowers and they made my nose run.

As the plain on one side of the portal had changed to the lush green of his family land, so too did the hedgemaze give way to the interior of the largest closet I have ever seen. This time I ran from him, slippers in hand, past a hundred drawers, scores of dresses, then turned a corner at a four-way juncture and brushed the edges of a dozen hanging coats on either side, and raced past shoeracks that went from the height of fashion to the crumbling remains of boots that must have been there for centuries. I grabbed clothes as I could while candles fluttered in my wake. Feet pounded somewhere behind me. I heard the "thwack-thwack-thwack" of his scabbard hitting clothes as he passed them.

We moved through courtyards where bronze nudes reclined and plaster saints prayed. We were breathless as we walked beneath their sightless gazes and outstretched arms. I told him of a book I had when I was a little girl, filled with drawings of statues just like these.

"The statues used to come to life and move around," I went on. "But as the city got bigger and bigger, they got slower and slower, until they finally stopped moving entirely. Then the pages got wrinkly, first at the corners, then the edges turned black like someone got them with a candle. Isn't that funny?"

I gulped for air and panted and laughed all at once. He put a cupped hand into a fountain and gave me clear water to drink.