

A Treasure in and of Itself

by Elaine Corvidae

Cover Art by [Linnea Sinclair](#)

author of [Winter's Orphans](#)

Sunlight streamed down on the marketplace, the hot, wet, sticky sunlight of high summer in Segg. Mosquitoes whined and buzzed by the thousands, accompanied by battalions of stinging, biting flies. The air was utterly still, allowing smells to collect into a stifling miasma: rotting garbage, blood from butchered carcasses, dung, and human sweat.

This is why I hate summer, Yozerf thought dourly as he made his way through the crowd of humans, all of whom seemed to be shouting at one another, whether they were vendors selling their wares or customers demanding bargains. His blood red hair clung in sticky strands to the pale skin of his face and the back of his neck. The headcloth that all Aclytese men were required to wear in the city at least kept the sweat out of his eyes.

A man reeking of alcohol stumbled into him, swore furiously, and aimed a blow at his head. Biting his lip in anger, Yozerf ducked out of the way and kept going, head down and eyes averted. Pride died fast in a city like Segg, where most people seemed to think that being poor and inhuman was enough of a crime to warrant being dragged off by the city watch at a moment's notice.

What the hell am I doing here? he asked himself wearily. Normally, he would be sleeping away the day in the tenement room he shared with twelve other Aclytes, all as young and desperate as himself. Hiding from the heat and the sun, waiting until dusk came and Segg's streets awakened with the illicit businesses that were its true lifeblood.

The answer to his question strolled a few paces in front of him, pausing every now and then to inspect a pile of fruit or a display of baskets. Her ebony skin gleamed faintly with sweat, and she had tied her long, black hair back with a colorful ribbon to keep it off her face and neck. Sweet Gin had appeared at his door hours ago, just when he was getting ready to sleep after a night of trying? without much success? to scrounge up enough money for rent. He could have refused to come with her, could have argued that he had been up since sunset and needed to rest. But when Ginny said go, he went without comment.

It had been that way since he had met her at age eight, when her pimp had added Yozerf to his stable. Ginny was two years older than him, and at that point had been in the business for a long time. Her tutelage had allowed him to survive, if not exactly to prosper. She was human, but he had forgiven her for it, and had eventually come to see her as the sister he'd never had. Ten years later, following her lead had become a habit with him.

Now, Ginny paused for a moment, forcing the shifting mass of the crowds to swirl around her. Impatience gleamed in her dark eyes as she waited for Yozerf to catch up. "I'm hot. Let's find someplace in the shade where we can get something to drink."

Thank the gods. Yozerf glanced around as he followed her. "Are there always so many people in the market this time of day?" he asked, knowing that her employer at *The Wyvern* would have sent her here

to buy food for the kitchen many times.

"Of course not! This is a festival, remember?" When he clearly did not, she let out a little huff of exasperation. "For the gods' sakes, you've lived in this city your whole life! Don't you ever pay attention to anything?"

Nothing human, he thought bitterly. *Except for you.*

They made their way to a wide, striped awning fronting a small tavern. For an instant, the shade blinded Yozerf's sun-adapted eyes, making him growl in annoyance. As his vision cleared, he caught sight of three Aclytes sitting at one of the battered wooden tables. Their narrow faces, high cheekbones, and canted eyes marked their race, although they had dyed their hair an acceptable black, to hide its brilliant colors from human eyes. Like Yozerf, they were all young, male, and restless.

Yozerf recognized one of them, a youth by the name of Ket who lived on one of the lower floors of the same tenement as himself. Ket was beckoning to him urgently, his face set in lines of grim determination. Yozerf considered ignoring him, but Ginny was already heading towards Ket's table. With a sigh, Yozerf followed.

Ket nodded briefly to Ginny? they probably knew each other from *The Wyvern*? but his intense blue eyes remained fixed on Yozerf's face. He and his other two companions all huddled over the table like conspirators, and Yozerf felt a flash of contempt for their obviousness.

"We need to find the Crow Queen," Ket whispered, his eyes darting around as if looking for spies. "They say that you know her."

Yozerf sighed a second time. Not many people knew that he was the son of Segg's most famous assassin, but word had obviously gotten around that there was some sort of link between them. "She isn't in Segg right now," he answered truthfully. If she hadn't been gone on a job, he might have been able to get his rent money from her, instead of signing on in one of the knife-fighting rings in the Old Quarter.

Ket's face crumpled in disappointment. "Oh."

Wariness fought with curiosity and lost. "Why?"

Ket hesitated, then glanced at his two companions. "This is Naryn and Gevannin. Naryn works the docks most days. He found out that there's a shipment coming in for Lord Uirek? Uirek is on the Regency Council, you know."

In fact, Yozerf was only vaguely aware that there was a Regency Council ruling the kingdom in the name of the three-year-old orphan queen, but he nodded as though this knowledge was a given.

Satisfied, Ket went on. "Naryn doesn't know what's in the shipment, only that it's valuable. *Very* valuable. It came in on a ship today, and guards are supposed to come from the palace tomorrow morning to remove it. That means it will be in the warehouse tonight."

"You intend to steal it."

Ket winced and looked around, as if expecting the city watch to come leaping out from some invisible hiding place. "Yes."

"Why the Crow Queen, then?"

"We thought she might help us."

Yozerf snorted. "She's an assassin, not a thief. She wouldn't be interested in anything that didn't require leaving behind a trail of dead bodies."

"Oh." Ket didn't bother to hide his disappointment. Then he brightened suddenly. "What about you? I've heard things about you? that you're fast, that you can fight."

Yozerf hesitated, caught off guard. "I don't know. I'm assuming that this shipment, whatever it is, isn't just lying around unwatched?"

"Of course not," Naryn said. "But I know a way in."

He needed the money? but still Yozerf hesitated. Knife fighting for the pleasure of a drunken crowd of ghetto slime wasn't going to pay his rent anytime soon. Ket's scheme might depend more upon impulsiveness than careful planning, but if it worked, then the results would surely be worth it.

Then again, it could also get him killed even faster than knife fighting.

He glanced automatically at Ginny, who was watching him with wide, dark eyes. "I think you should do it," she said quietly. "If this is as good as Ket says, we might be able to buy ourselves somewhere real to live."

When did this become "we"? Yozerf wondered. After all, he was the one risking his life.

"All right," he said at last, "I'll do it."

* * *

He met them in the cool bliss of night, when the moon had set. Although most of the streets of the Old Quarter were still packed with people, the docks were empty at this hour, with the exception of the occasional stray prostitute or sailor. The air smelled of the sea, tangy with salt and rich with the varied scents of living things. Warehouses lined the streets, their blocky shapes visible only by the stars they hid.

Ket, Naryn, and Gevannin lurked in the shadows, leaning against the brick wall of one of the warehouses. Yozerf caught the scent of alcohol, then saw that they furtively passed a wineskin back and forth, probably to bolster their courage. When he approached, Naryn held the skin out to him, and he took a generous swallow. It slid into his belly like a snake, nesting there with all the other drinks he'd had earlier.

Naryn led them through the side streets to the warehouse where Lord Uirek's invaluable cargo was being kept. Rather than go directly to the building, however, he cut over and made for a burned-out ruin beside it. Fallen beams and charred walls offered easy climbing, and before long the four youths had made their way to a place where they were level with the warehouse roof. Casting a wicked, challenging grin at them, Naryn leapt across the intervening space. His hands slapped on the brick edging, and he pulled himself up and onto the roof.

Ket and Gevannin exchanged nervous glances. Impatient now that he was fully committed, Yozerf pushed past them and took the leap himself. He had no fear of heights, and his natural grace and agility easily carried him across the gap. After a long moment, Ket followed.

Gevannin, however, did not. Yozerf looked back to see the youth's frightened face, blanched white beneath his headcloth. "Come on!" Ket hissed, beckoning urgently. But Gevannin only shook his head and began to clamber back down.

"Coward," Ket muttered. "Fine. There will be more for us, this way."

Moving as soundlessly as possible, Naryn led them across the flat roof to the opposite side. Once there, he unhooked a coil of rope from his belt. "There's a row of windows about ten feet down," he whispered. "They're shuttered for the night, but it shouldn't be too hard to trip the latch from this side."

Yozerf lay on his belly and slithered cautiously to the edge of the building. When he peered over the side, his heart sank. A few flickering torches illuminated the street below, allowing him to see the gleam of a metal helmet, the fold of a dark cloak.

"There's a guard directly below us!" he snapped in a hoarse whisper.

Naryn only shrugged. "If you see a better way, speak up now."

It would have been better if I'd stayed home and forgotten about this mad scheme, Yozerf thought sourly. But it was too late for recriminations.

They secured the rope to a barred grating meant to let light into the vast space below. Naryn and Ket both looked distinctly nervous, so Yozerf grabbed the rope away from them, tested its anchoring one more time, and quietly let himself down over the side of the building.

His boots scraped softly on the old brick, and he froze for an instant, glancing down. The guard looked small and far-off between his feet, but showed no signs of having heard anything. Taking a deep breath for calm, Yozerf lowered himself until he was level with the shuttered window. Letting go of the rope with his right hand, he fished in his belt until he found his knife, then slipped the thin blade into the large gap between the shutters. The iron bar on the other side grated slightly as he lifted it free. Replacing his knife, he pushed gently on one shutter.

The iron hinges let out a hellish squeal of protest. Yozerf froze, heart pounding madly in his ears. Far below, the guard stirred, glancing up and down the street, his posture suddenly alert.

Not daring to move, Yozerf hung suspended against the side of the building, clearly visible should the guard think to look up. His arms began to tremble from the strain of supporting his weight on the rope, and sweat dripped down his nose and ran into his eyes.

After what seemed like an eternity, the guard relapsed back into a more relaxed stance, apparently having decided that the noise had been nothing he needed to worry about. Half-scared even to breathe, Yozerf braced his boots against the side of the building and shifted himself over until he was able to hook both legs over the windowsill. Letting go of the rope, he slithered inside.

The window opened high up in the vast space of the warehouse. There was a narrow catwalk just beneath it, probably so that workers could easily open and close the windows depending on the weather and the time of day. The interior was dark except for the faint starlight leaking through the grates above, but Yozerf's night vision had always been exceptional. Crates and boxes of every description filled the warehouse, their contents scenting the air with the smells of dust and spices. The scent of the big rats that hunted the wharf also stained the air, making Yozerf's mouth water with hunger.

Ket and Naryn quickly came in through the open window, pausing only long enough to light a single candle that Ket had brought. Naryn clapped Yozerf on the shoulder in a friendly gesture, as if at a job well done. Yozerf jerked away with a soft snarl. The other man's eyes narrowed slightly, but he shrugged and headed off down the catwalk.

They followed him to the rickety ladder that led down to the main floor, and thence through a maze of bundles and bales that would have hopelessly confused any thieves who didn't know exactly where they were going. At length, Naryn paused before a surprisingly small wooden crate. Writing covered one side,

but they ignored it, as none of them knew how to read. Instead, Naryn gestured for the other two to wait, then set back off into the maze of boxes. A few moments later, he returned carrying an iron pry bar that he must have hidden elsewhere while at work during the day.

The sound of nails tearing free from wood was again painfully loud, and Yozerf began to seriously wonder how much longer their luck could hold out. They all paused for a moment after the top of the crate lifted free, but there came no suspicious cries, no sound of investigating footsteps. Ket reached into the crate and removed a small box no larger than an infant. The box was of polished walnut chased in gold, a treasure in and of itself. It was also locked.

"We'll open it when we get it back home," Ket said in a hoarse whisper.

But Yozerf shook his head sharply. "No." He shot a quick look at Naryn. "I've risked my neck on his word, but I want to know what we have before we leave, in case he's wrong. If it turns out to be nothing, then there must be other things of value in here that we can take."

Naryn flushed scarlet. "I'm not wrong."

"And I'm not leaving without something I know I can sell."

Yozerf took out a small set of lock picks that he had fashioned years ago. He was no expert with them, and it seemed to take forever, with his two companions fidgeting nervously beside him, but eventually the tiny lock on the box yielded. With a triumphant grin, Yozerf swung open the chest.

Their treasure lay nestled in blue velvet padding, shining like the largest pearl ever made. It consisted of two halves of a glass sphere? valuable in and of themselves? sealed and bound together with silver filigree and a second lock. The sphere was filled with water, and within the water? .

"What in the name of Hel is it?" Ket breathed.

Yozerf had no answer for him. Whatever it was, it glowed softly with an inner light. Its body was as transparent as the glass that imprisoned it, but he caught the impression of tentacles, a tail, and sad, frightened eyes.

And then it began to sing.

The song seemed to go straight into Yozerf's heart and mind, undistorted by water or glass. It was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard, and it lifted him up like a physical thing, as though he floated on a tide of silver light and pearlescent foam, as though the light of the stars poured down into him, filling all the hollow, lonely places. Pain and sorrow vanished, washed away by the creature's song, and for a moment he knew that he was something more than street scum, something that had value, something that could be loved and that could deserve love.

Then the song ended. And, as he awoke from its spell, Yozerf realized that, although he could recall how it had made him feel, he could remember not one single note of the song itself.

"Oh dear gods," Ket whispered. "We are going to be so damned rich."

Without warning, a disembodied, wailing scream split the air. Naryn let out a shriek himself, stumbling away from the glass sphere and the creature within.

"What by Hel is that?" Ket asked, shouting to make himself heard over the din.

"The box? there must have been a spell on it? if the wrong person opened it? "

Yozerf swore furiously. He should have known that something so valuable as the singing creature could not possibly be left unguarded.

"We have to get out of here? " he started, then stopped.

Something black, something with a thousand jointed legs and a glittering, obsidian carapace, was slowly clambering out of the crate in which the singing creature had been shipped. Apparently, an alarm to alert any human guards had not been enough to satisfy whatever wizard had been responsible for protecting Lord Uirek's valuable shipment.

Almost without conscious thought, Yozerf lunged forward and snatched the glass sphere from its velvet nest. Clutching it to his chest, he staggered back, pausing only long enough to see the monster in the crate suddenly catapult itself outwards. Moving faster than he would have believed, it leapt through the air and came down on Naryn, who was closest. Jointed legs clamped down hard around the youth's head and neck, and he began to scream.

Ket staggered back, face white with shock. He was frozen with terror, unable to flee or to help as the thing started to shred Naryn.

With a furious curse, Yozerf turned and ran.

He didn't head back for the catwalk and the rope? that would be too slow, and for now he wanted only to get away. As he wove his way wildly amidst boxes and crates, leaping over any stacks low enough for his long legs to clear, he almost collided headfirst with the human guard who had come to investigate the noise. The man swore in surprise, instinctively jumping back. Without breaking stride, Yozerf punched the man as hard as he could in the face, sending him tumbling into a stack of crates.

Yozerf ran out front door, left slightly ajar by the guard. His feet carried him down the street, across the wharf, into the warren of back allies and side streets that formed the Old Quarter. He ran until he thought his heart would burst, until every breath was like the stab of a knife in his lungs, until the muscles of his legs burned. At last, unable to go any farther, he stumbled into a garbage-filled alley and collapsed against the wall.

No many-legged horror appeared at the end of the alley to deal him the same fate that Naryn had suffered. As the sun began to rise, filling the dirty streets with a faint, amber light, the normal sounds of the city grew around him. Men and women chattered, a grubby urchin pushed a cart filled with fish past the alley, and a cat wandered in to investigate the Aclyte that had invaded its domain. There came no hue and cry, no screams of horror...nothing.

He had lost the guardian monster, if indeed it had ever bothered to pursue him. He was safe. Feeling far calmer, Yozerf chanced a look down at the sphere cradled in his arms and half-hidden by his shirt. The delicate sea creature swam within it, and he felt its song reach out to him once again.

He was rich.

* * *

Yozerf climbed the creaky stairs of his tenement building, the sphere hidden in a makeshift sling of rags that he had found in the alley. The airless heat of the day was already beginning to fill the ramshackle building. It stank of sweat, piss, mice, and garbage. A drunken youth lay across the stairs, clutching an empty wineskin in one dirty hand. Flies crawled in and out of his half-open mouth, buzzing away when Yozerf stepped over the prone form, then immediately returning.

Most of the other men who shared the room at the top of the stairs had left for the day, gone to jobs on

the docks or in the houses of richer folk. Two lay sleeping on piles of dirty straw, while a third made love to his mate, an Aclytese woman whom Yozerf recognized as one of the prostitutes that worked the market square after dark.

"Get out," Yozerf growled.

One of the men knew him well enough to leave without protest. The second received a kick to the ribs when he failed to rouse himself fast enough. Swearing furiously, he rolled out of reach.

"I pay my share of the rent same as you," he snapped. Then, seeing the look on Yozerf's face, he muttered an imprecation and departed.

The amorous youth climbed to his feet, clutching his breeks to him, his face flushed with anger and embarrassment. "Don't look at me like that, you red-haired freak! Just because you're a cold bastard with an icicle for a? "

He was cut off in mid-insult by Yozerf's hand closing hard around the back of his neck. A moment later, he found himself propelled out the door, narrowly escaping falling down the stairs. His woman followed without argument.

Alone at last, Yozerf paused a moment and rubbed tiredly at eyes that felt full of sand. After two nights and a day without sleep, he ached to lie down on one of the flea-infested pallets.

Instead, he unfolded the rags he had wrapped around the glass sphere and set it carefully in the center of the room.

The creature inside swam within its prison, its light looking dimmer but no less pure in the day. Its song flooded out again: beautiful, haunting, and magnificent.

And, as always, impossible to remember once it had ceased.

No wonder Uirek had been willing to import the thing at such expense. It was unimaginable that anyone could remain untouched by its song. Even the darkest and most twisted soul could feel uplifted and cleansed, if only for a few moments. Even one lost in despair could find hope.

That the glass sphere was designed to open was clear. Perhaps Uirek had prepared a special pool in the palace gardens, filled with seawater, ready to receive this beautiful, delicate, mysterious animal. Perhaps he would walk there at night and soothe his soul with its song after a long day of politicking and grinding people under his heel.

Lord Uirek would pay a great deal to have the creature back, Yozerf knew. Hel, there were dozens of people who would probably pay any amount to possess it, no questions asked. He could not only afford his rent, he could move out of this stinking, rat-infested hole forever. Maybe buy a little house somewhere outside the city? or even a tavern or an inn. Ginny would like that.

Ginny set this up, he realized as he paced back and forth in the small, dingy room. It had not been an accident that she had chosen that day to insist he accompany her to the market, had not been chance that she had directed them to the tavern where the would-be thieves were hatching their plots. She and Ket had probably planned out the entire episode the night before at *The Wyvern*.

It made him angry in a distant, tired sort of way. But any feelings he had towards Ginny were secondary to what confronted him now. He had to make a decision. He couldn't keep the glowing, singing creature indefinitely.

Could he?

He had never, in all of his life, owned anything beautiful. Segg was a port city, so he had sometimes caught glimpses of such luxury? perfect marble statues whose dimensions made his heart ache, exquisite paintings that brought tears to his eyes, delicate vases that he could have stared at for hours in contemplation.

Now, at last, he had something of his own. He sank down on a dirty pallet and stared at the sphere and the amazing creature within it. He, Yozerf, a dirty, scarred, ex-whore with no future and no hope...could have something beautiful.

And more than that, he realized. If he kept it, he could listen to its song whenever he wished. Anytime he wanted to, he could feel valuable, alive, worthwhile. For the moments when he was lost in its song, it made him believe that he had some untapped potential to be more than he was. Perhaps, if he listened often enough, he would come to believe its message all the time. Perhaps he would find some way of actually becoming what it promised.

He sighed and looked wistfully at the now-silent creature. So beautiful, so delicate, swimming around and around in its prison. Its eyes flashed past, full of longing and grief.

The day waxed to noon, then waned once again, and still Yozerf sat and struggled in silence. In the end, however, he knew that there was only one option. Perhaps there had never been any choice for him, since the moment he had first seen it in its glass sphere, had seen the pain in its haunted eyes.

But it had been nice to dream.

At sunset he rose, put the sphere back into its sling, and left the tenement. A breeze came up off the sea as he made his way down to the docks. The last workers and sailors moved cargo off and onto ships, shouting at one another in voices roughened by wind and salt. Yozerf avoided them and walked to the end of an empty dock. The sun was setting at his back, and the sea reflected the sky above with hues of red and gold. A seagull skidded across the clouds, loosing its mournful cry.

Yozerf uncovered the glass sphere. The creature's song poured out, entering his very soul. He closed his eyes, concentrating on every note, even though he knew he would not remember them later. Then, when the song was done, he carefully picked the lock on the sphere and released its contents back into the ocean.

The luminous creature was gone in an instant, without even a final flash of light. It did not understand what he had done, he knew, and felt no gratitude towards anything that walked the land. It knew only that it was free once again, free to return to wherever it had come from and rejoin its own kind. Yozerf threw its erstwhile prison after it, to sink beneath the waves.

Then, wiping tears from his eyes, he turned his back on the sea and left the way he had come.

Thank you for reading!
Meet the author of this story, [here](#).

Subscribe to Author's Newsletter and/or Comment on the Story

ecorvidae@vnet.	NBI Reader Comm	http://www.nove
email	realname,email	Name

(optional):

Email:

Comment(s) to Author:

Subscribe Me to Author Newsletter

Don't subscribe me, I'm just submitting a comment

newsletterrequest	NBI Newsletter S	http://www.nove
email	email	subscribe to NBI

announcements

email:

[Book Store](#)

[Home](#)

Questions?

publisher@novelbooksinc.com

Marketing information

marketing@novelbooksinc.com

Email Webmaster

webmaster@novelbooksinc.com

Copyright (c) 2001-2003, NovelBooks, Inc., All rights reserved.

All images and text are original or have been licensed for use.

Do not copy without permission.

redesign and maintenance by [Lisa Ramaglia](#)