

# Manuscript Found Written in the Paw Prints of a Stoat

by Samantha Henderson

## I. Stigma

When the last of her spines burst through the smooth, pearl-skin of her lower back, the Smallest Daughter of the House of Diamond decided it was time for her to leave her home and find her husband.

She told her Eldest Aunt of her intentions, as was only polite, and the older woman sucked in her breath and nodded, keeping her thoughts to herself.

Eldest Aunt told the Freckled Girls, whose twinned, variegated skins made them the most valued of their generation. The Girls told their pet stoat, and the stoat ran to tell Grandmother Time as she sat in her gazebo, watching the twilight fires of the Endless City spread out before her.

Which was, of course, Eldest Aunt's intention.

Grandmother Time licked her fangs, and nodded, and when morning came she sent for the Smallest Daughter.

"You'll travel far from the City you love. You'll cross waters that will not speak back to you. You will find places where you may forget who you are. You'll deny your House the profit of your company."

In answer, Smallest held out her hands. In the flesh of her forearms she had carved the Stigma. She'd chosen the sigils of the Angels of Dawn, Dusk, Waterfowl and Secret Things, and graven them with a kitchen knife by the light of the moon. Traces of mud were still on her petticoat: the mud she rubbed in the wounds to make them scar.

Grandmother Time told the stoat to bring a pouch of gold coin, and the throat-band of the House of Diamond.

"You should have waited for the blacksmith to do that," she said, nodding at the Stigma. She gave Smallest the gold and tied the velvet band around her neck. "And yet, crude as they are, they might prove stronger."

Smallest knelt at her Grandmother's mighty foot. She bowed to her Aunt. She gave a gold coin to the Freckled Girls, and another to the stoat, for luck.

And when day stretched into night and the birds brooded in the countless eves of the Endless City, she began her journey.

## II. Dawn

The Smallest Daughter walked all night, the stars hard diamond overhead and the road soft underneath her feet. She walked through the hour of the Witches, the hour of the Dragons and the hour of the Mice. She walked until the lights of the Endless City grew dim behind her, and as she turned and watched it disappear behind the swell of the road, she felt her heart break.

“So,” she thought, with interest. “This is what heartbreak feels like.”

But the itching of her half-healed arms distracted her, and the bag of gold beat a bruise on her hip, and the curious cracking of her broken heart faded into dandelion fuzz. She walked through the hard black hours and the soft gray hours and at sunrise she stepped aside into a meadow by the side of the road and fell asleep.

She woke as the sun blazed the dewdrops to life, feeling the tickle of a hundred tiny strands binding her body to the earth. Small creatures the height of her shinbone prowled around her. Their bodies were furry and they sang in high squeaky voices:

*We'll sell her to the Darkling Man*

*He'll sell her in the Market Square*

*He'll take her eyes for souvenirs*

*And when he's finished she won't care*

They smelled; not foul, but sharp, like new sweat.

She found she could not break the tiny strands that pegged her to the ground, so she flexed her new spines and they sliced the gossamer ropes easily. The little creatures shrieked in dismay as she swiveled to a sitting position and drew her long knife with one hand, snagging one of her captors with the other.

“Commerce! Commerce!” it squealed, and tried to bite her. She gripped it by the loose skin at the back of its neck, and laid her knife across her knees.

“I will not hurt you,” she told the creature. “But likewise I will not be bound and I will not be sold to your Darkling Man. I come from the Endless City, seeking my husband.”

It stopped struggling, and the others drew close.

“You want a husband?” piped the nearest. “Then you must come see Auntie! She buys and sells husbands, wives and children all day long.”

They all began to prance, shrieking “Auntie Thesis! Auntie Thesis!” and the one in her lap wiggled free.

“Come!” it said to her. “Auntie will find you a husband.”

So the Smallest Daughter sheathed her knife carefully, made sure of her bag of gold, counted the pieces of her broken heart and followed the meadow-creatures as they ran before her.

Soon they came to the ragged trunk of an enormous, ancient, lightning-struck tree. Inside dwelt Auntie Thesis, the Oak-Witch.

At the prodding of the meadow-creatures, she ducked her head and entered the trunk. Knowing as she did the ways of witches, she was not surprised to see the inside was larger than the outside, with

many doorways opening into dark halls.

Sitting at the table in the center of the tree-trunk was an old woman, older than Eldest Aunt, almost as old as Grandmother Time, bent and brown without a hair on her head. Before her was a great bowl of broth, and she stared, spoon in hand, at her visitor.

“Smallest Daughter of the House of Diamond,” she said, with mild surprise, “since I cannot sell you to the Darkling Man, or steal the gold at your hip, what may I do for you?”

“I am seeking my husband,” said the Smallest Daughter. “But I do not think I will find him here.”

“I can sell you none suitable,” agreed the witch. “But I can offer you my nephew.” She snapped her fingers, and from one of the hallways emerged a beautiful young man, barely older than a boy, with golden skin and sapphire eyes. His hair was black and curly, and there was no scar on him. He bowed to the Smallest Daughter, graceful as a dancer.

“See? He is already in love with you,” said the Oak-Witch. “Take him for free.”

“No,” said the Smallest Daughter, and the boy’s eyes blazed. “I cannot take one so unmarked. I fear I would break him.”

She curtsied politely to Auntie Thesis and turned away.

She never saw the boy draw his wicked little blade and throw it lightning-quick at her back. Dawn still shone on the horizon: the first Stigma on her left arm blazed once, and the knife vanished before it could touch her.

“Ah, young love,” said the Oak-Witch, spooning up her soup as the boy fled down the hallway, weeping.

Before she returned to the road, the Smallest Daughter gave each of the meadow-creatures a gold piece just in case, like the stoat, they were lucky.

### III. Dusk

The Smallest Daughter walked on, and the meadows and oaks of the lowlands changed with the hills to maple woods, and twin seedpods helicoptered across the road to fall at her feet. Morning turned to noon, and as the sun began its true strong rhythm she glimpsed a figure walking far ahead of her, black as if someone had cut his silhouette from velvet. In the heat it rippled and vanished and reappeared as the road humped itself up and down, and it always seemed to stay exactly the same distance ahead of her.

She stopped sometimes, and turned aside to drink from a woodland stream, or chew a strip of dried meat, or admire the countryside with the new wisdom of a broken heart. Whenever she returned to the road, the figure was still there, ahead of her, never further away and never closer. And now she saw that it danced, long and lanky, and that tassels swung about its body. In the highest heat of day, she turned from the road and found herself a nest of leaves between two sheltering maples, where she napped through the hour of the Sparrow.

She woke refreshed, and stretched her body, and the Stigma ached pleasantly. The soft dirt of the road gave way to hard-pack, and she dug her claws further in to gain purchase. And still, at the crest of the next hill, the fantastical black figure shimmered and swayed like a walking black puddle, man-shaped.

The sun was low and the sky reddening when she came upon a boy, nine or ten years old, perhaps, sitting by the side of the road and sobbing. She stopped beside him, and as he turned a tear streaked face up to her, the pieces of heart in her breast jangled and jumped, and her stomach turned over, for she saw that the sides of his mouth had been sliced, twisted up, and left to heal, so that his mouth was always forced to smile.

He rubbed at his eyes and rose to his feet, but he didn't seem afraid to see a Scion of the Houses of the Endless City.

"What's the matter, boy?" she said, as kindly as she could. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm crying because there's nothing else I can do," he said. "I'm crying because the Darkling Man stole my sister to sell in the Market Square of Laketown. I tried to stop him, but he was too quick for me."

"I remember a song about this Darkling Man, and a mention that he might sell me, and my eyes as well," said the Smallest Daughter, as anger stirred the pieces of her heart. "And it begins to offend me that he dwells in this world. Tell me how to get to Laketown, and I will find your sister for you."

The boy forced up his terrible mouth, as if he would wrest a real smile from it. "Come with me, Lady," he said. "Come to my home, and let my family show you what poor hospitality we may. As for Laketown, it is easily found, for it lies at the end of the road you follow."

She stared down the road at the flickering figure, her eyes narrowing, and would have ran it as fast as she could and made the taunting silhouette give an accounting of himself, but the boy tugged at her insistently and she was forced, for courtesy's sake, to go with him.

His small clan lived in the side of a cliff, where the great fossilized ribs of a long-extinct lizard framed a cave big enough to engulf a house. The Smallest Daughter could see where the vertebrae curved up the rock face, to terminate in an absurdly small head. On the other side, it coiled down into a long, serpentine tail.

All of them, Ma and Pa and Auntie and Uncle and the cousins and the siblings had the same vicious slash at the corners of their mouths, the same false smirk, like the grin of a clean skull. All their eyes brimmed with tears. They invited her to sit at their humble table and share their meal of berries and acorn-bread, and shook their heads sadly over the loss of their girl and the perfidy of the Darkling Man.

"He plucks our children like ripe apples," they told her. "And when we mourned, he sliced our faces. He said, he wanted to leave smiles behind him."

The Smallest Daughter thought she heard a snort overhead, like the grunt of a cynical dinosaur, but the others ignored it, so she did too.

"I'll rescue your girl, and make this creature grovel for the harm he's done you," she said. "Tell me what manner of man he is, so I can prepare."

But the grinning clan didn't answer her, instead shrieking and rubbing dirt on their heads, mourning their losses.

"Indeed, you are greatly wronged," said the Smallest Daughter, trying to be patient. "But I need to know his strengths, and his weapons. Claws and spines I have, but I am not yet old enough for fangs."

But still they howled and writhed in the dirt. "Hopeless, hopeless," Ma and Pa moaned. "Stay with

us, for he will capture you too.”

The younger siblings grasped at her feet, and she was afraid to free herself because her hind-claws might gut them. Auntie and Uncle embraced her about the waist, and she was afraid to raise her spines, for fear she might impale them. The noise of their wailing rose like the sea until she began to fear she would go mad.

The Stigma of Dusk flared on her arm, and the dinosaur’s long neck flexed, and its head swooped down to knock her besiegers aside. One, two, three, four, five, they rolled away like ninepins and sprawled in the dust on the floor of the ribcage-cave.

The Smallest Daughter thought it best to depart, fearing they’d bury her alive with their sorrows. Night had fallen, and she could no longer see the dark figure before her. But she hurried ahead, not stopping to sleep, determined to catch the Darkling Man and make him pay for his sins.

#### IV. Waterfowl

The Smallest Daughter started to trot. She might have been chasing the man in front of her or fleeing the scarred family behind her—she did not know herself. The faster she went, the more the road stretched out in front of her. Darkness dropped down and she picked her way by starlight, although she seemed to be passing the same twisted trees and black knots of grass, again and again. She began to suspect a spell, and wished her cousins, the Freckled Girls, were with her, for they could always sniff out any witchcraft and send their stoat to chew it out at the root.

Exhausted, she slowed and stopped. Her eyelids drooped. Beside the road was the same tree that she had passed twenty times and more. She curled up at the base of its trunk and went to sleep.

She woke to the sound of water chuckling to itself, but not to her, which was so astonishing she ignored the fact that where she woke was not where she had laid down. Moving water always told her jokes, bad ones, and she laughed for the sake of politeness.

“Grandmother was right,” she said, and sat bolt upright.

“Always,” answered a nearby voice, a smooth voice, a voice like the dusk spices buried as treasure under the Eldest Aunt’s house, and she rolled away from it and crouched, spines up and claws out, and wished for fangs. And he laughed at her, the Darkling Man, lanky and long and flaunting his tassels, with a pillowcase across his shoulder.

Beneath the fabric something moved, something the size and the shape of a girl.

Behind him was a vast lake like chopped blue glass.

Between them was three feet of sand and pebbles.

Not enough room to run.

His laughter whirled around her and she felt like she was on the swing again, barely out of her second skin, while Eldest Uncle pushed her higher, higher, until her feet were flat against the sky and she screamed with joy.

“Why does a daughter of the House of Diamond pursue a lonely traveler?” He gestured with his forefinger and she felt a phantom caress against the velvet of the House band around her throat.

“Especially when she seeks her husband. Shall I find one for you, little ferret-feet?”

“You’ve kidnapped a girl and mutilated her family,” she said bluntly. “I’ve come to take her home.”

He tilted his head and frowned at her. “Did I, and did I? Then I am the wickedest man alive.” And he swung the pillowcase off his shoulder, putting it carefully on the rocks between them.

It opened like an anemone and revealed a girl, old enough to start knifeplay, in Smallest’s estimation, but not to begin jewel-weaving. She looked up at her with eyes like the boy’s, the boy with the carved smile. But her face was whole.

She smiled at the Smallest Daughter, and didn’t seem afraid.

“She asked me to take her away,” said the Darkling Man, folding his arms. The smell of cinnamon drifted from his clothes like dust, and made her slightly dizzy. “Considering they would have slashed her face to look like theirs, I really couldn’t refuse.”

“You lie,” Smallest snarled.

He didn’t react. “I suppose they’ve told people I did it so many times that they believe it themselves. I avoid them when I can. They are a tribe that sits all day, in a cave of bones, mourning their lot and the tragedy of what-might-come. Their grief and self-pity destroys everything of beauty they have. They butcher their own souls.”

Smallest remembered the smiling tribe clutching at her ankles and hesitated.

“She told me to sell her in the market square of Laketown, if I must,” he continued.

“And will you?” she said, with what contempt she could muster.

The Darkling Man laughed and spread his arms out wide, the tassels bouncing on his sleeve. “Do you see a town?” he cried. “Do you see a market? This is all the Laketown you’ll find: rocks and water and a couple of terns.”

She looked around her and began to believe.

The girl pushed the pillowcase away and rose to her feet. She looked at both of them gravely, then walked to the edge of the water. Wavelets licked at her toes. Smallest found herself flexing her own claws in response.

“What is she doing?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said frankly. “After I bring them to the water’s edge, they must rescue themselves.”

The girl raised her arms, like the Freckled Girls invoking the Moon, and waited. They waited with her. Then, across the water, Smallest saw a white blur, a blob that whirled and came closer and broke into its separate parts, and joined together again, always spiraling. A flock of birds, hundreds of them, snowy white with wings as long as a man’s outstretched arms.

The flock swirled towards the girl as if it would consume her, and she uttered her first sound: the harsh cry of a sea-bird. The vortex descended and surrounded her, and rose again, and she was gone.

Birds flew everywhere overhead, and Smallest stretched her neck to look at them. The Darkling Man saw the tight skin of her neck, and bent close to her.

“There is still the matter of your husband, Daughter of Diamond,” he said. “I can find one for you. I can find one who will break down mountains for your love, destroy cities if you ask, wipe out nations to the last squalling child if that is your whim.”

His voice was a warm trickle of honey. She backed away a handbreadth.

“Or one who will sing all day of his love for you, write poems to your beauty, live and die on your smiles.”

His voice ran down the knobs of her spines. She backed away a foot.

“Or one who will bring you anything you desire, jewels and spices and clever birds, until you are buried in pretty things.”

His voice cooled her like a breeze and she turned and ran to the edge of the water, where the birds still flew, and the third Stigma burned like fire. The birds encircled her and she lifted from the ground, her arms stretching out and white feathers sprouting everywhere.

The flock swept over the lake, and beneath her, on the shore, she saw the dark figure watching until he dwindled out of sight.

Below them the smell of fresh water, before them the distant shore and a glimpse of towers.

## V. Secret Things

Wisps of clouds crossed the sky, and the flock dabbled their black, webbed feet in them. The clouds had the tang of burnt carbon. The water below started to smell salty and turn ocean-grey. Cold fog rose from it, and the other waterfowl called to each other in a language Smallest did not know.

The towers before them grew to a city: tall buildings and squat, and a thousand thousand pieces of glittering glass. The city filled an island and splashed across the mainland beside it. Like her Grandmother, the city was beautiful and terrible. On its breast was a great green emerald and across its shoulder a scar, the deep blackened stumps where two towers once stood.

Closer they flew, and the other birds cried “Haste!” for they knew a wind was coming. Smallest did not understand twisting her head on its long, feathered neck to see, so when the gust caught her she spun out of control, fell through the heavyside layer, and tumbled down the airstream. Head over winds over black, webbed feet, she slammed into the treetops of the peridot lozenge, and fell hard onto the grass below. Bile rose bitter in her throat at the impact, but she rolled with it, saving her bones.

When she got up her wings and feathers were gone. She felt for broken spines, retracted her claws, checked that her knife and her bag of gold were in place and stared at the green light around her.

It was a little grove of beeches, and soon she was blinking in the sunlight. People ran past her to the trees, shouting and pointing.

“It was a meteor!” she heard, then “No, it was a satellite!”

Some gave her an odd glance as she passed, but with her spines closed tightly down her back, she could almost pass for human, and she wasn’t the strangest creature this side of the Brooklyn Bridge.

“It was a spaceship!” came the cry.

“No!” said a woman in a dirty white dress. “It was an angel. Didn’t you see its wings?”

The Smallest Daughter thought it best to go, quickly and quietly. She bent her head and watched her feet as she crossed from the green grass to the pavement. But she looked up when she heard the familiar cry of “commerce, commerce!”

Running past her was a flock of the furry little creatures from Auntie Thesis’ meadow, the ones that wanted to sell her to the Darkling Man. But they didn’t seem to recognize her, and stranger still, nobody stared at them, or pointed, or acted as if they were anyway out of place.

Leaving the green swath behind, and walking between the tall buildings where a cold wind whipped, she looked into the faces around her. Human, mostly, but there – unmistakable, a young Oak-Witch, just rising into her powers. And there, in the distance, a flash of raised spines. And here, passing so close that his briefcase touched her thigh, a feather-faced man like those who lived north of the Endless City.

And there was a hide speckled like a Freckled Girl. There was a man with a tail, a panther’s tail that lashed and postured, same as Eldest Aunt’s favorite parrot seller.

But they walked and hurried same as the humans; like the humans, they began to stare at her, to stop and watch as she hurried by, spines down, claws tight.

There, an open shop where people sat around little tables, drinking from thick white cups. Near the sidewalk was an Elder Scion of the Endless City, unmistakable with her full-grown spines, her claws casually extended over her shoes, and the fang-tips that lapped over her lower lip. She wore no throat-band, so the Smallest Daughter could not determine which House she belonged to. She paused beside the table and made the courtesy of near-relation.

“Service, Older Sister,” she began.

The Scion raised her head and stared at her, astonished, and the Smallest Daughter almost jumped back in shock. The sides of the Scion’s mouth had been slashed upwards into a twisted smile.

Smallest *did* jump when somebody touched her arm.

It was a young man, an ordinary man, a plain man. Still, he glowed in the gritty light of this place like amber in a stream.

“Sorry,” he said to the Scion, in a voice as pleasant and bland as sugar. “She slipped out, and she hasn’t had her meds.”

The Scion nodded and dropped her gaze. Smallest let the young man take her arm and urge her away from the café, away from the street and into a small park, where children’s swings hung quiescent.

“They don’t know who they are,” he explained. “They’ve forgotten, and until they remember, the natives of this place cannot see what they really are.

“Most never remember. Most never even try.” He looked at the gray clouds overhead and sighed.

“And who are *you* when you’re at home?” she said, trying to sound indignant.

He tilted his head at her. “How is your heart?”

“What?”



“Your heart. Is it still broken?”

She felt for it, astonished. “Why no. It’s in one piece again.”

And she was a little sad, because she had rather liked it jangling.

“And you should know me,” he continued, “because I have followed you from the gates of the City of your Childhood down the great road to the shores of vanished Laketown. I followed you across the sky, although I am deadly afraid of heights.”

She blinked at him, at his wry mouth, and bent closer, listening.

His voice was honey, and trickled down the knobs of her spine. His voice cooled her like a breeze. She felt warm inside, as if an eggshell of hot water had broken in her breast.

“But perhaps,” she said, “*I was following you.*”

He shrugged. “It’s much the same thing. Do you know me now?”

“Why, no,” she said, coyly. “I’m terribly sorry.”

“And how,” he said, “do the women of your house claim their husbands?”

“Usually we must fight,” she said.

“The only other Scion within ten miles has forgotten who she is,” he said. “After you fight, what do you do?”

“This,” she said, and extended her two sharpest fore-claws, and carefully slashed two small parallel lines over his right cheek.

Later, in the velvet-dark of his chambers, she lay on her stomach while he stroked the nubs of her spines.

“Already the humans are beginning to see you,” he said. “Soon they will know who you are, unless something is done to stop them. And then they will take you away to the zoo, or the cathedral, or burn you at the stake, and I shan’t have that.”

He fingered her throat-band and bent close. She could feel his breath on her ear.

“If I cut this loose, you will forget,” he whispered. “Little by little, you’ll forget and no one will recognize you. It will not hurt a bit.”

Feeling his fingers on her neck, she shook her head.

The last Stigma, the sigil of Secret Things, glowed on her arm.

“Very well,” he said.

He left her side, and she dozed a little, listening to him rummage through his tools. She woke, though, and held very still when she felt the sharp blades slice, one by one, each spine from her back. Then he began on the claws.

The alcohol was cold on her skin and sharp in her nostrils when he finished. He covered her with a soft blanket and left her to heal.

“How does it feel to be a Secret Thing?” he said, before he left.

She laughed, but was too sleepy to say it aloud: “Whatever will we do when the fangs grow in?”

Outside the window, feeling for purchase on the rough bricks and railing, a stoat turned away and began its long journey home.

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**About the Author:**

Samantha Henderson lives in Southern California with mysteriously increasing numbers of corgis and rabbits. Her work can be seen online at *Strange Horizons*, *The Fortean Bureau*, *Ideomancer*, *Abyss and Apex*, *Neverary*, *Would That It Were*, *Bloodlust-UK*, and the archives of *Lone Star Stories*.

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