

**A Light in Troy**  
**by Sarah Monette**

She went down to the beach in the early mornings, to walk among the cruel black rocks and stare out at the waves. Every morning she teased herself with wondering if this would be the day she left her grief behind her on the rocky beach and walked out into the sea to rejoin her husband, her sisters, her child. And every morning she turned away and climbed the steep and narrow stairs back to the fortress. She did not know if she was hero or coward, but she did not walk out into the cold gray waves to die.

She turned away, the tenth morning or the hundredth, and saw the child: a naked, filthy, spider-like creature, more animal than child. It recoiled from her, snarling like a dog. She took a step back in instinctive terror; it saw its chance and fled, a desperate headlong scabble more on four legs than on two. As it lunged past her, she had a clear, fleeting glimpse of its genitals: a boy. He might have been the same age as her dead son would have been; it was hard to tell.

Shaken, she climbed the stairs slowly, pausing often to look back. But there was no sign of the child.

Since she was literate, she had been put to work in the fortress's library. It was undemanding work, and she did not hate it; it gave her something to do to fill the weary hours of daylight. When she had been brought to the fortress, she had expected to be ill-treated—a prisoner, a slave—but in truth she was mostly ignored. The fortress's masters had younger, prettier girls to take to bed; the women, cool and distant and beautiful as she had once been herself, were not interested in a ragged woman with haunted half-crazed eyes. The librarian, a middle-aged man already gone blind over his codices and scrolls, valued her for her voice. But he was the only person she had to talk to, and she blurted as she came into the library, "I saw a child."

"Beg pardon?"

"On the beach this morning. I saw a child."

"Oh," said the librarian. "I thought we'd killed them all."

"Them?" she said, rather faintly.

"You didn't imagine your people were the first to be conquered, did you? Or that we could have built this fortress, which has been here for thousands of years?"

She hadn't ever thought about it. "You really *are* like locusts," she said and then winced. Merely because he did not treat her like a slave, did not mean she wasn't one.

But the librarian just smiled, a slight, bitter quirk of the lips. "Your people named us well. We conquered this country, oh, six or seven years ago. I could still see. The defenders of this fortress resisted us long after the rest of the country had surrendered. They killed a great many soldiers, and angered the generals. You are lucky your people did not do the same."

"Yes," she said with bitterness of her own. "Lucky." Lucky to have her husband butchered like a hog. Lucky to have her only child killed before her eyes. Lucky to be mocked, degraded, raped.

"Lucky to be alive," the librarian said, as if he could hear her thoughts. "Except for this child you say you saw, not one inhabitant of this fortress survived. And they did not die quickly." He turned away from her, as if he did not want her to be able to see his face.

