



The Heart's Desire
A Short Story by Carolyn Kephart

The gavel struck once, then twice, sharply quelling the crowd. The third blow echoed in total silence.

“Let the Scryer be summoned.”

Her entrance was all but noiseless, save for the faint clinking of her bodyguards’ weaponry. It was always a ritual, a procession of ominous state with fully-gearred special forces providing escort as she glided deliberately down the aisle in her trailing gray robe, her lowered head entirely cowled by its overhanging hood. All around her she heard the surge of many people rising to their feet, and furtive murmurs that were sternly hammered down again as everyone re-seated themselves. In the now complete silence the Scryer halted at the bench to incline her head to the judge, and then moved to face the accused, her gloved hands clasped and hidden by her sleeves, her guards at ready on either side. During her silent progress the judge and spectators had donned the same kind of close-fitting reflective glasses her guards wore, and when she turned about she met only blank bug-like stares.

It was almost amusingly eerie, but no one smiled as the cameras recorded everything for the benefit of posterity—and a very sizeable video audience worldwide. Prior to the Scryer’s appearance, that audience had been treated to a full and unsparingly graphic recounting of the accused’s atrocities, but the robed figure’s complete ignorance of all details regarding the case was both expected and enforced. She had been summoned as the last arbiter of guilt and innocence, the simple, absolute truth. The accused had waived his right to a jury trial as a desperate means of evading a guaranteed death sentence, putting his fate entirely in the Scryer’s hands. The judge was little more than a referee.

Reaching the isolated dais where the accused sat, the Scryer pushed back the hood of her robe, revealing the black mask like a fencer’s that hid and protected her face. She alone stood between the defendant and his doom, and she felt all the weight of that burden. Her body was sticky and cold beneath the cumbersome sexless robes, that swathed her like the pleurant of a medieval mourner.

“The accused will face the Scryer.”

The accused, the only one in the room with naked eyes, a young man with tight Aryan features, appeared to suddenly realize the seriousness of his decision and made things difficult for his guards, who after some struggling bound his hands, gagged his screams and

fitted his eyelids with retractors. When the audience at last silenced, the Scryer began. Clicking the button on her mask that unveiled her naked eyes, she meshed her stare with that of the accused. The spectators fixed their attention on their video monitors, eagerly tracking the images of the accused's brain scan, the flares and throbbings of ever-intensifying color that meshed with his choked keenings.

The Scryer felt her entire body growing cold, sweat trickling at her nape as she stared into the accused's wan blue wide-stretched eyes with their now almost invisible pupils. Every time she thought there could be nothing worse to see, that she had finally come to the end of everything rotten and twisted and senseless, creatures like this hell-wrought youth proved her wrong. For fifteen seconds' worth of lifetime she plunged into the unspeakable sewer that was his essence before closing her eyes, forcing her heart and guts to calm; but she felt faint and staggered slightly, causing a murmur among the spectators that the judge sternly banged into silence.

"Scryer, your decision?"

The judge's question, one she had heard so often in the last five years, reminded the Scryer of her power, and it gave her a surge of intense, terrible joy. Her mask contained a device that would distort her normal voice beyond detection, and her words would emerge in a flat, sexless staccato. Always her statements were given tersely, whether advising incarceration or execution; but this time she said nothing.

Her eyes again locked on the accused's. Reaching out, she put her hands on either side of his head, and even though her touch was gentle, the accused screamed behind his gag.

She mirrored him. All that he had inflicted, he now felt.

He twitched and thrashed, and his muffled shrieks never stopped. The Scryer wrinkled her nose as he lost control of his bodily functions, but her stare never wavered; and finally his body relaxed as his head went limp in her hands, lolling backward as she let go. In the total silence, the slight thud of his head striking the chair's back seemed to echo as his brain's desperate, throbbing, brilliant colors faded to flat pale gray.

Amid the collective gasp of the spectators, many of whom applauded and cheered, some of the accused's supporters hurdled the barrier to exact vengeance. The guards rushed in to earn their pay, and at the same time the Scryer felt a steel-strong pair of arms grabbing her about the body, lifting her up and carrying her to the safety of the judge's chambers.

The heavy door slammed and locked. Her rescuer looked her up and down through the impenetrable sunglasses that for the Scryer had become part of his face. "You okay, ma'am?"

She pushed at the spring that detached the mask, her fingers cold and frantic in their gloves. "I'm freezing. And I'm going to be sick."

Her savior caught the mask with one hand as it dropped, setting it aside as with his other hand he reached into a pocket and took out a slim silver vial, lifting its cap with an expert flick of his thumb, extracting one of its contents. The Scryer at once held out her hand to receive what looked like a pretty piece of hard candy, and popped it into her mouth. In seconds, sweet expected calm ensued in her stomach, a tranquil warmth that soon ebbed out to her body, working its blessed way upward to quiet first her battering heart, then her jangled mind. "Thanks, Dave."

He nodded slightly, then pushed back the Scryer's hood and carefully removed the helmet. "What happened to that guy?"

She knew what Dave really wanted to ask, but there was always someone else listening. "It was a heart attack, or a stroke. The autopsy will prove that."

Dave only nodded again. After he packed the robe and mask into its case, he led the Scryer to the private exit that led to the secluded garage, and helped her into the car. Its back windows were coated with an opaque film, making it impossible for the Scryer to see anything

outside, but that didn't matter. Past the barrier that divided her from Dave, she could feel him compelling the expensive machine with smooth stops and precise gradual turns. It always calmed her, his driving.

His voice understood. "Feeling any better, ma'am?"

"Yes." But she only meant her husk. Inside, the emanations of the accused still poisoned her.

He knew. His voice became level and detached, in a way she had learned to take very seriously. "What happened today won't ever happen again. Sec, making a call."

He got on his phone and began speaking in Soldier, a language of acronyms and expletives. The Scryer took out her music player, donned her headphones, and escaped into her needful paradise of fugues and arpeggios and adagios.

When at last Dave stopped the car and opened her door—he had to, since he controlled the lock—the Scryer blinked at the sudden light, and found that they were at the front of the hotel, not inside the closely guarded space in the building 痴 depths.

Dave shrugged off her surprise, and handed her their room's keycard. "Something's come up, ma'am. You know the drill."

She did, although she'd very seldom met with this part of it. Donning her dark glasses as required, she went as far as the door with Dave and then entered the lobby alone.

She was expected to head directly for the room elevator, but her stomach didn't give her time. Rushing to the ladies' room, she bolted into a stall and vomited. Having thus at least partially exorcised the accused, she went to a sink and rinsed her mouth, poured hot water over her hands to warm them, then took off her dark glasses and gazed into the mirror, pushing back her disordered hair, shaping it and her thoughts into order. Face to face with her mirrored self she calmed as she always did, and began freshening the light makeup she was required to wear on assignment. Her features combined the golden symmetry of a Botticelli portrait with the meditative stillness of a Noh mask, and her eyes were pure and clear, the only eyes not a monster's she was ever allowed to look into.

She knew it. Knew she'd killed him. All she felt was relief...and a sense of power so alien it confused her.

Freshened and put to rights she headed again for her room. The candy drug given to her by Dave tenderly cocooned her as always, sliding a fine mesh between memory and reality, turning the horrors into dismissable blurs, and making any thought of running away, escaping, getting free, a laughable, touching folly.

On her way to the elevator, she passed the cocktail lounge. Halting in the doorway, she listened to the murmur of relaxed conversation and calm piano undercurrent for a few indecisive instants before entering and seating herself at the bar. She'd never done such a thing before, and wondered why she dared to now. Perhaps it was the detached peace of the place, or the skill of the musician despite the cheapness of the music. Perhaps it was anger, that always dwelt in her like a dormant seed, waiting its chance to burst into a blood-red flower. But most of all it felt like the new, strange sensation that had come over her when she'd seen the face of the accused grow white and stiff around his staring eyes. Joy. Sheer rapturous joy.

Part of her instruction, although she very seldom had occasion to make use of it, included how to move smoothly in a public setting, and she was secure in the knowledge that she fitted in seamlessly. She felt the bartender's approving scrutiny as she ordered her drink with downcast eyes. More than one man came over to speak to her, low-toned and interested, and she listened to them with bemused half-smiles as she sipped her iced Cointreau, wordlessly examining their cufflinks or their watches or their rings until they became tired of trying and left her alone.

“What would the lovely lady like to hear?”

Her seat at the bar was very near the piano, and the musician had addressed her. She felt a blush well up in her cheeks, a confused smile quiver on her lips as she turned toward him, evading eye contact as a matter of instinct. “Anything by Couperin.”

Her words had rushed out of her, breathless, and her blush deepened at them. The musician had been playing a medley of pop tunes, and must have found her request bizarre. But then he amazed her with ‘Les Baricades Mistérieuses,’ and she leaned close to listen, feeling every note imbue her with peace. When it was done she applauded, and to her surprised pleasure a few others did so too. Encouraged, the pianist moved on to a Bach prelude and was beginning a Mozart rondo when the hotel manager appeared and said something to him in a low warning tone. The music instantly reverted to bland, facile pop. With a sigh the Scryer motioned to the bartender for another drink, but a sudden hand unlike all the others intercepted her glass. The voice that came with it was low and taut, very like the manager’s to the musician.

“Damn it, ma'am, you know you shouldn't be here.”

The Scryer was startled only for an instant, and replied calmly as she studied the hand’s fine white scars. “You shouldn’t either, Dave. Civilized clothing doesn’t look right on you.”

It took him a few seconds to reply. “Did you use the can?”

He spoke very quietly, but she colored up anyway, and answered only with a nod. Muttering a curse he got out his phone and punched in a text message. When he’d finished, he pocketed her glass, ice and all. “Let’s go. Keep the shades off—it looks weird for us both to be wearing ‘em.”

She knew better than to protest, and left the bar at his side with eyes downcast. They were silent in the elevator, and neither of them spoke on the way to the room. As soon as the door was closed she buried her face in her hands. “It was so alive, that music. Like all the places I know only from pictures, places I’ll never see...”

The last words cracked and stalled, and Dave sighed and put his arms around her, cradling her quiet. “Shh. I know, babe. Shush.”

The music had been so beautiful. The Cointreau had tasted like paradise. She hadn’t wanted to be anywhere else. “You used to be free. You—” His embrace tightened a warning instant, and she drew a deep steadying breath. “I didn’t get you into trouble?”

“Nah.” His fingers slid to her waist in that warning way she’d grown used to, but then the touch became appraising. “Let’s find you some food.”

Before Dave, the Scryer had lived mainly on sugar, alcohol, and vitamins, the latter prescribed by the state, which was extremely solicitous of her health. But Dave never failed to take full advantage of room service at a five-star hotels with famous restaurants, and made sure she did too. Going to the room phone, he ordered dinner for both of them, calmly and unerringly as if planning a crucial mission. Finishing the order he gave the Scryer that grin she always liked and seldom saw. Addressing the phone again, he said, “Plus a bottle of champagne. Your best. Oh, and fruit fondue.” He knew well that she adored both, and the latter combined two of his passions, chocolate and fire.

The fondue pot's candle made just enough light.

“Permission to speak freely, ma'am?”

“Granted, Dave.”

“You're a damn fine lay.”

She laughed, low and soft. “I think I’m the one who should be saying that.”

In the darkness visible she caught the edge of his smile as he covered her bare shoulders with the rustling luxurious sheet. “Honored, ma’am.”

She snuggled against his side. “The others were impossible. They’d have treated bed like one of those video games they were always playing—get in, score, and get out.” Her fingertips traced his chest as she spoke. “Until you, it was a lot more fun to say no.”

“They were hand-picked to serve your every need.”

“By very bad pickers. I didn’t know I even had needs, until you.” She’d always wondered who’d chosen Dave. He was older than the others, and she could tell that he had been an officer, and fought in wars. Her next words were whispers. “You’ve seen the kinds of things I have.”

He didn’t answer, but took her hand and gave it a surrounding, gentle, warning pressure. Most of their communication was like that. So much she wanted to ask him but knew he could never reply to, because of the watching eyes, the listening ears of the administration that had taken her when she was almost too young to remember and kept her sequestered ever after like a mouse in a box, a terrified little mouse that didn’t want to live and had often tried very hard to die. But Dave had brought in the light...warm bright light. And she had changed from a mouse to a princess in a tower.

Surely he’d have known what life with her would entail—jagged moments of raw danger, spaced by long empty stretches that had driven the others desperate. He was required to be with her constantly, and she was permitted no contact with anyone else. They had been together half a year now, and she could no longer envision life without him, but she had no idea what he really felt, or how much longer it would be until he broke like the others. She would not blame him for leaving, nor for what happened to her afterward.

“I read somewhere that it is a prisoner’s duty to escape,” she said, softly into the darkness. “Then again, I’m always reading.”

“Yeah. High-falutin’ old stuff.”

“It’s beautiful. It keeps me alive.” Moving to rest on her side, she fixed her gaze on the candle that now made only a faint fleck of light. When she spoke again, her voice had cooled to wryness. “It was so embarrassing, making the first move.”

“You had to. Regulations.”

She half laughed, remembering some lines lately read. “The amours of an empress, as they exact on her side the plainest advances, are seldom susceptible of much sentimental delicacy.”

In the fallen silence Dave lay motionless, but then his hand moved to her bare shoulder, gripping it gently. Slowly and carefully, each word clear, he said, “To heal, as far as was possible, the wounds inflicted by the hand of tyranny, was the pleasing, but melancholy, task of Pertinax.”

She felt a shock well through her, quickening her heart. She trembled, but somehow kept her voice steady. “I’d wondered who was dog-earing my Decline and Fall. I’d never have thought you the Gibbon type.”

His chuckle made a soft rumble under her ear. “Yeah, I’m more of an ape, huh. But believe it or not, I read that guy quite a while ago before I got here. I’ll even admit to liking poetry.”

He was amazing her, but she fought to reply calmly. “Give me an example.”

“Okay, but promise not to laugh.” And he began.

“She is coming, my own, my sweet;
Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear her and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed;
My dust would hear her and beat,

Had I lain for a century dead,
Would start and tremble under her feet,
And blossom in purple and red.”

He spoke the words matter-of-factly, as if reading a list; but she felt his heart beating as fast as hers. They had discovered a language, a code, that the administration could not understand. They might have very little time to use it.

His hand, that still held hers, gave another, longer, gentler pressure. The little flickering flame quivered in death, leaving them in complete darkness. She felt him take off his glasses and set them aside. “Your turn.”

She understood. Summoning all her calm, she spoke the words she had wanted to say for a very long time.

“Now that I have your heart by heart, I see
The wharves with their great ships and architraves;
The rigging and the cargo and the slaves
On a strange beach under a broken sky.
O not departure, but a voyage done!
The bales stand on the stone; the anchor weeps
Its red rust downward, and the long vine creeps
Beside the salt herb, in the lengthening sun.
Now that I have your heart by heart, I see.”

As she spoke the last line, she turned to look directly at him, and she knew their eyes had met entirely naked, blind in the darkness. It didn't matter. She rested her head on his shoulder once again, and he wrapped her in his arms no differently than he always did. “What the hell are architraves...” His lips touched her hairline. “I have to tell you about tomorrow, babe.” And quietly he explained what was scheduled to occur, and how her life would change.

The new administration had for some time decided that the scryer's talents were wasted on No Mercy, and this day's show would be her last. In the coming week she would be flown to the nation's capital to attend a reception in honor of the visiting leader of the world's second most powerful nation. He was said to be utterly inscrutable, this leader; he had only just come to power and it was suspected that he might have dangerous tendencies to megalomania, but so far no one had been able to ascertain the truth. It would be her task to learn it.

So much became clear, suddenly—the lessons in etiquette, the guidance of her education. “So that was the test I passed. At the cocktail lounge.”

“Yep. I figured it called for bubbly.”

She had also been taught to hold her liquor, and her thoughts were sober, but it was hard to calm her heart. At last she would see those places she'd only known in pictures; watch an orchestra playing the music she knew only by recordings; view the paintings she loved in the museums where they hung, instead of on a screen...and much, much more than that. Her blood heated with a surge of sudden, terrible joy. “I just thought of another poem.”

He felt her quickened pulse, and twined his fingers with hers. “I'm listening.”

She licked her lips, which were very dry, and forced the words to issue softly, calmly.

“Ah Love, could you and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
Would we not shatter it to bits—and then
Re-mold it nearer to the heart's desire!”

He was silent a long time, but then his hand closed around her wrist, and she trembled even though his touch was barely a squeeze, just as his voice was scarcely a murmur. “You really need to get some sleep, hon.”

Suddenly she felt very tired. “You're right.”

Dave tensed ever so slightly, then relaxed. “Hear that? Thunder. It’ll rain soon.”

“Yes.” She loved rain, but she had only ever seen it through windows, heard it on roofs. She had spent her life behind glass, darkly. Now that would change. Now...

A massive detonation made the distance vibrate, and she gasped. Dave’s touch at once gently reassured her, fingers warmly wrapping hers.

“Just a storm, babe. It won’t last long.”

“Then I don’t want to miss it.” Slipping free, she got out of bed and went to the window, struggling with the latch, shocking herself with her language. “These goddamned things never open. Ever.”

Dave joined her. “Easy. You’ll cut yourself.” But he didn’t make her stop. He only shooed her hand away, clicked the latch and slid the glass wide open. The lightning was coming down in great bolts, but she leaned out, feeling the rain striking her face, streaming through her hair down to her naked skin.

“Jeez, you’re gonna get yourself electrocuted.” Dave pulled her away and held her close as a great jolt of blinding white shook the building, and all the lights went out.

Her shriek had been muffled against his chest. Beneath her cheek, past his warmth, she felt his heartbeat. Save for the storm’s hectic incandescence, the world was lightless, soundless, safe. She moved to look up at Dave and their eyes met, as naked as their bodies.

What she saw, she’d known all along. He had the soul of a hero. And he’d die for her, but she wouldn’t let him.

His fine clear gaze seemed to know her fully as deep. “Be gentle, Medusa.”

“No worries, Galahad.” She wrapped her wet arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes as she listened to the rain.

Dave’s voice threaded the downpour. “Tomorrow’s a big day, hon. Let’s get some sleep.” He gathered her closer, and his lips smiled against her brow. “You know, it’s not going to be easy.”

She smiled too. “Shattering the sorry scheme, you mean?”

“Nah. Having kids who can see right through me.”

They both laughed. The storm’s thunder was distant now. Sweet clean rain-washed air filled the room, and morning would come with warm, bright light.



Note: The first poem quotation is from ‘Maud,’ by Alfred Tennyson, 1855; the second is from ‘Song for the Last Act,’ by Louise Bogan, 1949; the third from ‘The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám,’ translated by Edward Fitzgerald, 1859.

Other works by Carolyn Kephart:

WYSARD and LORD BROTHER: Parts One and Two of the Ryel Saga, acclaimed epic fantasy

THE RYEL SAGA: A TALE OF LOVE AND MAGIC (WYSARD and LORD BROTHER complete in one volume)

QUEEN OF TIME – Contemporary magic realism

PENTANGLE: FIVE POINTED FABLES – Short fiction previously published in ezines, plus a bonus tale