

BALLAD OF THE
BEANSTALK
AMY MCNULTY

Ballad of the Beanstalk

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Chapter One

The worm Clarion almost impaled with the dibbler poked its long, pale head through the dirt toward her, so straight and taut it was like a dagger someone stabbed up from beneath the soil. At first she thought she'd missed it entirely, but after she instinctively turned the tool and drilled the hole larger, she watched it stretch and fight until it snapped its own tail off.

Clarion stared as it slithered into the upturned earth and gaped at the still-wiggling tail that flopped from beneath the dibbler.

“Clair?” Elena readjusted her bonnet and tucked a strand of auburn hair that'd fallen out of her plaits back inside the fabric. “Have you found something?”

Krea scooted over, the basket full of seeds hanging from the crook of her arm tipping slightly, almost causing the basket's contents to fall. “Oo, is it some crystal? Mum told me to be on the lookout for crystal in the witch's garden, she did. Rocks have healing powers.”

“Your mother has more rocks growing in her head than there are rocks in my garden.” Jacosa finished scooping water from the little canal that ran through her property and out under the stone wall that protected her garden from rabbits and other varmints. “And there’s no such thing as magical healing crystals, and if there were, you wouldn’t find them growing in the dirt like common potatoes.” She dropped the watering can next to Krea’s feet, causing the poor girl to jump back and lose a few of the seeds in her basket. “You’d be wise not to call me a witch within earshot, either, not if you hope to make use of any of my potions and poultices ever again.”

Krea mumbled something about there being “nothing wrong with a witch being called a witch” but pressed her lips tightly together when she caught Jacosa eyeing her.

“It’s just a worm.” Clarion stood and slapped some of the dirt off her skirt. Most of it blended right in with the dust and mud caked on from mucking around with the last two pigs left on her family’s small pig farm. “I’m sorry. I... I was just thinking.”

“I know we raise them, care for them, and become their surrogate parents, only for them to wind up on our neighbors’ supper tables.” Clarion’s papa didn’t mention that they wound up on their own table, too. Or that they became trade for the cows, sheep, and chickens that wound up roasting in their place over the fire. The piglet thrashed under his grip as he tried to slip the tip of the kitchen knife beneath the splinter in the pig’s leg. “But that doesn’t mean we don’t treat them with kindness while they’re with us. Hold it still, Clair.”

Clarion squeezed the pig’s little hoof tighter and stretched the leg out as far as it would go. She didn’t like being so close to the pigs then, especially when they were squealing and thrashing like they were little monsters.

Her papa twisted the knife and the splinter of wood popped out. He lay the knife beside him on the ground and picked up a piece of scrap cloth, tying it tightly around the animal's injured leg. His eyes met Clarion's and the corner of his lips twitched up into a smile. "We have a responsibility as the bigger species, no matter what others may say."

He smacked the piglet's hind end and Clarion let go. The piglet scrambled off to join its four siblings at the trough.

"Grab it, then, they're good for the chickens." Krea dropped her basket on the ground and peered into the small hole created by Clarion's dibbler. Clarion snapped back to the present, remembering the worm instead of the piglet. She was sure Krea couldn't have imagined that the sight of an injured worm had conjured up images of Clarion's late father. Krea showed little interest in the work of her own papa, and besides, the town blacksmith had little knowledge he cared to pass on to his daughter when he had four sons from whom to choose to succeed him. Never mind that they were all under the age of six.

Krea's lips puckered. "I don't see no worm."

Elena picked up the watering can. "You don't see *any* worms."

Krea glared at Elena. Clarion wondered if she should say something. She hated when Elena understood what Krea meant but felt the need to "fix" her words anyway. It often led to unnecessary fights between them.

"All right, all right." Jacosa clapped her hands together. "Seeds don't sow themselves." She tapped her index finger against her bottom lip. "Although that would be very convenient, wouldn't it? Maybe I have something that can make an animal to do it for me. Oh—for crying out loud!"

The girls paused in their work to examine the eccentric enchantress. Jacosa kicked at a large rock—about the size of her torso—with her boot. She tossed her hands in the air before crouching down. “Fell off the fence here, I reckon.” She grabbed it with both hands and strained to pull it backward, groaning.

Clarion moved to assist her, but Jacosa waved her away. “No, no. Don’t trouble yourself. I’ll have to do this another way.” She stood and shook her head to no one in particular, walking off toward her cottage and slapping her palms together. “Always something, isn’t it? Always something.” The familiar far-off look in her eye let Clarion know the witch had all but forgotten the girls she left behind. “If only I could boost my magic. If only it weren’t so darn hard. And disgusting...”

Clarion wondered at what the witch might do. The older woman didn’t like wasting magic. It was why she offered some of her magicked herbs and spices in exchange for the villagers’ help in her garden instead of figuring out some other way to do it on her own. Jacosa never wasted any of her most enchanted plants for the trouble, just the little ones that could cure a sprained ankle in two minutes or make a woman having trouble bearing children fertile. (The latter was for Krea’s mother. And it worked far too well, to tell the truth.)

Clarion had gotten distracted again, had forgotten to soothe the tension between her two dearest friends. They were still arguing.

“You have a problem with the way I talk, I’ll thank you to keep it to yourself.” Krea’s too-big bonnet slipped down over her eyes. It was a hand-me-down from her mamma because she was too proud to take any of the old ones Elena didn’t want.

Elena turned away from Krea, likely because the sun shone so brightly behind her towering friend. She didn’t like when her skin got too much sun. It made freckles break out all

over her nose, and although Clarion thought she looked adorable with those little flecks of color on her small and elegant nose, Elena thought they made her look rugged and childish. “All right. I’m sorry. You won’t have to tell me twice.”

“No, I’ll have to tell you a dozen times before sundown.” Krea scoffed and snatched her seed basket back from where she’d left it. “And you still won’t learn your lesson.” She tossed a pinch of the seeds unceremoniously at the hole.

Elena’s voice lost some of its sweetness as it cracked. “How many times do you expect me to apologize?”

Clarion crouched to cover the seeds with dirt and remove her tool. The piece of the worm left behind had ceased moving. She didn’t think until too late to remove the dibbler holding it down, but she wasn’t sure if it’d do any more good anyway. Her papa had told her once that when a worm snapped like that, it became two separate beings, but she didn’t know if he was teasing her or telling the truth, now that she thought of it. And she’d never have the chance to ask him again.

The dibbler slipped from her fingers. She felt the tears on her cheeks before she even knew they were forming, heard the choke escape her throat before she realized she was about to make a sound.

“Clair!” Elena put her hands on Clarion’s shoulders and helped her stand on shaking legs. “Let’s get to the shade.”

Krea followed the pair to the largest tree in Jacosa’s garden, a giant apple tree that was just starting to blossom. Elena spread her skirt out among the white petals that had already fallen, as if she were posing for an artist’s portrait. Krea bristled a little as she dropped her seed basket

and sat cross-legged on the other side of Clarion, who wiped her eyes with the bottom of her palm.

“Clair? You okay?” Krea reached over to hug her, squishing Clarion’s tanned cheek against her own. When Clarion opened her eyes, she found Elena frowning at them.

“Come here,” said Elena as Krea loosened her grip. Elena wrapped her arms around Clarion more gracefully, resting her cheek against Clarion’s ear. When the two girls drew apart after a moment, Elena kept one arm around Clarion’s back and held the other out toward Krea. “You too. I’m sorry. Really, I am.”

The three friends, often confused for sisters in their sixteen shared years of life, rocked in their three-way embrace. Krea didn’t stop the never-ending chain of arms from swaying until Clarion finally laughed, and her eyes brightened.

“Ah! There you are!” Krea pinched Clarion’s cheek, bringing forth a flush of color. “The pig farmer’s daughter, as her papa loved to see her.”

Elena’s arm dropped from Clarion’s shoulders slowly, almost reluctantly. She straightened her bonnet and tucked in that loose tendril of hair, which had fallen from her plaits again. “Why don’t you sing, Clair?”

“Sing?” asked Clarion. Her head sank into her shoulders. “Here? Now?”

“Why not?” added Krea. “Don’t you need to practice for the springtime ball?”

Clarion wove her fingers together. They were cracked and dirty, and calloused from too many plucks of the string. “I don’t have Papa’s harp.”

“*Your* harp,” said Elena, but she soon seemed to think better of it. “He wanted you to inherit it. It’s the last legacy from your family, from back when they led this village. I mean... Anyway.”

Clarion knew why the latter words spilled so quickly from Elena's lips. It was *her* family that had wrested control from the last lord and started calling themselves the "mayors" of the town. Elena was often embarrassed by that fact. But that was half a century ago, and besides, Clarion's papa had had no sons, so there'd have been no one to inherit the position even if he had been lord.

"Well, I don't have the harp with me." Clarion's face glowed when mentioning her most prized possession. "But I'll sing if you sing with me." She took both Krea's and Elena's hands in hers, more to anchor herself in the moment than to encourage them to join her.

Clarion was the first to sing, and her voice, like a breath of air after an exhausting run, rung out over the rustling branches and blossoms and the twittering of the birds in the grasses nearby. "*They told me you had left for the land above. I told them you would never leave me, my love.*"

Elena joined in, her voice timid and quiet, her eyes never leaving Clarion's face. "*But when I looked for you, you had gone. I couldn't give up; I searched all over 'til dawn.*"

Krea was always less confident about joining her friends, but Clarion smiled at her even as she sang the next verse, and Krea added her own voice, although it was the wrong notes and it sounded like she had a sore throat. "*Were you stolen away by the kings of old? Or did I know ye not, so I've been told?*"

The girls stopped to giggle, even Krea, despite the flush on her neck. But when they continued, a young man's tenor voice broke out from the dirt path along the stone wall surrounding Jacosa's garden.

"*I'd like to have faith that I knew ye well. That you love me still, and in the land above you dwell.*"

“Jackin Mayorsson!” Krea snatched a handful of grass and tossed it at Jackin, ignoring how the blades simply fluttered in the wind. “You ruined a perfectly good ladies’ harmony by jumping in there uninvited.”

“A perfectly good ladies’ harmony?” Leaning forward, Jackin placed both elbows on the top of the small stone wall. “Are your ears as ill-suited for music as your tongue?”

“You know what I mean!” Krea wrinkled her slightly-too-long nose. She gestured at her friends. “These ladies.”

Jackin’s gaze floated dreamily over Krea’s head to Clarion sitting beside her. “Yes, in that case, I’m sorry to have stopped the song.”

Elena stood and slapped her skirt for any traces of grass stains and dirt. “Well, out with it. What does Father want?”

“What makes you think our father wants you for anything?” Jackin tore his gaze reluctantly from Clarion. Clarion shifted uncomfortably, remembering that day a few weeks ago he’d told her how perfectly the traces of her brown hair poking out from beneath the bonnet complimented her hazel eyes. “I’m here on other business.”

Elena shrugged and picked up her skirt. “I’ll get Jacosa then.”

“Yeah...” Jackin slouched until his chin nearly touched the stone, completely forgetting to disguise where his eyes were fixed once more.

Clarion didn’t have to stare at him long to *feel* his eyes pouring over her. She’d noticed it for months now, maybe longer. She hadn’t had time to think much about it, not with her papa passing, and the remaining pigs still needing looking after.

Krea cleared her throat. She felt the intensity of Elena's strapping brother's blue-green gaze, but she mistook the intent. "I'm supposing you already have a lady escort for the springtime ball now, Jackin?"

Jackin's head snapped up, the fact that Krea was still present seemingly almost as surprising to him as her question. "Well, no. Actually, I thought... That is, if you—" His eyes seemed determined to catch Clarion's, but Clarion kept darting her gaze back to her hands.

"Yes!" Krea jumped up, tripping over her hem as she snatched both of Jackin's hands in hers. "Yes! I'd love to go with you!"

Jackin's face fell at once. "Krea? I didn't mean... I thought you'd be going with Tenney and—"

Krea dropped just one of Jackin's hands in order to wave at him dismissively. "Pox on Tenney Woolman and all his poxy friends. That fool don't deserve a cow for a date, nor do any of them either."

If Jackin were as cruel as some of those boys, he might have said that Krea was as close to having a cow for a date as one could get, short of putting a bonnet on an actual bovine. Not that Clarion agreed with that assessment at all. Blonde and tall and well-endowed, Krea was fair enough, in her rough way, but Clarion knew the boys in the town, and she knew not a one of them had any eye for beauty. Jackin wrested his hand free of Krea's and ran it through his silver-white curly locks. He stood straighter and cleared his throat. "But I can't let Clarion go without an escort. It wouldn't be right."

Intending to pick up her dibbler, Clarion had already descended the small hill. She heard her name but responded a moment too late, her thoughts still elsewhere. "Me? No, I'm all right. Your father asked me to bring my harp to play."

Jackin frowned. “But you can’t play the entire time.”

“I’m not much for dancing.” Clarion patted the earth back over the holes she’d made now that Krea had filled the voids with seeds. “Besides, your sister asked me to be her escort.”

Jackin laughed. Then the smile fell from his face. “You’re serious? Two women can’t be each other’s escorts.”

Krea looped her arm through Jackin’s. “They can if they intend to keep those toads calling themselves boys away.”

Pulling back, Jackin used the excuse of the wall to separate them. “Father won’t approve of Elena dancing with a woman.”

“Who said anything about dancing?” Krea backed up to give Jackin the space he needed to jump over the fence. “Elena’s just going to watch over Clarion as she plays and beat off any suitors with a stick.”

Jackin’s face soured as he clapped his hands together to shake off some of the dirt.

“Jackin Mayorson, haven’t you ever heard of a gate?” Jacosa weaved her way through the seedlings and newly-upturned dirt to shove a small parcel at her unwanted intruder. She kept one red bean in her grip. “I could have sent Elena home with these, you know. What’d you come all this way for?”

His gaze once again catching hold of Clarion, Jackin flushed. “I had nothing better to do.”

Jacosa raised her brows. “This is why I say no good comes of a young’un without a family profession.”

“We have a family profession,” said Elena, catching up with Jacosa. She clutched her skirt high and was careful not to disturb any of the new plantings. “Jackin’s going to be the next mayor.”

Jacosa turned on her heel. “Well, I suppose doing a whole lot of nothing is proper training to be mayor, that’s true.”

“*Jacosa!*” Elena gasped.

Jacosa fluffed a hand at her and put the bean between her lips. Her words were hard to make out, and the bean jumped up and down as she spoke through gritted teeth. “Instead of standing here debating whether or not a young man can prove himself useful, why don’t you actually start proving it?” She grabbed a piece of the bean and spit the other half out as she made her way to the giant rock. Bending over, she shook the piece over the top of the rock, then smashed the small legume against the fallen piece of fence entirely. “Now I won’t need you for any heavy lifting, mind you, but I could stand a helping hand or two when it comes to corralling this, once it—”

A monstrous roar shook the earth. Clarion, crouching, fell back, and both Elena and Jackin swooped in to catch her, but Krea caught hold of Jackin first. Jacosa just planted her feet firmly onto the ground, her hands on her hips, her gaze steadfast on the clouds above.

The shaking stopped as suddenly as it’d started. Jacosa’s lips puckered. “I thought they were being awful quiet these days...”

“They?” Jackin stood straight, freeing himself from Krea and tugging on his vest. “Don’t tell me you believe the stories.”

Jacosa poked one long, spindly finger at the bag Jackin absentmindedly cradled against his chest. “Boy your age wouldn’t know the difference between a story and the truth if the truth hit him upside the skull.”

As if on cue, the rock that had given Jacosa such trouble coasted through the air past them, clipping Jackin on the back of the head.

“Ack!” Rubbing the place where he’d been struck, Jackin winced as he turned. “What hit me?”

“Useless, even when I give you a task that should require no stretch of that idle mind of yours.” Jacosa’s face soured as she grabbed hold of her muddy skirts and stepped around Jackin, practically knocking him over, to get to the gate. “After that rock!”

Krea laughed and jumped up, threading her arm through Jackin’s. “Yes, ma’am!”

Jackin seemed dazed as he stumbled after the witch and his would-be sweetheart. He didn’t even spare a glance for his crush and his sister as he and Krea followed the raving woman and her flying rock down the path to the town.

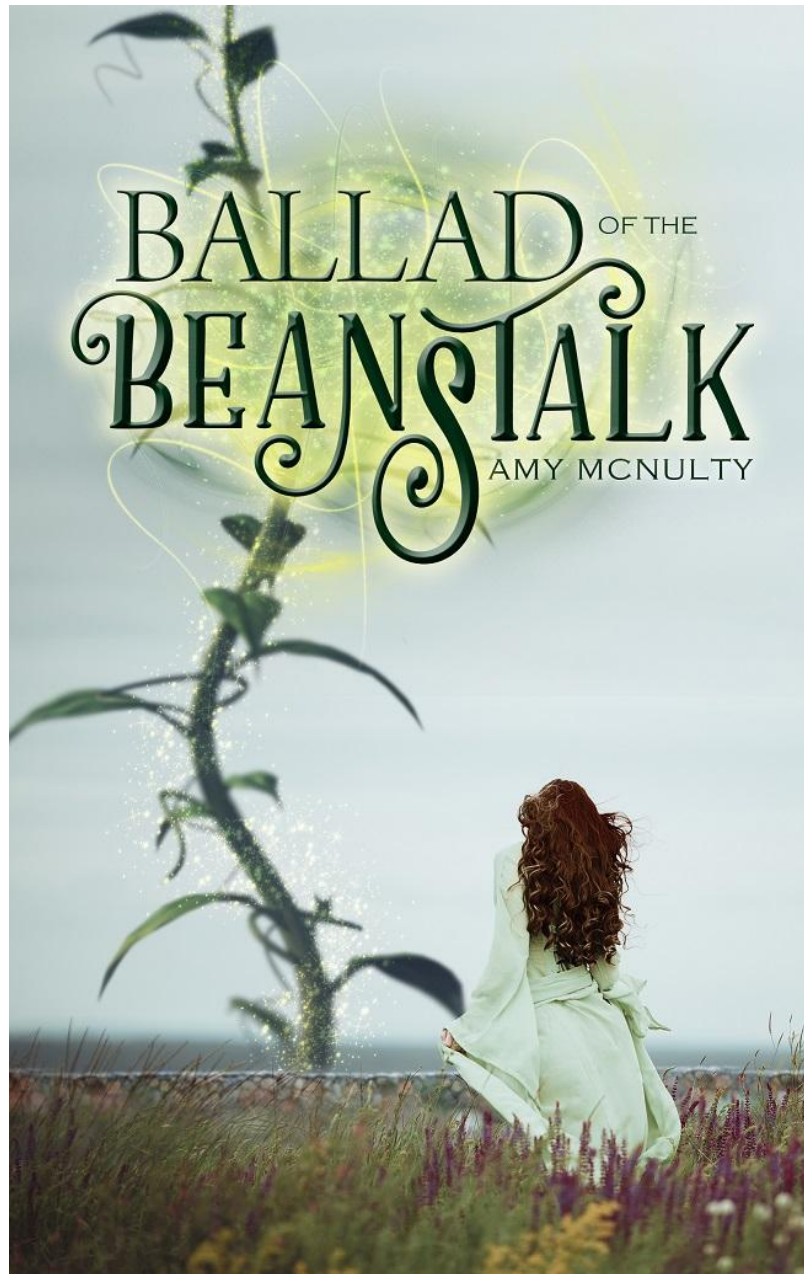
Clarion watched them go, feeling warm and safe in Elena’s arms. The soft tip of Elena’s finger ran over Clarion’s brow and down her cheek.

“Are you all right now?” asked Elena, squeezing Clarion’s shoulder. There was a lot of hope in Elena’s eyes, and Clarion couldn’t bring herself to disappoint her.

And she was so tired of it all. So tired of explaining why she felt so lost when there were such good things all around her still. She knew that, she *did*, but it wasn’t enough to fix her. To make her feel better.

“I am,” lied Clarion, burying her head beneath Elena’s chin. That way, Elena couldn’t see the new tears.

But as she felt Elena's head shift, and the press of the dainty young woman's lips on top of her head, Clarion watched the drops tumble and fall against her sweetheart's lap.



As her fingers move across the strings of her family's heirloom harp, sixteen-year-old Clarion can forget. She doesn't dwell on the recent passing of her beloved father or the fact that her mother has just sold everything they owned, including that very same instrument that gives Clarion life. She doesn't think about how her friends treat her like a feeble, brittle thing to be protected. She doesn't worry about how to tell the elegant Elena, her best friend and first love, that she doesn't want to be her sweetheart anymore. She becomes the melody and loses herself in the song.

When Mack, a lord's dashing young son, rides into town so his father and Elena's can arrange a marriage

between the two youth, Clarion finds herself falling in love with a boy for the first time. Drawn to Clarion's music, Mack puts Clarion and Elena's relationship to the test, but he soon vanishes by climbing up a giant beanstalk that only Clarion has seen. When even the town witch won't help, Clarion is determined to rescue Mack herself and prove once and for all that she doesn't need protecting. But while she fancied herself a savior, she couldn't have imagined the enormous world of danger that awaits her in the kingdom of the clouds.

A prequel to the fairy tale Jack and the Beanstalk that reveals the true story behind the magical singing harp.

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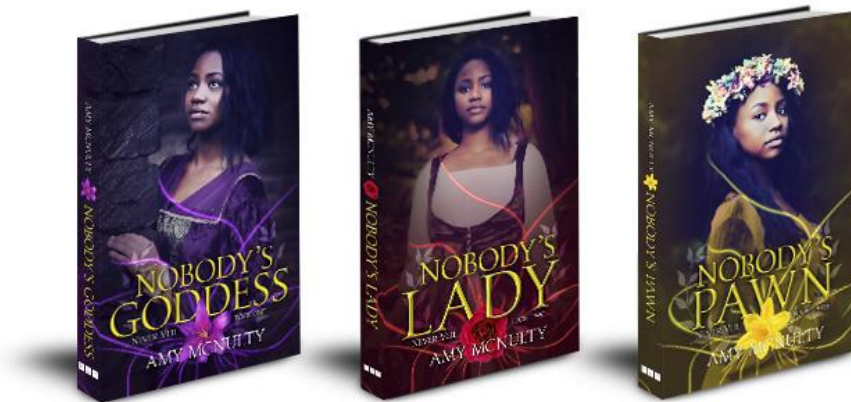
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About the Author

Amy McNulty is a freelance writer and editor from Wisconsin with an honors degree in English. She was first published in a national scholarly journal (*The Concord Review*) while in high school and currently writes professionally about everything from business marketing to anime. Her YA romantic fantasy debut, *Nobody's Goddess*, won The Romance Reviews Summer 2016 Readers' Choice Award in Young Adult Romance. In her down time, you can find her crafting stories with dastardly villains and antiheroes set in fantastical medieval settings.

Find Amy at amymcnulty.com and on social media as [McNultyAmy](#) (Twitter), [Amy McNulty, Author](#) (Facebook), [McNulty.Amy](#) (Instagram), [AuthorAmyMc](#) (Pinterest), [AmyMcNulty](#) (Wattpad), and [AuthorAmyMcNulty](#) (Tumblr). [Sign up for her monthly newsletter](#) to receive news and exclusive information about her current and upcoming projects. Please visit her [Goodreads](#) and [Amazon](#) author page as well!

Other Works by Amy McNulty



Nobody's Goddess (Book One in The Never Veil Series), [winner of The Romance Reviews](#)

[Summer 2016 Readers' Choice Award for Young Adult Romance:](#)

In a village of masked men, each man is compelled to love only one woman and to follow the commands of his “goddess” without question. A woman may reject the only man who will love her if she pleases, but she will be alone forever. A man must stay masked until his goddess returns his love—and if she can’t or won’t, he remains masked forever.

Seventeen-year-old Noll’s childhood friends have paired off and her closest companion, Jurij, found his goddess in Noll’s own sister. Desperate to find a way to break this ancient spell, Noll instead discovers why no man has ever chosen her. She is in fact the goddess of the mysterious lord of the village, a man who refuses to let Noll have her right as a woman to spurn him.

Thus begins a dangerous game between the choice of woman and the magic of man. The stakes are no less than freedom and happiness, life and death—and neither Noll nor the veiled lord is willing to lose.

The complete The Never Veil Series is out now and is free on Kindle Unlimited! [Click here to learn more](#) or [shop at Amazon now](#).



Terror. Callousness. Denial. Rebellion. How the four teenage children of leaders in the duchy and the neighboring empire of Hanaobi choose to adapt to their nefarious parents' whims is a matter of survival.

Rohesia, daughter of the duke, spends her days hunting "outsiders," fugitives who've snuck onto her father's island duchy. That she lives when even children who resemble her are subject to death hardens her heart to tackle the task.

Fastello is the son of the "king" of the raiders who steal from the rich and share with the poor. When aristocrats die in the raids, Fastello questions what his peoples' increasingly wicked methods of survival have cost them.

An orphan raised by a convent of mothers, Cateline can think of no higher aim in life than to serve her religion, even if it means turning a blind eye to the suffering of other orphans under the mothers' care.

Kojiro, new heir to the Hanaobi empire, must avenge his people against the "barbarians" who live in the duchy, terrified the empress, his own mother, might rather see him die than succeed.

When the paths of these four young adults cross, they must rely on one another for survival—but the love of even a malevolent guardian is hard to leave behind.

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A woman with shoulder bones as sharp as an eagle’s talons—bones almost protruding from her skin—opens her mouth as wide as it’ll go, impossibly wide, consuming the pill that takes both of her arms to cradle. The nourishment makes her thin stomach pop out like she’s pregnant with a child so large it’ll burst through her stomach. She swallows slowly and licks her lips. Her eyes search around hungrily for more.

That dream again.

Josie is skilled at her job as an “unfortunate” who inhabits the bodies of her clients to perform their work while they sleep, but her coworkers’ cruel jealousy over her success leads to her enslavement and the loss of her dream-worker

status. A YA sci-fi reimagining of the tale of Jacob's favorite son Joseph, his dreams, and his famous coat.

A novelette by the author of *The Never Veil Series* and *Fall Far from the Tree*.

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