

golden daughter

By Anne Elisabeth Stengl

Prologue Sample

PROLOGUE

THE SKY DRIPPED STARS, like diamonds turned liquid and running in shimmering streams to pool beyond the horizon.

But not really.

In truth, there was not a star in sight and wouldn't be for many miles yet. If one could bear to think in terms of miles or distances of mortal measurement here. The young woman did not. Nor did she consider words like *stars*, *diamonds*, or *horizon*. These were nothing more than barriers a weaker mind would attempt to inflict upon the incomprehensible, a futile bastion against the oncoming sweep of madness.

Madness, the young woman knew, was inescapable here. But it could be borne if accepted as naturally as a body accepts the necessity of air and breathes in and out without thinking.

This was the secret, she considered, as she stood upon the edge of the formless wasteland that forever shifted before her gaze, presenting her with visions fantastic, grotesque, and beautiful by turns. This was the secret, ultimately, to the skill she practiced: No thinking. Merely being. Merely floating, experiencing the madness without thought.

She watched the glow of the melted stars rising above the distant horizon, spilling over in a winding ribbon that twisted over inexplicable landscapes to run at last in a thin, fluid trickle of

light beneath her bare feet. And she did not think “I am standing on starlight.” She did not think “This is impossible.”

Instead she felt without thought: *Beautiful*.

A presence loomed behind her. A vast, unknowable presence, an entity that may or may not be living. She wanted to turn, to look at it. To see again the unknowable, unreachable Wood. But that road led only to frustration. No matter how many times she pursued the Wood, seeking to walk in its green-gold shadows—no matter how persistently she chased it, exerting all her will and power—always it eluded her. Perhaps she simply was not yet strong enough.

So she refused to turn but gazed out instead upon the formless hinterland beyond the Wood. Shifting visions presented themselves before her eyes, and she felt the beauty of the star-trail under her feet. She began to walk. The hem of her robe was soon stained with light. Above her, the stars ceased to melt but broke into blossoms of many-colored brilliance, like a rose window come suddenly to life. They whirled and gyrated and cast weird patterns upon the ground. Still the young woman only felt: *Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful . . .*

And the thought that was scarcely a thought: *The others do not know. They cannot do this. Poor fools.*

The blossoms in the sky vanished. They were not, after all, real stars. All was dark now save for the thin silver trail and the continued glow beyond the horizon. The young woman made for that glow with more intensity than she should have permitted herself to feel. Unlike the Wood, the horizon sometimes seemed to draw a little closer. She believed she might, with enough exertion, reach it one day. So far, however, she had not succeeded.

None of them have penetrated this deep into the Dream, she thought. But what does it matter if I cannot go all the way?

She smelled harimau spice. The scent was real, too real, and she knew that she smelled it with her own mortal body, somewhere far from where she now walked. The knowledge brought her up short, and she stood still, draining herself of all thoughts, all anxieties.

The scent faded away then vanished. That had been close. She had almost awakened. She was not ready to wake yet.

Beautiful, beautiful, she felt. Her feet moved, splashing the starlight, and she continued down this strange path once more.

Perhaps tonight. Perhaps tonight . . .

She could hear the chanting. Always, when she came this far, she heard it. If she turned her head to the right or the left, she discerned flickering shadows of movement in the deeper whorls of darkness. Sometimes she even believed she could discern individual voices. But she smiled and continued on her way. If the old men knew how close she came to the chanting phantoms, they would never permit her to undergo the Sleep, would never permit her to step outside her body and wander these strange, otherworldly roads.

As if they could stop her. Poor fools. Poor fools.



“Allow me to wake her, Besur. She is troubled. She has ventured too far tonight.”

“Stay your hand, Brother Yaru! No one touches her.”

At the word of the High Priest of the Crown of the Moon, the men gathered in the room trembled and withdrew, hiding behind the fans they quietly waved to clear their faces of smoke and incense. The Besur stood above the young woman lying in quiet repose upon low cushions. He scattered another handful of harimau spice into a golden bowl of burning coals, his face shielded by a mask to keep out as much of the scent as possible. Always his eyes studied the girl’s face, watching for any sign she might give of her progress, of the sights she even now beheld.

The only indication of trouble was a slight knot that formed ever so briefly between her delicate brows. Enough to worry Brother Yaru. The meddler, the boot-scraper! He did not believe what was plain to the eyes of all other men in the Crown of the Moon. He did not believe because he was so old, and age had addled the little sense with which he had been born.

Brother Yaru did not believe that any woman—particularly a maiden so young, so fresh, so unspoiled as the girl who lay before them—could do what he, in all the decades of his life, had not achieved.

But she would do it. The High Priest gazed upon the girl with solemn pride and not a little fear. She would do what generations of Dream Walkers had never managed to achieve.

She would find the gate to Hulan’s Garden. And she would walk among the true stars.



The young woman progressed beyond the chanting now, and the phantom chanters, foiled yet again in their attempts to follow her, faded into nothing. The silver trail beneath her feet trickled away, and she walked on darkness swirling like mist. Still the glow on the horizon, the elusive glow, guided her footsteps. Even in darkness she would pursue it. Soon enough the strange sights of the Dream would present themselves again to her mind's eye. She would deal with them then. For now, she merely walked.

My dear. My own. My beauty.

She continued walking. It was best while under the Sleep to ignore all voices calling, however intriguing. This one whispered to her from what seemed a great distance, and something about it made her recall the depths of a summer sky at midnight, the depths beyond the stars.

My sweet. My love. Will you hear me?

The young woman's feet faltered. She cursed herself, but the voice had been close this time, as though it had leapt across a thousand miles in an instant and even now spoke just behind her left ear.

"I've come so far. I've come so far," she told herself.

But the horizon's glow was as distant as ever, and the voice was so very near.

So young. So fresh. So lovely. Let me hear your voice.

"Who are you?" the young woman asked, and it was the first she had spoken aloud this Sleep.

I am near. I am far. I am imprisoned.

"Who has imprisoned you?" the young woman asked. It was safest, if one chose to interact with a Dream, to ask only questions and give no answers.

It would be difficult to understand in mortal words. Let us say only that my brother imprisons me. He fears me. Do you fear me?

No answers. Only questions. "Should I fear you?" the young woman said.

Never. Always. Sometimes.

But the young woman was not afraid. Not here. Not even the phantom chanters could frighten her. In the Realm of the Dream, she was most powerful. She walked with ease that left

the priests of the Crown of the Moon trembling and making signs of reverence and awe whenever she crossed their paths.

She was Lady Hariawan, Dream Walker, and she laughed.

“Do you have a name?” she asked through that laugh, smiling even as she continued to face the horizon, her goal.

The voice at her ear said, *I do. If you would know it, you must turn and look at me.*

“Why would I want to do that?” And still the young woman laughed. Her laughter brought small red and blue flowers bursting into life around her, flowing through the darkness and up over distant hills. Though, of course, there were no flowers or hills, and the young woman would not think of them as such. “Why would I want to look at you?” she asked.

Because I know what you truly desire. I know what you seek. And I can give it to you.

“I seek the gate to Hulan’s Garden.”

And there she made her mistake, the first ever she had made since undergoing the Sleep. She knew it as soon as she’d spoken. She had not asked a question.

Now the Dream, whatever it might be, had power over her.

That is not what you seek, said the voice in her ear. *There is no good to come of trying to deceive me, for I cannot be deceived.*

The flowers at her feet withered, rotted, fell from their stems, and lay dead upon the ground. She began to tremble. She half expected to smell harimau, but she did not. She was still deep in the Sleep, deeper perhaps than ever before.

Turn and look at me, Umeer Melati.

“How . . . how do you know my name?”

Turn and look at me, Umeer Melati.

“What will I see if I do?”

Turn and look at me, Umeer Melati.

The young woman drew a long breath, though she did not truly breathe here. She drew a breath, hoping to still the racing of her heart, though she had no heart here. And the dead flowers upon the ground became spiders and ran in all directions, away, hissing as they went.

Turn and look at me, Umeer Melati.

She turned.

She saw an uncut pillar of stone. It rose above her head, three times her own height and taller, and it was blacker than night itself. And yet, deep inside, beneath the rough surface, the young woman believed she saw something white. Something that moved. Overhead, dark clouds churned. Beneath them, more clouds, these shot with lightning. The stone, more solid than anything else in this realm, stood suspended on air.

The young woman took a step. Then a second. She leaned forward, peering into the depths of the stone at that which moved in its center. She lifted a hand to touch it.

“Hag! Crone! Withered mortal!”

The voice like fire roared through the young woman’s mind, and a harsh, searing wind blew against her shoulders and the back of her head so that her hair singed. She felt it with a physical force that was startling here in the Dream. She struggled to turn around, but the power of that wind was too great. It blasted her against the stone, and then the stone was gone and she was on her knees in the darkness. No clouds, no wasteland, only the ongoing roar. She felt herself burning when she should have felt nothing at all, for she had no corporeal substance here, merely imagined form. But the burning was as real as flesh, as real as blood, and she screamed.

Movement agitated the darkness on either side of her peripheral vision. She had an impression of enormous, pounding wings. She fell forward, turning so as to land on one shoulder. Gathering all the strength she possessed—which was considerable here, in the Dream, where her powers were unparalleled among her kind—she looked up.

Eyes set in deep, dark hollows blazed with raging fire. There was a rush, a bellow, and then a crack like the breaking of worlds.



The scream filled the small chamber, and all the priests gathered screamed as well, dropped their fans, and covered their ears in terror. The Besur’s mouth fell open, but his own cry died in his throat as he leaped forward and grabbed the young woman. Her body convulsed upon the cushions. She struck at him, but her limbs were delicate, and she could make no impression upon his sturdy frame.

He saw that she still slept even though she screamed. He should never have allowed her to dream-walk so far, so long!

Still holding the girl, the High Priest reached out and overturned the golden bowls, scattering coals across the floor. Even as he did so, he felt a last shudder pass through the girl, and then she lay still in his arms.

“Lady Hariawan?” he asked, his voice drowned out in the continued screams of his brethren. He rose up, clutching the girl to his breast, and shouted at the lot of them, “Silence! Silence, you dogs!”

The shock of their Besur’s bellowed curses was enough to bring most of them, even Brother Yaru, back to reason. They clustered together at the door, ready to bolt, their gazes fixed upon the young woman limp in the Besur’s grasp.

Her eyelids fluttered, delicate as butterfly wings. Then she looked up, looked around, and they saw no fear in her empty gaze.

Instead they saw the burn, shaped like a hand, spreading in ugly stain across her face, like a pool of spilled blood.

“Lady Hariawan!” gasped the Besur, holding her gently. “My child, what did you see?”

The young woman said nothing. She did not speak for three days.

End of Sample

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