VESSELS FOR DESTRUCTION

The price of perseverance.

BY A. G. CARPENTER

Muhmughmuhmuh. The hushed babble of the spectators crests as the guards bring the prisoner into the hall.

Patron Jamis looks up at the gallery, stern, and the mutters fade.

The girl looks like all the rest of her kind, dirty and scarred, but she has the nine bands of Authority tattooed on her forehead and she stands straight, even under the weight of her chains.

Jamis clasps his hands behind his back, considering. They've had other Destructives before, but never one with the full nine. It means she is a leader and a prophet. Maybe even *the* leader and prophet.

He clears his throat.

"We have ways of making you talk."

She grins. "We have ways of making you talk." The words are sing-song.

One of the guards steps forward, truncheon raised, but the girl doesn't flinch and Jamis shakes his head, motioning the guard away.

"It will be more pleasant for everyone if you cooperate."

She shrugs, awkward with her arms bound to the pole across her shoulders. "I am cooperating. I let you take me in."

"You were gravely outnumbered."

"Because I chose to be." A quick shake of her head and the irritated quirk in her mouth relaxes. "Tell me what you want to know."

Jamis frowns. This feels wrong. Easy. Not at all like he has anticipated.

"Well?" she asks.

"They say you can see the future."

"Yes."

"Yes that's what they say, or yes you can?"

She raises an eyebrow. "Yes, I can."

The spectators take a collective breath; the noise breaks on the high curve of the ceiling like water and falls back in bits and pieces. *Ahhh-ahhs-sh-shs.*

"Then you must know why I have brought you here."

"I do." A pause. "Oh. You want me to tell you?"

"Yes, I want you to tell me." His voice is rough with annoyance.

"You want me to tell you if you will succeed in wiping out the Destructives."

Ahhh-ahhs-sh-shsh.

Jamis waits for the echoes to fade. "Yes."

Another shrug. "Of course."

His heart hammers in his chest.

"Of course?"

"You don't believe me."

His gut twinges, but he is not one of her disciples. "We will survive."

She says nothing.

"We are not mere animals. We were made for more than that."

"Our souls, you mean." She smiles, sunlight on desert sand. "Maybe. But this ..." She waggles her fingers. "This is just a vessel built for destruction."

The room is like a bell, clamouring with the uncertainty of the crowd in the gallery.

Jamis silences it with a single gunshot. It is a shame to waste a bullet on the girl when a knife would have done just as well, but it would not have caught their attention in the same way.

He tucks the pistol back into its holster. "Take that out."

The guards drag the body away and Jamis turns to face the gallery.

Hundreds of eyes burn at him, candle flames flickering against the dark nothingness.

"If it is destruction they want, they shall have it."

They sigh in agreement.

Yessssssssssss.

"We will fight against this seed of despair until it is wiped from the face of the Earth."

Yessssssssssss.

"Go and burn them out."

Thunder shakes the room, feet pounding the metal floor as they trample out of the doors. Men, women and children all bent to one purpose.

Jamis returns to his room. His face itches and he scratches it, absent. His fingers come away speckled with blood. Something in his gut stirs, uncomfortable. Even in death the girl is filthy.

He washes and waits for the army to return.

Three days later they find him in his room, bright-eyed with fever. His cheeks are spotted with black. His hands, too.

The guards draw back, a single word on their breath.

Pox.

Jamis nods and smiles, mad with certainty. "I have seen the future." He coughs, lips wet with spittle. "It is death." ■

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