Dreams of the Starcatcher

by Penny Blubaugh

The Starcatcher is the main attraction of the Festival March. It's been that way since before time. Whatever comes behind is beautiful and charming: donkeys covered with flowers; small children with huge, unblinking eyes, dressed in starched white; wagons drawn behind prancing horses, filled with old men wearing broad-brimmed hats; young men, dancing, wearing the colors of peacocks.

But I'm in the front, wearing a white even brighter than the clothes of the children. A white with the absence of color that's only found in the stars on nights when the world seems to be made of glass.

There are red streaks running down my sleeves, artfully painted. I know. I've put them there myself. They're so well placed that they blend flawlessly with the real blood that flows with them. This, and my stark white robes, make me not only the main attraction, but the most fascinating one, as well.

Here is the part of being Starcatcher that's less attractive. Before each festivity, I gently lay open the skin on my wrists, just enough to get the liquid red to begin to streak my arms. It's a blood exchange for the knowledge that comes with knowing the stars.

The longer anyone holds this job, the harder it gets to find unscarred tissue to cut. Even now, eighteen and the Starcatcher for only two years, I've been in enough seasonal fests that my wrists are a mass of tiny, hard white lines.

The festivals always bring visitors from the mainland. I hear them now, as I walk with measured strides down the center of the cobblestoned street, my face hidden behind my thick papier-mache mask. Whenever I wear it I can actually feel the moon and the stars swirling around my head. And I hear Innes, my best friend, saying, "...reaping the night's harvest. The stars are gathered, held tight and brought back to the village, their knowledge carried with them."

"But... the blood?" asks the visitor.

"The stars hold tight to the sky. Bringing those mythic, sharp-edged things down cuts the hands, tears at the arms."

Their voices dwindle as I pass, but I'm still able to hear the visitor, the respect in his voice. "He must represent great strength for your people."

I wonder how surprised he'd be if he found out that "he" was a she.

Afterwards, as I'm wrapping my wrists in gauze, Innes pokes his head around my door. He doesn't knock, but then Innes never does. He's lived at my house as much as his own since we were babies. Innes takes liberties, and I love him for it. Without him
the job of Starcatcher would be very lonely. There's a huge grin on his face as he comes over and pulls the gauze from the fingers of my left hand. "He," Innes emphasizes, mimicking, "must represent great strength. . ." He lets his voice trail off, chuckling in the deep rich way he has that always makes me think of hot cider and warm baths. He ties off the right wrist, then carefully inspect the left. He shakes his head, grabs the peroxide bottle, and upends it over my arm. It splashes on my tiles and bare feet. I jump to the side, but he keeps my hand locked in his and pulls me back into the puddle. The bubbles tickle my toes.

"Brena," he sighs.
"I did," I object. "I must have just missed a spot."
He begins wrapping my left wrist. "And if the spot you missed gets infected?"
"It's not like we're in the middle ages anymore. There are things called antibiotics. Even here."
He ties off the second wrist. "It's not worth arguing about." His black eyes sink into me. "Too many times of antibiotics and none of them will work at all. Be more careful."

I stamp my bare foot, spattering peroxide. "It's not as if I asked for the job."
"It's not as if you turned it down." His eyes don't move from my face.
He's right, but this is something even Innes doesn't fully understand. I've never seen Starcatcher as a choice.

I started having the dreams about a year after I started my period. Wild dreams, where I was caught between dark glass skies and jagged-edged stars. When I finally told Innes, the first person I ever told, I was sixteen. He took my hand and led me to Alier, the old Starcatcher. Alier looked at me with a softness on his face and then invited us into his house, the one I live in now, the only house in town with gold on the door.

Within the year he was dead, and there I was, supposedly ready to shoulder everything on the island, good or bad, just because of the images that sneak into my two o'clock, death-hour dreams. That's the time when illness, mental or physical, takes most of its victims. It's also the time the Starcatcher's connection to the stars is the strongest, the time there's an almost palpable link between us. When the dreams have spun me so far into the night I'm afraid I may not be able to get back, I snap awake, and it's impossible to sleep for the rest of the night.

I try one more time to make Innes see. "It's not something you just walk away from. The dreams tug at you, pull you, give you the idea that you can fix people's lives."
"This," I hold up my bandaged wrist, "is just the outside symbol. This," and I hold up my other hand, feeling like I'm ready to play patty-cake, "is the part everyone sees. But they don't know how superficial it is. They don't understand the internal sacrifice, the exchange of blood, for the," I wiggle my fingers in the air, "'wisdom' they want from me."
"I do. At least, partly I do." And he nods to show that yes, he really does. "The Starcatcher subconscious. Not passed down through families, just through minds. And even then only accessed by accepting the scars from star-gathering." He's echoing all my attempts at explaining this to him. And to myself. "But you can turn it down, you know. Any time. You've always got a choice. It might be the choice between bad and less bad, but there's always a choice."

I shake off his eyes. I put away my mask, drop my robes into a sink full of bleach, dig under the bed for my sandals. I'll pretend we never started this conversation.

"I'm hungry," I say. When I stand up, sandals on my feet, my blue jean edges are still damp from his first aid. I run my fingers through my hair, glad it's freed from its festival twist. "I'm sure I saw corn and, if Rufus is cooking it again, we need to get there early. You know it always disappears fastest when he's making it."

"It's that dill he mixes with the butter. Anything that wonderful would walk off on its own, even without Elana hawking for him."

We leave, gently closing the gold door behind us.

The festival is glorious. It's the Midsummer Fest, one of the major holidays of the year. The sun is warm enough for me to be out with only a T-shirt. This means my arms are bare, and the gauze on my wrists glows like neon. I try to ignore the stares coming from locals and visitors alike, concentrate instead on the sun. It feels healing, soaking into my muscles, gilding my skin with sweat. Innes catches my hand and his fingers are as warm as the sun on my shoulders. We get the corn at Rufus' stall. He grins at us, and his fingers barely move when he waves our money away. I let him, knowing that Innes will slip it to Elana later, when the crowds have thinned. The corn is exactly as it should be: hot, and soaked with butter and dill. The kernels snap in our teeth. We wash them down with thick, mahogany-colored beer with inch-deep foam on top, then devour fried plantains, peaches glazed with brown sugar and cinnamon, folded bread filled with herbs.

We pass by the meat stalls, waving but not eating. Starcatchers are by nature vegetarian. More of the collective subconscious, but where that particular idea comes from, and why, I've no idea. I only know that meat, all colors and flavors, makes me so physically ill that it's never worth the risk, no matter how wonderful it smells.

Johannes, the silversmith, has new jewelry laid out on black velvet. It glitters like my stars on a particularly clear night. Innes stops before I even try to pull him in that direction, and a path opens for the Starcatcher as soon as my wrists catch the light. I know I'm the one they're watching because I hear bits of my title, "Starcatcher," floating behind me.

I sigh softly. Two years ago they would have shoved past me just like anyone else. Innes pretends that nothing's different and wanders into the clear space.
Although I'm Starcatcher, in uniform or not, Johannes knows I like to pretend that I'm still just Breena. He waves, with the grace and dignity of a king, at the glitter in front of him. "All your size, Breena. I guarantee."

Innes laughs and I glide my fingers over the cool silver, touching rings, bracelets, pins and anklets. I can't have the bracelets. Too much interference with the Starcatcher's job. Rings can get so messy if I slip and cut too deep. I've never been much for pins. So Innes, who knows what I'll look at almost better than I do, points me toward the anklets.

His fingers touch one with tiny bells that sound like fairies laughing. I touch it, too, then move on to another with dangling, small small hearts.

"Try it on," Johannes urges, lifting it gently off the thick velvet.

I wrap it around my ankle, shake my foot, and silver dances against my skin. Cool and smooth and precious, because it's not part of the job of Starcatcher. It's just something I like, something that's beautiful.

Innes is back at the tray, still jingling the bells.

"One for each ankle?" Johannes suggests, and Innes glances sideways at me.

"Why not?" I say, feeling happy and relaxed and ready to smile at everything. Again the fit is perfect.

"Magic?" I ask, but Johannes only smiles and says, "Matching toe rings?"

"Absolutely," says Innes, and bends to touch my feet. He puts the heart ring on the foot with the bells, the bell on the foot with the hearts. Now, every time I move I sound like a carousel.

"I love it," I say enchanted. Right now, I'm not the Starcatcher. Right now, I'm just me.

But later that night, when Innes is barely gone, the knocking comes on my door. Knocking, so it's not Innes. And it's deep night now, the time when work usually comes to me. Night makes the star connection that much stronger. I grab a robe and throw it over my jeans. My ankles and feet jingle as I go to the door.

It's Morena, young as I am, and heavily pregnant. Morena and I played dolls together when we were in second grade. I think she always liked it better than I did. Maybe that's why she's doing it now for real. She lowers her gaze as if she's never met me.

"Starcatcher." Her voice is breathless, but I suppose mine would be, too, if I were carrying that much extra weight.

"Come in, Morena. I'll make some tea." Maybe she's here for a visit. She hasn't been, not for the past two years, but I can pretend. I can hope.

She shakes her head. "It's about the baby." She still won't look at me.

No one knows who else this baby belongs to. Well, someone does, but he's not telling. It's been the talk of the village for months. Morena has barely left her house.
This is part of the job. This is what I spill my blood for -- help from the stars to clarify futures. This is what put me here in the first place: desire to know, as well as desire to help.

I lead her to my table and she kneels awkwardly on the bright red cushion I've put on the seeker's side. A cheerful color, something to make them feel comfortable. I light the candles that never move from the low table, and kneel on the other side, facing her. My cushion is black, the color of a midnight sky.

I reach my hands toward her, palms up. The scars on my wrists flare white as the candle lights touch them.

Morena puts her fingers against my wrists. Her skin is dry, and suddenly, in spite of the size of her, the weight of the baby, she seems papery and thin. I'm afraid she'll fly away when the next breeze blows through the open windows. I don't look at her, just pull in breath and close my eyes.

I always lose track of time when I'm doing a divination, so I don't know how long we sit there. When the images come, they come fast, almost too fast to read, one on top of the other. Nothing about the father, and I'm glad. It's something I don't want to know. Pictures of Morena, though, giving birth to the baby, fighting so hard to make it come and, in the end, both looking so weak and exhausted it seems that neither will survive another day.

I snap my eyes open, desperate, not wanting to see my friend die. I'm so bad at this, I want to scream. Why was I chosen, anyway?

I take a very long breath, watch Morena's bent head, and close my eyes again. I owe her this much. But the images are gone. Everything's gone but the colors and patterns that always live in my mind.

Still, I didn't see them die. There's a chance.

"Don't have the baby here," I tell her. "Go to the hospital on the mainland. It's going to be a hard birth. I want to see the baby, and you, both strong. They can help there better than we can."

She looks at me, fear and wonder in her eyes.

"And Morena." This much I could see. "It's a boy."

She smiles at this, a shaky smile, and struggles to her feet. She tries to hand me money, but I won't take it. "Save it. You'll need it. For the baby."

"Starcatcher," she says, but I shake my head again. "No, it's just me. Breena." I hug her and open my gold door. The candles light a path halfway across the clearing. Morena follows their light, and then she fades into the night like smoke caught in a breeze.
When Innes comes in later that night, I'm a puddle of robes, crying. It's the hiccuping kind of crying, long stretches of shaking shoulders with no sound. He's on the floor next to me before the door is fully closed.

"I hate this," I moan in to his shoulder. He no longer smells like the festival. Now his scent is of lemon and sage and his hair is damp against my face. Innes doesn't say anything, just holds me and rocks me, giving me his strength, which is good because mine seems to have walked out the door with Morena.

"I'm no good at this," I finally mumble, waiting to see what he'll say.

What he says is, "Shower."

He pulls me to my feet easily, even though I'm a dead weight against him. He walks me down the short hall that leads to the bathroom, pulls the shower curtain, starts the water. He knows I'll want it hot as fire, hot enough to bury the mirror in layers of steam.

Then he leaves, pulling the door closed behind him. It catches with a tiny, short snick. Once he's gone I can feel him pacing like a tiger in the other room.

I come out of the bath in a breath of steam, warm, my muscles relaxed. I'm close to normal again, from the shower and from reminding myself, one more time, that the job of the Starcatcher is to have visions, both good and bad.

My bed is turned back and Innes in already in it, propped comfortably on all the pillows. He wiggles one out from behind his back and drops it on the empty side of the bed. I look at the others, four of them, still behind him.

"Can you spare it?"

He glances over his shoulder, looks at the one pillow he's offered me and frowns. "Well, probably. I'll let you know if I need it later."

I have to smile as I cuddle in next to him. We sleep like this two or three nights a week. We've never made love, but I can tell by the quivering tightness of him when I'm close that he wants to. I do, too, but it never seems right. And tonight, after Morena... Innes doesn't ask me if I'm thinking of loving him, doesn't make any suggestive moves. He waits until I'm comfortable, then says, as if no time has passed since he walked through my door, "You're wrong, you know. You're very good at it." And then he kisses the inside of my wrist. He looks surprised when he lifts his head. He's never done anything like this before. The kiss seems to tie my job and my life together. He doesn't do it again, just keeps talking, stumbling a little on his words. "Hating it and being good at it are two completely different things."

"Sometimes what I see is good," I say, as if this answers him. "Sometimes I really think I help."

"Oh, Breena." He pulls my head against his chest and rests his chin on my hair. I know how hard it can be."
I can't argue with that. He's pulled me out of unhappiness more times than I can probably remember. And he's always there when I'm happy, or ridiculously silly, when I don't have to be anyone but me. If I ever marry anyone it'll have to be Innes, just because I can't imagine my life without him.

I never do divinations for Innes.
I fall asleep curled against him, listening to the patterns made by his breath, his heart.

In the morning, the air is the same clear gold as my front door. The breeze blows off the water in light sighs. I'm at the headland rocks early, watching for the first ferry. When it comes, it brings a handful of visitors. When it goes, Morena is on board with someone who looks like Mickey, the shock of red hair blazing even with the sun still resting low on the horizon. He's actually holding her hand. Does that make him the father? And if not, does it matter? At least there's someone.

Later, when I tell Innes, he only nods. "I know he's the father. I've known for months."

"And you never told me?"
"Wasn't any reason to. Anyway," and he grins, "you're the Starcatcher. If you'd wanted to know, you'd have found out."
"But Innes..."
Those eyes catch me. "You didn't want to know, Breena, and you know that."
I sigh, making sure the sound is loud enough to hear. Innes grins again. "Like I said, you're good at it."
"Yeah? You seem to be pretty good, too. Want to trade?"

He holds up his hands and takes one quick step back. "No, but thank you. I have enough to worry about with myself." Then, as if it's an afterthought, he adds, "And you. I don't need anyone else."

"Neither do I." I'm not joking anymore. Maybe I wasn't in the first place.

Three nights after the festival, and I'm exhausted. Divinations always pick up near Fest time and I've had too many nights of sadness, sickness, death, torn relationships. The few good things I've seen have been so small in comparison. My own place among the stars is getting harder to read; harder to understand.

Innes has been in my bed every night, but not one of those nights have been restful. Every time he's asked what's wrong, as I'm twisting under the sheets, I've stopped moving, straightened like a length of pine, and said, "Nothing."

On the fourth night, when Innes shows up, I'm sitting on the floor, arms wrapped around my knees. I've just finished a session with Johannes. I've warned him about the accident, hot molten silver spilling on his hand. I can only hope a warning is enough.
move my ankles together, feeling his silver work glide like water over my skin, but otherwise I'm as still as the island on a doldrums day. Innes can tell immediately that I'm too calm.

"I want to stop this. I want to leave here."

Innes stops moving, quits as suddenly as if he's walked into my door instead of through it. All he says is, "Are you sure?"

"You were the one who said I could walk away."

He nods, one slow bob of his head. I think he'll back me in anything I do, but I also think this will be hard for him. The Starcatcher legend is a part of him, just like the dreams are a part of me. But I can learn to ignore the dreams. I can learn to ignore the pull of the stars. I think. And if I can, Innes can leave the legend behind. I hope. Because, when I leave, I want Innes to come, too.

He sits next to me, takes my hand in his, looks carefully at the scabs and scars on my wrist. Then he reaches slowly for my other hand and, so gently that it feels like a spring rain, he puts the fingers of both hands on my scars.

"Starcatcher," he says, and it's almost a whisper.

"No!" I yank my hands back, but he holds them like he does when he doctors my cuts.

"Starcatcher," he repeats, watching my face.

I want to be anywhere but here. Letting anyone else in the world touch me. I do not want a divination on Innes. If anything terrible shows, my life will fold in on itself like a tumbling city of cards.

"Breena," Innes says gently.

I look long at his face, feel like I'm drowning. Then slowly, so slowly, I close my eyes. And see colors, strong pure colors. The mixing blue of sea and sky on the horizon, the green of barely born leaves, the purple of the small violets I find in the middle of the island, buried deep under the thickest trees. The colors that always wait right on the edges of my mind.

Then sky black. And colorless white. It's like my death hour images, strong as when my Starcatcher dreams first started. Swirling in space, touching those glass-edged stars, cracking them from the heavens. And rich, red blood, warm and thick as syrup, sliding down my arms as I gather my harvest. Innes' images belong to a Starcatcher.

When I'm back on earth and I open my eyes Innes is still concentrating on my face.

"You, too?" I ask, breathing hard.

He nods, still holding my wrists.

"When did you know? When did you start having the dreams?"

"Just before you did." He smiles, but it's a rueful smile, not his usual grin. "I talked to Alier. Talked to him for hours. For days. But, Breena, I couldn't do it. I tried
to convince myself -- it seemed so fine, so beautiful. But it was scary, too. And I knew, deep down, that I wasn't the one."

I shake off his hands, get up, pace my floor. "So you let me do it. When you knew how hard it would be, when you knew how it'd tear at me. . ."

"No," he interrupts. "I had no idea how hard. There's no way anyone, even a Starcatcher, could have explained it and had it make sense. After watching you for the past two years I still don't fully understand. I just knew that I wasn't the one."

"But you had to have had the dreams. Your images -- they're just like mine."

He wiggles his shoulders, almost a shiver. "I made a choice. I walked away. And if it helps, I decided before you talked to me."

"But you let me," I wail.

"No," he says again. "You made a choice, too. You wanted it, Breena. You were scared of it, but it sang to you. I could tell, as soon as you told me about the dreams."

I drop onto the red pillow by my divining table and say, to my candles, "So you weren't tempted?"

Innes gets up from the floor, walks over and sits across from me, in the Starcatcher's place. "Of course I was. Who wouldn't be? But after talking to Alier -- he let me call him that till he died, did you know? Never Starcatcher. Alier. That made me feel so . . . oh, important, I guess.

"But I couldn't accept. And then you came, and it seemed so right. It was like you had an aura that glowed whenever you and Alier were together. I could tell, that first day, when you walked out of his house."

"Maybe I glowed for the wrong reason," I say flatly. "Maybe I thought it was fine and beautiful, too and just ignored scared. I do that, you know."

He laughs, a real laugh, and says, "Yeah, you do. But not this time. I've got some of the blood, after all. And I know you -- so well. You were practically incandescent."

"It's just so hard," I whisper. "And this," I touch his unscarred wrists, then touch my own battered ones, "sometimes this is the hardest of all."

"I know. Maybe that's what scared me off in the first place. And you still do have the choice. I just thought you needed to know about me."

"They'd find someone else."

"They would," he agrees.

"Maybe you?" I ask, testing.

"Absolutely not. Guaranteed."

After what feels like hours I say, "If not you, will it be the right someone?"

"I don't know," he says honestly. "Maybe right in a different way."

We sit, not moving, not speaking. It's well past midnight. I can feel myself being pulled closer and closer to the stars. My stars. To pretend that connection's not there, to not use it after pursuing it every way I've been able to -- that seems wrong. I'd be a
different person, the kind who walks away, leaves everyone stranded, never looks back. Selfish. Thoughtless.

I don't think I'd like that person.

Feeling my way, as I would if I were crossing a stream on slick rocks, I say, "If I could connect some other way, if I could stop this..." and I tap my wrists.

Innes raises his head slowly and blinks, once, at me. "You'd still be willing to carry the burdens of the island?"

I wiggle my shoulders. "The knowledge is hard, but it's a life knowledge. Bad things happen all the time." This is the first time I've admitted this to myself, but I know it's true. "As hard as it is to warn people, I still believe I can help. And there are those bright spots of happiness. If I could have it without the blood..."

"Breena," Innes says in a gentle voice, "you can have anything if you want it enough. It's the getting it that can be hard."

I close my eyes. Stars swirl through my mind. As soon as I see them the thought hits me with the clarity of a bell clapping in the wind. I'm wide awake and I can still touch the stars. Innes' voice echoes, saying, "...can have anything if you want it..." Could I do this for divinations? Catch the stars with my mind, not with my arms? Leave the blood and exchange knowledge for a conscious gift of myself. A kind of meditation.

I snap my eyes open, excited, and explain my idea to Innes. I end with, "Maybe it's only blood for knowledge because it's always been that way. Maybe no one's ever even thought to try something different."

Innes is silent, and still. My excitement fades as quickly as it came. "And maybe it's not such a great idea, after all," I mumble.

But Innes looks at me, eyes shining, and says, "No, Breena, it's brilliant. It'll take work, take time, but it's a brilliant idea."

Tension flows out of me like pebbles sliding with the tide. I slip into an almost trancelike state of relaxation. When I come back to myself the candles are dim, almost gone. I can feel the magic of the night sky in my mind, cool and sweet as ice on a hot day. I shiver with the sensations of freedom, and of responsibility. I will be able to do this.

I look around the room with new knowledge and sigh, a breath I didn't know I was holding. Several of the divination candles blink out, their wicks glowing red. Their smoke floats above my head and I follow it toward the opened windows. Through them I see dawn wash over the island in shades of rose and dove gray. I lean forward, exhausted. Emotions swirl through me, following the same paths the smoke takes as it floats through the air. I rest my head on Innes' hands, let go of everything one more time, breathe his scent like elixir, and glide into a sleep where there will be no dreams at all.