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by Eugie Foster

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Second Daughter

Eugie Foster

Navah was born second daughter to her house, a disappointment to her mother and father, who had expected another son. Her mother died of shame when she realized she had birthed a second girl child and her father named her *Navah*, which means "regrettable."

The only one who was kind to Navah was her brother Alsieb. Navah would sit with Alsieb while he wove his warrior's shirt and as his hands twisted and pulled at the thick strands of yarn, he would also spin fabulous tales for her about cunning monkey kings, sly fox women, and her favorite, the fearsome witch who lived in the forest. She barely dared to breathe for fear of disrupting the luck charms his fingers twined into the cloth, but she never missed a single word.

Now Alsieb was sick, the poison from a bandit's lance working its way into his heart. The brigand had stricken off one of Alsieb's charms at a crucial moment and the green tip had stabbed into his side.

The aunties said the wound was cursed and would not heal. Navah overheard them as she stood peeling the vegetables for dinner.

"It was bad magic!" Aunt Yegane said as she poured rice into a cooking pot.

"A demon perhaps," Aunt Hadara agreed, rolling out flour for dumplings.

"Maybe it wasn't a demon," Savina said. "Maybe it was Navah. She sat with him while he wove. I saw." Savina was first daughter and

delighted in tormenting Navah, who, after all, was lowlier than her, being *second* daughter.

The aunties glared at Navah.

"Cursed second daughter," Aunt Hadara hissed. "Alsieb will surely die because of your thoughtlessness!"

Navah shrank within herself, feeling the harsh glares that fell on her back as though they were rods. She dropped the half-peeled radish and ran out of the kitchen, ignoring the indignant cries of the aunties. They would surely pinch her and beat her later, but she didn't care.

Navah snatched up her ragged mantle, climbed through a low window, and stepped out onto the lane. It was a cold night. Lady Moon wore a thick shawl of dark gray clouds rimmed with faint stars. Navah could barely see her feet on the white-stoned path.

"Mistress Moon," Navah said, "I am just a second daughter, but I am on an errand to save my brother. Won't you smile upon me so that I may find my way to the witch woman?"

Lady Moon winked at Navah and let her shawl slip. She didn't take it off, for she was shy tonight, but it was enough. A fragile beam of silver glimmered down and touched the path with a pale brilliance.

Navah hurried along, but the trees grew thick in the forest, and their branches tangled over her head so that they blocked out Lady Moon's face. Navah stopped and looked to the left and right. She wasn't sure of the way.

The black eyes of a night hare glittered at her in the shadows.

"Master Rabbit," Navah said. "I am just a second daughter, but I am on an errand to save my brother. Do you know the way to the witch woman?"

The hare flicked his long, black ears and twitched his shiny whiskers. His hind legs kicked out and he soared through the hedges.

Navah ran after him, her heart pattering in her chest. Again and again she thought she'd lost him, but then she would catch a glimpse of his sparkling eyes or the shimmer of his flashing paws. And suddenly, before her was a lopsided hut. But surely this couldn't be the witch's house already? In Alsieb's stories there were always *three* companion guides--one for truth, one for fortune, and one for honor. There should have been a talking bird of paradise or a rhyming boulder to deliver her to the witch woman, certainly?

The night hare bobbed his head to peer at her.

"Thank you, Master Rabbit," Navah panted.

The hare flipped his tail at her and vanished into the forest.

Navah had never seen anything like the hut before. It had five sloping sides, which was very unlucky. Everyone knew that five was an evil number. And the path led straight to the door, without a single bend or curve. Surely it was an invitation to bad spirits to have an unbroken line leading to one's door? Finally, not a single lantern hung over the entry. Did the witch not know that a shadowed doorway meant ill fortune? Truly, it was the most poor-omened house Navah had ever seen.

She stepped up to the door—painted dark green, green for sorrow no less!—and lifted the heavy bronze knocker. She struck it three times, the number for prosperity.

A lilting, musical voice called from within: "Strike the knocker once more, if you please."

Four knocks? That was unheard of! But Navah did as she was bid, and with a trembling hand, raised the knocker one final time.

The door swung open on noiseless hinges. What of the lucky squeak to frighten away goblins? All these contrary omens! But Navah did not dwell long on the silent hinge, for the witch woman, her hostess, caught up her attention.

She was not at all what Navah had expected. She was young for one, a lady, not a crone, and quite beautiful for another. A waterfall of ink-black hair cascaded, almost to the floor, around a smooth, round face. She wore a simple wool dress with a flaxen girdle that emphasized her supple waist and graceful arms. But the wool had been dyed a deep gray, almost black, a very unlucky color; it was the exact hue of a death shroud.

The woman beckoned her inside. Within, the room was hung with herbs around a blue-stoned fireplace and a single round window let in the night sky. Navah struggled not to dwell on all the perils a window with no corners might attract.

"Are...are you the witch woman?" she asked.

Amber eyes twinkled at her, tilted at the corners, cat-slitted. "Call me Lady Isahr."

Navah gasped; *isahr* meant "ill-met." She bowed. "I am Navah."

Lady Isahr laughed. It was a bright, merry sound, full of sunshine and sweetness. She took Navah's arm and tried to coax her out of her obeisance. "What brings you to my door on so cold a night, unregrettably?"

Navah bowed lower. "Please, Lady Isahr, my brother Alsieb is sick, maybe dying. It is my fault, my bad luck that caused it. The stories say you are wise and can lift curses. Will you help him?"

Lady Isahr knelt and wiped Navah's cheeks with a corner of her death-colored gown. Until that moment, Navah had not realized she was crying.

"Tell me what has happened."

Navah sobbed out the tale in a rush of misery and guilt. Lady Isahr listened, her smooth face somber, until Navah was done. Then she lifted Navah to her feet and ushered her to a five-legged chair by the fire.

"Child, I may be wise, but it is your courage that is needed tonight." Lady Isahr pulled several herbs down. "I will make a draught for you that will let you walk with the spirits. I fear your brother is caught in a ghost web."

"I will free him."

"You are brave, but there is peril." Lady Isahr plucked up a knife that glistened like a slender star. "I must open your vein to anchor your soul to your body, but if you do not prevail before you are bled white, both you and Alsieb will be lost."

Navah trembled, but she said again: "I will free him."

She watched as the witch woman mixed a bitter potion in a tawny, heavy bowl. When it was done, Navah lifted the bowl to her lips and swallowed every drop. Lady Isahr pressed the silver knife to Navah's throat. "Remember, you must make haste," she said, and the bright metal flashed.

Pain blossomed like an orchid of fire at Navah's throat. She recoiled from the agony and was astonished to see her body still slumped in the five-legged chair. Lady Isahr bent over her, catching the stream of blood in a honey-teak cup.

"Fly, Navah," she heard the witch woman call. "Quickly."

The pain flared in her neck, and with a thought, Navah was outside and back on the path. A night hare blinked at her but she did not need his aid. She ran, her feet skimming the ground, her neck a torrent of fire. Fast as worry, she retraced her steps and slipped into her father's house.

Within, she found Alsieb in a strangling web of spirit knots. Strands thick as despair looped his waist, while razor fine threads of disharmony twined his hands and feet. Alsieb lay as one already dead, his face slack and pale. The trap was so tight that not a flicker of light shone through the coils.

"Alsieb!" she cried.

His eyes opened. "Navah," he whispered. "Beware. It is a bad luck web. Come no closer."

Before he finished speaking, tendrils reached out for her. One jagged strand wrapped around her ankle and tugged her forward. It was icy against her skin and the chill of it vied with the fire still ablaze at her throat. She felt dizzy, a wash of sickness in her stomach. But she also saw that as the web clutched at her, the knots around Alsieb loosened.

She waded in, welcoming the lashing cables of discord with open arms. Their touch drained her strength, crushed the breath from her chest. But still she moved forward, until she stood beside Alsieb. She wrenched her hands free from biting knots of misfortune and shoved him with all her remaining strength. The tangle around him had become so slack, distracted by new prey, that she was able to push him free.

As soon as he was loose, he sat up, the color returning to his cheeks. He reached for her, but she staggered back with her burden. She was second daughter and of no consequence; she would not let Alsieb become tangled again.

How she made it outside and onto the path, she did not know, but there she was. She fell heavily, her feet snarled and her limbs too numb to respond.

A black hare appeared by her head. "Silly girl," he said. "How can you be strangled in ill-fortune if you are a second daughter?" The rabbit reached

out with a sharp paw and swiped at Navah's neck. The burning pain from the cut flared anew, like a fire behind her eyes, eating her up, and thawing through the cold. She cried out and found herself back in Lady Isahr's five-legged chair. A black rabbit preened its silken ears by the fire.

"Quietly, child, you must rest," Lady Isahr said. She set a cooling poultice against Navah's neck.

Navah looked up into a face as beautiful as the full moon and into eyes as kindly as the sun. Surely this woman was brimming with good luck.

But: "Lady Isahr? Are you a second daughter?" Navah cringed at her own temerity.

Lady Isahr only smiled. "Of course I am, child. Didn't you know? Second daughters are very special. We make our own luck."

Navah thought on Lady Isahr's words as she drank fragrant tea and nibbled sweet bean cakes until the last of the chill faded to a muted tingle. The black rabbit escorted her to the boundaries of her father's house.

The household was rattling lucky chimes and setting food out for good spirits in thanks for Alsieb's recovery. She stepped over the incense sticks and walked straight to Alsieb's room without adding a single curve or twist to her course.

Alsieb greeted her warmly and embraced her in his arms.

She felt his strength and heard the vigor of his voice and rejoiced. But she was also sad. "I am going off to make my own luck," she told him.

Alsieb pressed his cheek to hers. "Don't go, little sister. You have always been my lucky charm."

Navah kissed Alsieb's warm forehead. "And you have always been my sanctuary. But I must make my own house now. Perhaps one with five walls."

Alsieb bowed his head sadly, but let her go, promising to visit her often. And even though the hinges on Navah's door didn't squeak and the walls were a most unsettling green in color, it was a lucky house. And no one who knew Navah thought the acquaintance to be at all regrettable.



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"Second Daughter" was originally published in Brigham-Young's *Leading Edge* magazine, issue #44, December 2002.

Eugie Foster is an active member of the SFWA, winner of the Phobos Award, and has an M.A. in Developmental Psychology. She shares her writing space in Metro Atlanta with her husband, Matthew, and has been seen occasionally with a brown-and-white skunk named Hobkin trotting at her heels. When asked about her unusual companion, her reply is inevitably "he likes broccoli."

Eugie's fiction runs the gamut from children's folktales to science fiction to horror. She was recently nominated for a British Fantasy Society Award, has sold over fifty stories, and her publication credits include tales in *Realms of Fantasy*, *The Third Alternative*, *Paradox*, *Cicada*, *Cricket*, and the anthology *Hitting the Skids in Pixeltown*, edited by Orson Scott Card.

Eugie is also the managing editor and a fiction reviewer for the four-time Hugo-nominated publication, *Tangent*. For her complete bibliography and current updates, visit her online at eugiefoster.com.



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Bill Snodgrass began writing during his high school days. In the winter of 2003, however, he embarked on the journey of becoming a published fiction author. Bill writes fantasy, science fiction, and other fiction, all grounded in Christian values and appropriate for readers of all ages.

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The Sword Review is a publication of Web-Net Solutions, LLC. It is available at www.theswordreview.com and updates are published weekly.

The Sword Review (ISSN 1556-5416), 9618 Misty Brook Cove, Cordova, Tennessee 38016
For more information visit www.theswordreview.com. Eugie Foster's "Second Daughter" and Bill Snodgrass's "Science Station Alpha 1" appear as part of Issue 5, August 2005.