

# CIRSOVA™

Magazine of Thrilling Adventure and Daring Suspense  
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## Pawn to the Queen

by  
Christine Lucas

Ken McGrath  
Marie Brennan  
Ville Meriläinen  
Spencer E. Hart  
Adrian Simmons

Hal Y. Zhang  
Jim Breyfogle  
Jennifer Povey  
William Huggins  
Rebecca DeVendra

# Cirsova

P. ALEXANDER, Ed.

Mark Thompson, Copy Ed.

Xavier L., Copy Ed.

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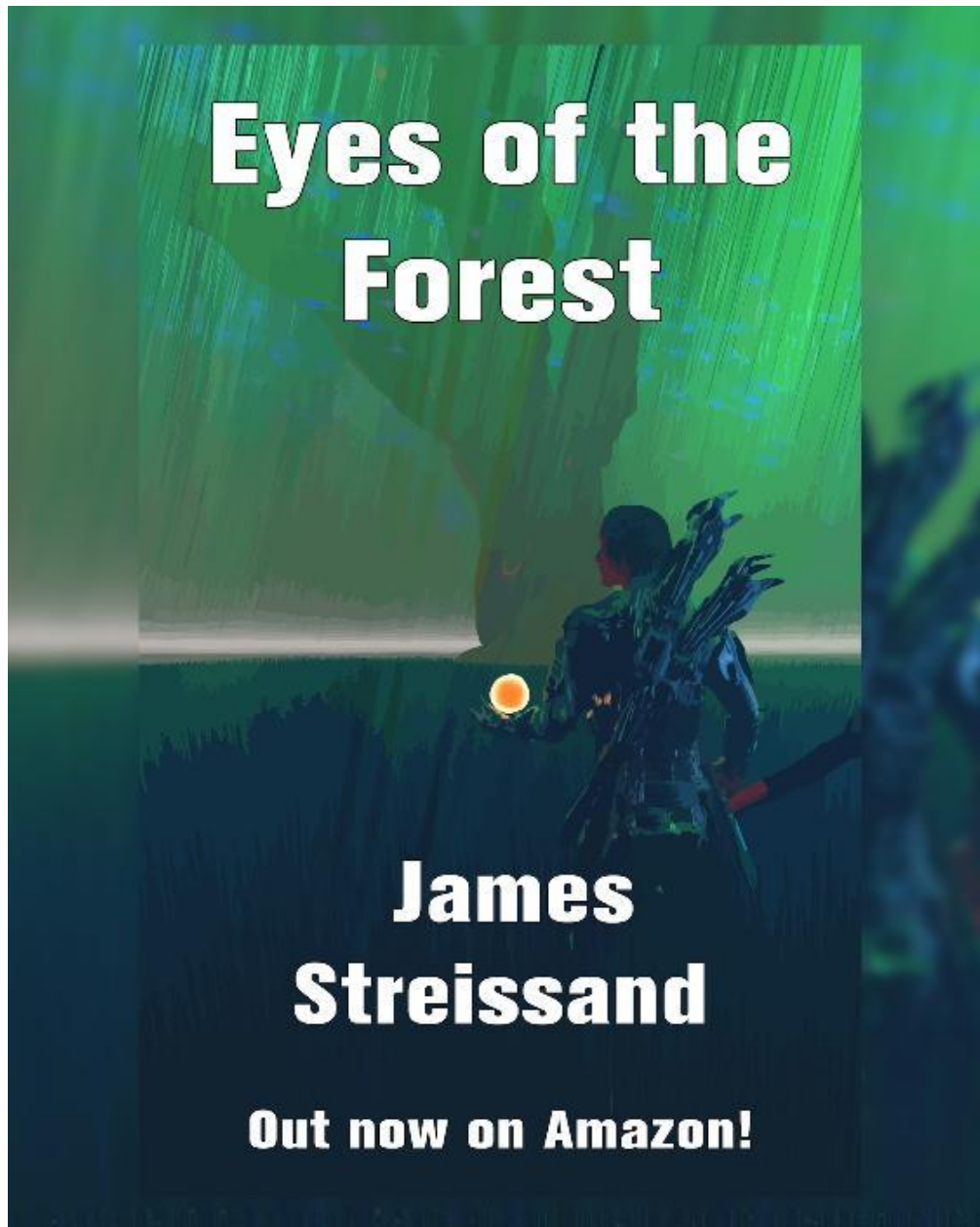
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**Amidst a conspiracy to forfeit the capital city capitol, Brestrel's army prepares to assault a point of Asha's border; Warden's Watch. Runin, unjustly condemned to exile from society proper and charged with taking the Watch, is offered to strike back at the nation**

**which betrayed him. He must choose between aiding a foreign power in striking down his homeland, or protecting those who made him a war hero, and promptly turned their backs on him.**

**Whatever the choice, he'll pay.**

# **A Little Human Ingenuity**

**By WILLIAM HUGGINS**

*The Rake, the last great champion of the Game—a bloodsport recreating mankind's battles against alien foes—is given an opportunity to face those old foes once again!*

*Soon, the Rake thought. Soon we could be free.*

Anger coursed through him. Mirroring his fury, the crowd—better than a hundred thousand today—was long since tired of the amateurs, the living and the dead. Four tedious matches down, so many shelled out thousands of credits to watch, and for what? Terra’s billion slum children fought better battles with stones and skateboards than the two fools currently circling one another. The jeers and derisive catcalls rang nearly as loud as the scudders roaring their way around the arena.

*Bad sign. Bad for the other riders, bad for the future of the Game.* The Rake shifted on his own scudder, just inside aperture Six, waiting for one of the fools to win. He was miserable in the sweltering humid heat, in a season that used to be winter—but he knew the crowd suffered too. They always came out to see him, the last of the generation that brought the great battles back to Terra, the last to fight the Grish at the Way’s far side and return with a taste of true death. Not Game death, this fantasy before the throngs, but the true empty horror of it.

*Though Game death is true enough, he knew, if you got caught napping.*

The green scudder fired at the orange and missed an easy shot. If his helmet had not been on, the Rake might have put his face into his hand. His own harshest critic, he also demanded a higher standard of those around him—like his fans. When had his people ever been silent in their displeasure? The crowd howled outrage into the arena at the misfire. *My people, wise to wasted money.* He would take it up with Pelk later. The Rake would long have been done with both fools and headed home to Keller, showered and clean and ready for their own form of fighting in the time it took these amateurs to chase one another in circles, and every seatholder knew it. The knowledge made him grin, a sly twisted thing that curled over his lips like a snake.

*My people.*

A long five minutes later, the green took a textbook move and annihilated his opponent with two guns just outside the dunes. The

applause was sparse, barely audible; the crowd had seen the maneuver before, better executed. They were ready for the main event.

They were ready for the Rake.

He ignored the introductions. Over the years they had become more obnoxious, bombastic. Pelk slipped him information on the challengers earlier: brothers, two, thirty-five victories between them, up and coming talent from the fringes of what had been Russia, and completely mad—mad or creditless. Dying in the Game was much like winning in some ways. The Rake would be obligated to make some restitution, set the remaining family up well. He had contributed to the success of hundreds who would have sat in destitution to the end of time. *Tell that to critics who say the Game has no conscience*, he thought, smiling.

Then the arena erupted with applause. His left thumb tripped a lever, and the black plasteel dome closed over him soundlessly. He fired the engines, felt the throb ripple through the scudder's body like a purr, as familiar a sensation as Keller's warmth. He took the jack and popped it through the back of his left knee, the one wound for which he might thank the Grish. Linking brought the onboard to full life. It roused quickly from its semi-slumber, cycling diagnostics and the weapons on sim in the blink of his eye—all systems clear, glitch-free.

Then the light in the aperture went green, and he fired himself into the arena.

The crowd knew his signature and roared—the Rake, always the first out. But the brothers were quick behind him, surprisingly so, sliding from Two and Four simultaneously. *Linkup*, thought the Rake, *dual-sensitivity plate or another twice-damned shareware*. No way to block it. If they had a shareplate, who knew what else the NewTech near-monopoly had thrown behind the brothers. Absolutely directed at him, personally. He clicked through a sequence and backfired a pearl at the brothers' matrix, testing. He'd know soon enough if they were linked.

He swung right toward the seats, intending to take a quick look around and give the crowd something to watch. Lover she might be, but Keller was overly fond of subtly changing the lay of the land on him, though



there was only so much she could do with Barcelona's ancient bullfighting arena. That hadn't stopped the developers from cramming every seat they could inside. The dome over the top allowed for little experimentation. He rose above seat level and glanced over his shoulder. Just outside of Six was the gorge, stretching from a wall to the forest in the center. Between Five and Three nothing but flat sand, a wide, open area where the last battle ended. At the end of the dunes, just past Three, the bridge. Keller had moved it again, damn her, and lowered it to what looked like a mere two meters' clearance. He made a mental note of that—it might prove useful. Beyond the bridge was the lake.

The brothers circled clockwise below him, cruising over open sand now, side by side. *Unwise*. Unless they were trying to tempt him. He made another high circuit and caught the pearl on his second pass—*shareware*. Like any technology, it could be your friend, but it was no replacement for experience, or talent.

The Rake let himself be tempted.

He opened the throttle and swooped over the forest onto the bridge, racing just above the slats. The brothers broke apart below him, coming out from under the bridge, one rising to challenge him, the other swinging out and around the lake in a covering move.

The Rake let the first brother, his dome a fiery red, settle onto the bridge before he accelerated, fleeing across the sand. The second brother, dark brown, gave chase. The other leapt off the bridge and sped toward the center.

The Rake smiled. *Pincer*. The brothers were mad, and foolish. This would be a short day's work. *But not too short*, he admonished himself. The crowd had been bored enough. He would play for a bit.

The brown fired merrily away, as though his packs had enough energy to keep him aloft for hours. Perhaps they did—maybe some new linkage into the power plant. The Rake pushed that thought aside. Fools though the brothers might be, he had no time to consider remote possibilities. Green bolts passed over and under him ineffectually, his own evasion systems timing his bob and weave. Half the shots went so awry they

terminated against the arena walls and protective plasglass in sharp electric flashes, to the joy of the crowd.

The red swung behind the forest's far side, sweeping around for a frontal assault. *Little time.* The Rake shot down, accelerating, and vanished into the gorge. Brown reacted quickly, racing down behind him, but the Rake had a few seconds and was wiser in how to use them. He hugged the rocky spires like relatives and shot the stone loops in a mad rush, flitting through the gorge like a ghost. The brown, less experienced, fell behind.

The Rake exploded from the gorge, right across the flight path of the red, who was too stunned to fire. He recovered quickly and swung around, giving chase. The Rake let him in, closer, toyed and dodged a few dozen shots, then bucked right and entered the forest. The red rose, refusing to follow.

*Coward!* the Rake thought angrily. He wove a short pattern, then rose above the spiked trees. The brown came out of the gorge and reunited with the red. They circled, holding position near the bridge. He had spooked them, then. Maybe they were not mad, these two—maybe he had scared some sanity into them. He unspooled his engines and rose to the vertical, hovering. *Let them make the next move.*

The brothers wasted little time. They came at him quickly, guns firing in perfect tandem. The Rake let his nose fall, spun on his axis, and fled for the dunes. Yet they were quick studies, these two—he had to give them that. No doubt they studied earlier flights of his, maybe stored a few of his maneuvers quick-retrieve in their matrix. NewTech could give them that power.

So he needed to envision something new, and quickly.

They chased him over the gorge and into flat sand, both with guns firing. The Rake pulled and rose into the center of the arena, engines whining with the strain, and the brothers followed. Over the bridge, he inverted and dove, firing his engines. The brothers swung in tightly behind him, varying their angle to catch him when he flattened, hovering. The Rake kept up his dive, speed increasing, the onboard pumping

numbers through his knee to his eyes. When the count hit calculation, his quickflexes acted. The scudder screamed in torment but pulled off the move, throwing sand as he slid beneath the bridge. He looped around and dropped behind the brothers.

*Red or brown?* They were completely unprepared for his maneuver. The brothers barely knew where he was, only knew they had to flee, and did so, carelessly, before him. *Brown*, he decided, and opened all sixteen batteries. What little was left of the scudder and its rider settled gently on the lake, causing small ripples.

The crowd went wild.

The red fled for the dunes. The Rake shook his head. *Fool*. He could catch him easily before he got there by crossing his vector, surely the idiot knew that. And he did. As the Rake drifted behind him for a shot, the red swerved jerkily into the forest. The Rake smiled thinly. *My Game*.

This, his element, his favorite aspect of the Game, this twisted maze of sharp, brittle death. Trees, yes, but trees unknown to any nature besides the Game—or those who had seen the Grish homeworld at close hand, as he had. Large, laser-sharp limbs stuck out from trunks, keen enough to cut through plasteel and bone. The Rake sluiced through the hazards like water through a cavern. He had quickflex, and intuition—both had served him well, from war far away to this day in Barcelona. Even when the red brother quit the forest less than halfway through and shot high and free, several scratches and holes in his dome, the Rake carried on till he came through the far side, unscathed. Another signature of his—his forest, in his Game.

The crowd on its feet, cheering their approval, one hundred thousand strong.

*Time for an end.*

He had given his people their show.

He shot to the apex of the dome, nearly touching the glass in a steep, sweeping turn. He keyed all power to the guns—saw with their eyes,

brimmed with their power. *As days of old.* He saw Grish, squadrons of them, arrayed before him like threats to Keller and all the things he loved. The jack pulsed against his knee, information adrenaline. At times like this, he felt less than half-human, more demon than man. He swept down on the red brother in a fury of descending green fire, without thought or mercy. And the scudder blew apart in a violent explosion that flamed and flamed and settled over the dunes, a dozen small fires scattered over the undulating sand.

“**Y**ou know I’m serious.”

The Rake caught Pelk’s amused reflection in the window. “Mmm. I have heard this how many times now, cher?” he asked, in his singsong voice.

“I’ve warned you for months now, Pelk.” A finger tapped the glass. “That was it. I’m done.”

Pelk chuckled.

“I loathe this city.”

“Yes, cher, yes.” Pelk commiserated with a nod of his immense head. His bulk sat confined in an equally huge chair, the purple silk of his robe falling over its sides. They met in Pelk’s suite high above the arena floor, alone, as the assembled crowd left after the Rake’s arrival. Two screens at opposite sides of the suite replayed the match. Empty champagne bottles lay everywhere, alongside trays of half-eaten hors d’oeuvres. The Rake had ruined a great party. He was hungry but damned if he would eat anything on the nearest tray.

*Billions starving and surrounded by opulence—but such is the way of the world.*

“Barcelona’s not my favorite city, either, cher,” Pelk droned on. “Too hot. Too humid. Mmm. And I certainly don’t like the mood it puts you in.”

“Not the city, Pelk.” The Rake poked at the glass with a finger, hard. He looked down and saw crews already at work all across the floor, cleaning up debris, breaking down the forest and bridge. Keller’s work, so much put into it for so little time. But, like him, it had served its purpose. “This arena is too confining for the Game. Hell, they all are, but this is the worst.”

“It’s only twice a year, cher. And we have to play here, there’s too much tradition in Barcelona. Don’t you fight next in Tokyo? To keep the Asian Crown? You love Tokyo!”

“I’m not flying again, Pelk.”

“Not even for me, cher?”

“Not on Earth. Not for you, not for anyone.”

“Not even Keller?”

The Rake spun. “Pelk—”

“Mmm. Just testing your sincerity, cher.”

The Rake grunted noncommittally, turning back to the glass. But he couldn’t see the arena now. His eyes and mind saw the future, considering the freedom of retirement, a life outside the Game. No restrictions on his or Keller’s time. Two years back, they escaped the mad routine of their lives and spent a month on Mars, a slow pace of flying and climbing. The immensity of the planet and lack of people had been refreshing. Invigorating. They planned to move within the month and get a post at a remote terraforming site—with his name and prestige and money, he could make almost anything happen. Maybe somewhere deep on the fringe of Tharsis, mostly alone, live out another century perhaps without seeing another human face besides Keller’s in a kind of privacy you could never have, never even imagine, on ancient, crowded Terra, no matter how wealthy you were.

Pelk’s shrill voice invaded his thoughts. “Truly, cher, I meant to speak to you about a future engagement. Something unique.”

The Rake's thoughts stopped. He remembered entering the room, the way Pelk's hand had moved, and the room cleared. One of Pelk's plans was in the offing, he could feel it. He turned slowly, stared Pelk down. "There are no future engagements, my old friend." He motioned to Pelk's readboard, stationed on a table close by. "Let's do the document, right now. Issue the press release, transfer my credits, sell the houses and scudders and ships. I'll give you the transfer number, the account's ready and waiting. Got it right here." He tapped his temple.

Pelk sat forward listlessly. He reached a long, limpid hand into a pocket and drew out a wilting cigarette. He lit it and blew purple smoke high into the air where silent ventilators sucked it instantly away. A servant appeared, suddenly, from a place as mysterious as the cigarette. The short figure deposited a meter-high ashtray at Pelk's right side, then vanished. Pelk took another drag. "I'm trying to put it in my head to take you seriously."

"You should."

Pelk waved a hand languidly. "Sit, please." He waited until the Rake settled into a small couch to his left. He puffed again, then ground the cigarette to ash. He scratched his lip. "I do sense a change in you." The servant reappeared, pulled the ashtray to his chest and sped away.

"As I said, Pelk, you should."

"What has changed, cher?"

"Maybe I've found love."

Pelk laughed humorlessly, his great jowls shaking. "Would that we were so lucky, cher. Mmm. Or that I was." He paused a second and nodded, thoughts colliding. "I should have seen this coming, I think. Keller tried to give me her resignation before the match."

"Truly?"

Pelk nodded. "I couldn't accept. She, unlike you, has another year on her contract."

The Rake sat forward. “But you don’t need her, Pelk. You can get anyone to design an arena.”

“Not like her.”

The Rake felt his face color. “You aren’t being fair!”

“When have I ever been fair, cher?” Pelk rested a hand on his huge chin, let his smile widen a bit more. “Maybe it is love, then. If so, we have an impasse.”

“There is no impasse.” The Rake cut a hand in front of himself. “I can’t tell you to let her go—much as I’d like to, I can’t, but I am finished.”

Pelk’s throat rumbled. “Did you make a promise, my Rake?”

The Rake let the seconds stretch like those before leaving the aperture. At last, he nodded.

“Then it is love,” Pelk said, not blinking.

“Yes.” The Rake didn’t hesitate this time. “It is love.”

“Well. Mmm. That changes things, then. I may be prepared to be magnanimous, cher.” He rubbed his hands as if to warm them. “As I said, I hoped to talk to you about your next engagement.” He put up a hand to stem the Rake’s response. “I had thought you would be in the Cage in Tokyo next month, then Rio for the South American Special, then godforsaken Phoenix to end the season—wasn’t it 140 degrees there last year?”

The Rake nodded. Pelk knew it was—it had been brutal fighting in that heat. But he wanted Pelk to get to the point.

“So...those will not happen. I understand promises, cher. We shall have to see if the Game can survive without you.”

“With talent like I saw today, probably not.”

“You may be right.” Pelk swayed some as he spoke. “You’re the last of that generation that got old so fast, from the war. But you’re still young.”

“Young enough to get out and enjoy what time I have left.”

“Believe me, cher, that I understand. I truly do.”

“We’ve both become ridiculously rich, Pelk. What more do you want?”

Pelk smiled wistfully. “For me, the money is the only motivation. You know me well enough to know that. For you...well, I know you better than you think. So: how would you like to get your love and leave the Game on the highest note possible? Is this how you wish to leave—” indicating the arena below them with a dismissive wave—“defeating two lunatics?”

“They seemed to pick up pretty fast, Pelk, no doubt with a little help from NewTech. And yes, leaving under these circumstances is fine with me—alive.”

Pelk waved a hand airily. “Yes, yes, the promise. Mmm. What were you planning to do?”

“For starters, we hoped to fly Tharsis.”

Pelk looked stricken, as if a plate of canapés had turned on him. “Mars? Whatever for?”

“Lack of humanity, for one.”

Pelk considered that, lit another smoke. The ashtray reappeared, a smaller servant this time, only hands and feet visible. “I couldn’t go for long without people. I need my human contact—and technology.” His eyes flicked quickly to the screens, running through the Rake’s victory again. “Tell me, cher, have you heard of Image?”

“Of course.” He kept up with all things NewTech, figuring eventually the monopoly would eventually find a way to use it against him in the Game. His refusal to use their products and insistence on designing his own fightware drew their ire from the earliest days of his career—but he had seen NewTech fail when his comrades had needed it most, in battle against the Grish, and he knew its flaws. He trusted himself, no one else. *Not with my life.* With his retirement, the Game would be wide open to



NewTech to sweep up all riders; without him making his fightware available for free for any who wanted to use it, the few holdouts who still lived would be forced into NewTech's camp, just as they wanted. *Adios ingenuity*. Image was the monopoly's latest communications package, the fastest form of image-dumping for relaying information across solar systems and vaster distances.

“Well, it's online.”

The Rake shook his head. “Impossible. Not even NewTech works that fast. They only hit the Moon last month.”

“It's being dropped throughout the Way right now, cher, deposited on every inhabited world we know, from Mercury to those maniacs on Pluto to the Outers. We're all about to become much closer.”

“How do you know this?” the Rake asked, leaning forward. He knew Pelk had his finger in a lot of pies, but NewTech?

“Mmm. Unimportant.” Pelk took a last drag and raised his empty hand. “Imagine this, cher: all those billions and billions of souls, connected almost immediately, seeing everything at once, as it happens, with barely any delay. Soaking up the immediacy of the experience. Imagine what they would pay for that. Imagine them seeing something no one had ever shown them before. And then imagine five percent of it for yourself. How much freedom would that buy you? And what a way to go out, cher.”

“Pelk, what in the hell are you talking about?”

Pelk leaned forward conspiratorially. “NewTech is not only looking at the human side of the business possibilities, my dear Rake. There are other markets out there, equally as profitable as ours. Perhaps more. Who can say, mmm?” He took a short breath. “In complete confidence, cher, they have spoken with the Grish.”

A cold hand touched the Rake's heart, or so it felt. To think that name was one thing—to hear it spoken, quite another. He felt like rising from his seat. “Spoken to the...Grish...about what?”

Pelk waved his hand. “Markets, economics, information movement. Ways to maintain the peace.”

“Through business?”

“Through business.”

“They’re fools.” He realized his fists were clenched and forced himself to relax. “No one on that twice-damned Board knows what they’re about. Good gods, Pelk, what in hell are they thinking?”

“Mmm. It’s a time-honored philosophy, cher: business makes better partners than war.” Pelk cleared his throat, coughed. “I tell you this from the mouths of the Grish, through a NewTech Image feed from their homeworld—and yes, the talks have already moved that far.”

The Rake shook his head, disbelieving.

“I tell you so you know where we stand, cher. The Grish want to set up a Game to help launch Image, both here and there. And NewTech wants it, too. Badly. And NewTech wants you, for reasons we both know too well to argue.” Pelk smoothed his mouth and swallowed. “Mmm. If you live—mmm, if you live, you’ll get five percent of the launch. It’ll be more money than you can spend in a thousand lifetimes. You’ll be pointlessly rich.” He smiled, craven. “And so will I.”

The Rake knew what kind of sums were involved. A point of honor with him and those who knew him best was he had never been greedy. Money always seemed a burden: the more you had, the more you needed. Not him. Sooner or later, the accumulation would bury you beneath its acquired weight. The Game had made him foolishly wealthy already. He could easily have made as much in other avenues less hazardous after the War. Plenty of his comrades-in-war had. It was just that fighting was what he knew best, and for the last decade the killing had come easily. His needs were simple, far less than what the Game brought. He could have retired years ago.

But the Game was a calling, an irresistible voice, a cutting imitation of life at its essence—it could end any second, instantly, from any direction.

At least in the Game you had a chance to fight back. In the early days, he'd had some close moments, when there had been other fliers from the War, years back in a past that often seemed like someone else's life. Truthfully, no challenges had appeared in years. One recent article in a humanist journal called him a murderer because his opponents had nowhere near his skills. Some openly called for no-kill in the arenas. Simulated destruction. It was a wave that would probably swell and end the Game as he knew it as the generations moved forward, farther away from one intimately used to violence. The fact that NewTech wanted business connections with a vicious enemy was proof enough of that.

*Changes.*

Yet... The Grish fought on an entirely different level—a *different world, mindset*. He remembered battling them in space and on the ground, with scudders and pistols. Always teams of six. The Game returned to Terra like that but changed as the early veterans retired or died in the Game. Terrans liked single dogfights best, or two-on-one, like the brothers. Also, the Grish fought more like him, stripped down—as a hivemind they didn't need shareware, their connected minds already served that function. He doubted there was even a homeworld shareware variant, yet another thing about them he would never know. Not being a NewTech junkie would work to his advantage.

And Pelk was right: it would be a way to go out, fighting his old enemy one last time.

*But Keller—well, either way, she would be free.*

He looked up. "Team of six?"

"Of course, cher."

"I'll do it," he said, though Pelk already knew he would. And almost added, *for the challenge*, but didn't. Let Pelk think he was like everyone else, like his own gluttonous self, motivated by something as pointless as money. He would shunt the proceeds into the coffers of several world hunger organizations he quietly supported who would see the funds put to good use. Terra's jobless billions, ever hungry.

Should he live.

Pelk showed his teeth. “It’s done, then.”

“And Keller’s free of her contract?”

Pelk clapped his hands, wiped them. “Done.”

The Rake rose, suddenly feeling he had to move, even if only a few steps around the chair. Then a thought occurred to him. “Where will it be? Gods, not Barcelona, Pelk.”

“No, not here, cher. You’re safe on that point.”

“Where, then?”

Pelk chuckled. “That’s the delightful part. They want a spectacular backdrop. The battle will take place around Everest.”

“This is madness,” Keller said, a line repeated again and again over the weeks, like a mantra. First when he returned from Pelk’s office, again during the negotiations, preparations, and again here, at nearly 18,000 feet and five minutes before the Rake was due to engage the Grish. “You do not have to do this.”

“You keep telling me that,” the Rake said, smiling. He touched her shoulder. *How strange, oh how strange, after all I’ve seen and done, to find love.* An entire lifetime stood between Keller and his last romance, almost two decades. He rubbed her upper arm. “You look beautiful.”

She shook his compliment off, though she knew she did. Keller’s face, the only part of her visible, was dark and unlined; her night-black hair pulled back, part of it just hanging below her pink stocking cap; her hands gloved, trim body wrapped in a warm suit, tight and confining and insulated. The Rake thought she looked tremendous. He said so again.

“Stop.” She pushed at him. “You thought those Russian lads were mad, but you—” She waved her hands in the air. “*This* is madness. And you made me a promise.”

A reporter shouted over the din, looking for a quote, a moment alone with the Rake—maybe a famous last word. The Rake waved him away. Security stood between him and the furor, occasionally pushing someone back into the center. The media presence was huge, as expected, all NewTech, reporters and sponsors, looking for their moment in the spotlight. The Rake had had enough of that to last him a lifetime. He just wanted these few minutes with Keller.

“I should never have let you—I mean, look out there!” Beyond the clear shelter, the wind kicked up blasts of snow, the entire area a whiteout. Centuries ago, this spot launched expeditions for the summit high above. Now that climbers moved deeper into the system for newer challenges, NewTech thought it the ideal spot for a jump point.

“Once I get above this, it’s clear,” he said. “Most of the glaciers are gone, only the Icefall is left, and even that’s halfway gone. But the imagery will be unbelievable, Kel.”

Tears grew in her eyes. “It’s suicide!”

“Give me more credit than that, love. I’ve fought the Grish before.” He put his gloved hands to her face, tried a smile. “We all gotta go sometime, darlin’. And Pelk promised: you’ll be free. Mars will still be there for you, whatever happens in the next few hours.”

“There’s no Mars without you, you fool,” she hissed. But she wrapped him in a hug, and the power of it nearly took his breath.

Then a roar went up, and the crowd got even more raucous. The countdown dropped below two minutes. The Rake could see the Image viewscreens at all angles, in every open high spot. Image cameras mounted everywhere, including his suit. No angle uncovered, even the mountain above. Remotes sat on floating disks for tight shots during the fight, easily maneuvered by technicians at readboards in the shelter. Larger shuttles monitored the limits of the perimeter, with summit angles covered by a trio of geosynchronous satellites. NewTech had all its angles covered.

The clock dropped to zero. *Time*. He pulled back from Keller's embrace, kissed her full on the lips for most of the Way to see. "I love you."

"You, too, fool."

"See you soon." She shook her head and waved a gloved hand, tears brimming in her eyes. "Wait for me."

The red light went yellow. He spun and walked to his scudder, mounted. He inserted the jack behind his knee and keyed the plasteel over. Pre-run diagnostics cycled as a crane lifted him into the exit port. The warmsuit pressurized, the only thing protecting him once he exited the shelter from the thin, hypoxic air. A week of flying in it hadn't made it feel any less cramped. The scudder seemed smaller and clumsier with it on—but it was wear it or freeze.

Then the light went to green, and ten billion pairs of eyes saw him stay true to form and leap first from the shelter and into the Game.

The wind caught him immediately, a great firm hand that nearly drove him to ground. The scudder's engines screamed, half as loud as the gale, lifting him slowly from the snowblind. Nothing had ever pressed against him like this—*gods*. He flew directly into it, crawling at what felt like a snail's pace up the Western Cwm. The Khumbu Icefall—or what was left of it—below him was half hidden in the swirling snow like an icy mirage.

Clearly the wind was going to be a problem. In an arena, the elements were never against you—you couldn't ask for a more placid environment. Here, he could hardly ask for anything worse. *Damn. Might have to sacrifice power to primary systems to gain speed.* He spent a moment wondering what he could dump when the onboard brought nav to his attention. He checked behind: six Grish scudders in perfect formation, terraced threes, pacing him. He took a deep breath.

*Time to begin.*

The rules allowed a pass of Everest, a single circuit more for the viewers than the riders. He passed the Southwest Face and began the gentle climb

up Lhotse, over the South Col into the Kangshung, then looped over the summit. The rock and what was left of Terra's dying ice were stunning, as empty and marvelously dark and white as Mars was red. *Mars*. He needed to remind himself he had a reason to survive what lay ahead. The wind slid behind him as he passed over the summit. He shot down the West Ridge, throttle wide, a hundred feet above the frozen stone.

The Grish spread behind him, two dropping as fast as him, the other four a wall of potential fire in case he should turn. The Game was on. The pursuers came one on top of the other. They closed quickly, typical Grish, no subtlety, systems stripped to the bare necessities for speed and agility, hardly noticing the wind.

*Gods large and small, they know how to manage power.*

When they nearly caught him, he danced left. A gap in the Southwest Face presented itself, and he took it, riding as closely as he dared, the wind harassing him mercilessly from his left. The onboard warned him as they executed a tight turn and came in, guns firing. The closest two of the larger net dropped, guns belching green bursts. He let the firing come tighter, just tighter, then throttled hard back and up, inverting himself, rolling over. His momentum and the wind snapped him around and away from the four tight on him.

The last pair drifted slowly down the ridge, covering for what they might have perceived as a quick kill. He caught the first with a shot through its dome, sending him spinning into the gap he'd just risen from. The explosion was a bright fireball against the dark rock. The other spun on its axis and fled toward the North Face. The Rake shunted power from the onboard to his engines and followed.

The Grish was still too fast. The other four closed quickly behind him. *Too fast. Damn.* He could not outrun them, could not chase them down—a fact he'd known from the beginning. *Lucky first kill.* He spun right, heading for the summit.

The Grish followed in a tight V-formation, the one he chased slipping quickly around and into form. *Hivemind.* What communications went on between them the Rake could only imagine. He hit the summit and spun,

the wind pushing him up and back, opening fire on the lead scudder. It blew apart and vanished in the strong wind.

Red and green bolts littered the snowscape around him, one glancing off his dome's right side, another across the top as he raced toward the south summit, two Grish in tight pursuit. He tried to swing left, but the wind off the Kangshung was too strong, slowed him too much. He veered back over the South Summit, the mountain falling steeply away below. Bolts glanced off his dome as he danced down with the wind, then swung sharply right up the face toward the summit again, the wind pushing and helping him the whole way. As the Grish slipped in behind, he spun quickly and opened four guns, feeling the power flee the engines as they fired. Another Grish scattered on the wind.

They chased him off the Southwest Face, warier now, setting up a three-point attack: one above, two at his sides. They closed like the wind, so much faster than him, saving their shots until they were right on him. As they opened fire, he dove for the ice canyons below.

The lower Grish moved in. The Rake made a choice, spun left and fired even as the other two Grish came straight at him, bolts crossing his dome. He took his target out a hundred yards away and bounced through the scattered debris.

The Grish behind fired, and hit.

The first cracked the plasteel and killed his momentum, spinning him out of control for a moment, slave to the wind. The second shattered the dome and exposed him to the elements. He fought for control and won, briefly, then lost, crashing into the snowpack.

*Lucky. Could have hit open rock.*

The Grish thumped by in an overhead pass but did not fire. The Rake shook his head to clear it. He ran a quick check: nothing broken, no systems down, no scudder damage. *Gods. Lucky.* He looked up, waiting for the Grish to make another pass, but could not see them. Were they giving him another chance? In his experience with them during the War, he had



never known them to be so generous. He took a chance, unjacked, and began to wrestle the scudder from the snow.

A few moments later, the mountain above him shook.

He looked up and found the Grish. They flew low along the West Ridge, two or three meters above the snowpack. They flew slowly, using the wind as he had, their engines turned to the wall. The reverberations from their engines made the snow slip, moving it down the Southwest Face in a graceful way that belied its power. The avalanche gained speed and power, and the mountain itself seemed to be shaking.

*No time.* He forced his way onto the half-buried scudder and fired the engines. Buried in the snow, submerged and cold, they came to life reluctantly. *No time.* He rejackd and maxed the throttle. The scudder shook but could not break free. *Gods, no time!* Above him, it seemed the mountain had broken in half. The avalanche crested like a mad wave, a breaker a hundred meters high. Its vibration should have been enough to break him free. Watching it fall toward him, he thought it beautiful—a *beautiful death.*

Then he thought of Keller.

He fired the rear guns. The snow turned to slush, and the scudder sank. Throttle full on, he fired again, then again, until the snow that held him vaporized and the engines spat him free. He sped with the wind in a steep vertical climb, through a wall of diaphanous white cotton. The sun on the flurries was so intense he had to close his eyes.

It was like fleeing the cold heart of a star.

He let anger warm him. *Bastards.* This was no way to play the Game. You killed your opponent with your guns, outright—you blasted him apart in the sky, or let him drown in the lake or slash his skillless self in the forest—in short, talented or not, you let him have a rider's death. Buried in a grave of snow—no.

The wind stayed brutal, tearing at him as he sped up the Lhotse Face, working a long curl up the South Col and Balcony to the summit. The

Grish came up the West Ridge in perfect tandem.

*See you at the summit.*

He allowed himself a moment to look over Terra's largest mountain, a long look, like he'd had on training runs. The roof of the world, they said, the world he'd always known as home—and was now ready to leave. Awesome, the mountain, majestic, truly, the harsh dark stone softened by the gentle whiteness that took away some of the edge of its frightening countenance. Uninviting, truly, but in a raw, basic way. Beautiful, as he thought Mars might be, stripped of everything but the essentials. *Clean*. He understood how it enraptured Terrans over history. Maybe the same might be possible in the red canyons of Mars.

A red bolt an inch from his facemask punched him from his reverie. He opened fire on the left, ignoring the right, and felt satisfaction as his opponent dispersed into fiery pieces just above the summit, settling where so few human feet touched. The last Grish hit him twice as he passed. Power disappeared. He spun left in desperation, letting the wind lift him over the summit, then went into deadfall.

The onboard screamed code in his ears and eyes, running it faster than he could process. *Damn*. He cycled the engines but they refused to fire—two direct hits fried them. He could barely keep the scudder from spinning wildly as they fell. *Can't end like this—so close!* The onboard howled. He tried to shut it down, but something had snapped. His own code, failing him like NewTech, falling with him.

Like a pearl breaking against shareware, an idea blossomed in his mind. He laughed aloud. *Madness*. But one died one way or another.

He scrambled nav code through the onboard. To fall from Everest took a long time, and the Grish circled him, in no rush to finish him, content to pace him and let him fall to his doom. *Hiveminds*. Who knew how they worked? *This one, alone now*. Maybe the same that tried to bury him in snow.

Nav code hit his brain in a blitz, choppy in places but clear where he needed it. He sifted through the static, searching. He smiled. He shifted

slightly to his left, testing an updraft, then opened fire with what was left of his rear guns. The Grish, pacing closely, dodged the fire easily. But the Rake angled left, left, drifting, checking his nav and letting the Grish pace him.

Then he jumped.

He caught the Image disk with one hand. His momentum and the wind kicked the disk sideways, nearly throwing him free, but he held on. The disk's thrusters kicked in and stabilized. His left hand squeezed his fingers numb while his right dug for his blaster.

Rare for a Game to go to ground. Most ended in the air, but some ended with scudders and riders on the floor. The Rake fought through two of those, both crashes into the lake. The Game was played to the death, scudder or no, and someone had to win. War taught him to be prepared for anything—one time, ages ago, worlds ago, he fired a blaster from a domeless, weaponless scudder, and lived.

And there were other times and reasons, less spoken of, when a blaster might be handy.

*But not today.*

Whatever the last Grish thought had happened, it was unprepared to take fire from a human hanging from an Image disk. The scudder made a long, slow pass around the NewTech camera. The Rake didn't even let it have time to express anything in its many orbs—at that point, it was a mind of one.

*Here's a close-up for you,* he thought, and fired.

**K**eller attacked him as he stepped off the shuttle. Pelk was there, too, waving. Everyone else wisely remained within the shelter, waiting their turn at him. Both looked cold and uncomfortable, though the wind fell with the twilight. The Rake shook Pelk's gloved hand as Keller peppered him with kisses.

“You fool. I've given my heart to a madman.”

“Madman no more.”

“Mmm. Mad enough to be rich,” Pelk said, and hustled them back to the shelter. A hundred voices shouted the Rake’s name, but Pelk pressed them up against the wall as the door sealed behind them. The cold vanished, and warmth moved across them. “What will you do with all that money, cher?”

“What are you going to do?”

“Spend it, of course!”

“A wise course of action.”

Pelk raised his eyebrows. “And you?”

“I’m buying Mars.”

“Cher, be serious.”

“What makes you think I’m not serious?”

Pelk smiled and extended a hand. “Mmm, my Rake. If you’re ever in Barcelona.”

The Rake shook it heartily. “If you’re ever on Mars.”

Pelk snorted. “See you in the next life, then, cher,” and smiling, moved into the crowd.

“The next life,” the Rake said, ruminating. “I feel like I’m in the next life.”

“You are,” Keller said, embracing him again. She was warm and smelled of fresh living things. Her lips dry from the cold. He closed his eyes as they kissed and saw red: a planet like burnished stone, crimson as far as his gaze would go—canyons, cliffs, hills, dunes, and dust. He could taste it on his tongue: red dust. The taste of freedom, like Keller’s kiss.

And she held him tight, whispered in his ear, “*We* are.”

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*William Huggins lives, works, writes, and explores the desert southwest with his wife, daughter, and three rescue dogs. He's outside too much when he should be writing. His short fiction and critical essays have appeared in multiple media, and his first book Ghosts will be released in October, 2019.*



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# **The Burning Fish**

**By JIM BREYFOGLE**

*Seeking out the Burning Fish for a client, Mangos and Kat instead find a strange cult of folk devoted to a simple life—who would kill before giving up their secrets!*

*Ten months after the fall of Alness.*

“This isn’t the Burning Fish we need,” Kat said.

“I know that!” Mangos retorted as he tried to push the fish off the hot stone. Smoke curled up, and the fish turned blacker and blacker. Finally, he drew his sword, slipped it under the fish, and flipped it onto a wooden plate.

Kat stood next to him, looking down at their burnt dinner. “I’d rather not be poisoned on this quest.”

“If the worst thing that happens is our lunch, I’ll be happy,” Mangos said. But he laughed; there was nothing else he could do. “I turn my back for a minute...” He shook his head. Kat had been tending the mule that carried their gear and the special barrel that would let them transport a Burning Fish once they found one.

Baron Endelhorn wanted a Burning Fish because it was his family’s crest, and he was willing to pay very generously for one. The true Burning Fish would burst into flames when it leapt from the water only to be extinguished when it fell back in. It was, Mangos had always thought, legendary, but after rummaging through old records in the ruins of Terzol, Kat said they might be able to find one.

“I thought I would save time,” Mangos gestured to the well-stoked fire, prodding the plate with his foot. He would have to be starving before he tried to eat that fish.

“It was said the right sized fish would cook itself perfectly if it wasn’t returned to the water,” Kat said.

“Then the fish could cook itself better than I can cook it.” He sighed. “How much further to the lake?”

Kat shot him a look that seemed to say, *if you learned to read, you would know this for yourself.*

Mangos threw dirt over the fire and took up the mule's halter. The journey was easy—plentiful fish and game, and pleasant shade under the forest canopy. It was almost like being paid for a pleasure trip.

Best to enjoy things while they were good.

Yellow flowers dotted the forest floor. They looked like little suns, globes of tightly bunched petals just starting to open. Their sweet smell tickled his nose and made the forest seem cheerful.

Presently he caught a glimpse of the lake far ahead, sunlight sparkling off its surface. They emerged from the trees on the east shore. The lake was half a mile across, and something more than that in length. They were closer to the south end of the lake than the north.

Grey stone buildings clustered at the north end, an enduring reminder of the former power and reach of Terzol. Vines crawled over half the buildings, and empty darkness gaped through their windows and doors. The rest had been cleared of growth and fitted with shutters and doors of rough-hewn wood to keep out the weather.

Made small by the distance, people moved around the buildings and on the beach. A few used large baskets to fish while others worked on the beach.

Mangos shaded his eyes, trying to see more clearly. "There are people here."

"People?" Kat came up behind him. "What kind of people? The only people in these mountains are hunters."

"Just people."

"They're not from the Terzol valley, and it looks like they're fishing for food, not trade."

"They must be crazy. This is nowhere. Go to Alomar, people," he growled. "You can *buy* fish in Alomar."

"Not Burning Fish," Kat remarked, her tone thoughtful.



An old man sat on the sandy beach, watching the fishers. Another man sat next to him, weaving a fishing basket. Several more people moved around, some carrying wood or fresh cut rushes. They all stopped working as Mangos and Kat approached.

“Are you pilgrims?” one of the fishing women asked. She was only a year or two older than Mangos, brown hair bleached by the sun, wearing a tunic that came to her knees, the bottom inch wet from the waves.

*Pilgrims?* Mangos wondered. “No,” he said.

“Who are you?” Kat asked the group.

They turned to the old man to answer. He bowed his head in respectful greeting before saying, “We serve Tournalan, the goddess of the lake.”

There was a stone table with a roughly carved wooden fish on it halfway up the beach. *That’s a pretty poor altar*, Mangos thought. Did they expect pilgrims for that?

“Tournalan?” Kat raised an eyebrow. She appeared thoughtful. “You are far from civilization.”

“We are. Yet the goddess is here, so here we serve.”

“We won’t bother you,” assured Mangos. “We’ll just get what we need and leave you to your goddess.”

“What do you need?”

“A Burning Fish.”

The crowd murmured and an angry, wordless grumble came from many throats. The old man’s eyes widened a fraction, he glanced at his followers, and licked his lips. “The Burning Fish are sacred to Tournalan,” he said. “You may not disturb them.”

“The Terzoli served them for dinner,” Kat remarked. She jerked her head around to encompass the village. Mangos wondered if these people even knew the origin of the buildings.

“And look what happened to Terzol,” the old man retorted.

“You think there’s a connection?” Kat asked.

The old man took his gaze from the buildings and turned it on her. “Yes.”

“You eat fish,” Mangos protested, pointing at the women fishing.

“Not the goddess’s sacred fish,” the old man replied.

“It’s fortunate nobody wants to eat one,” Kat said. “The earl wants one because it’s the symbol of his family. It would be honored.”

The woman who first spoke opened her mouth, her expression angry. The old man forestalled her by shaking his head and saying, “No.”

The man weaving fish traps reached for a rusty sword lying beside him. “Darnow,” the old man said. “That isn’t necessary. They have traveled a long way. They may rest here before returning home.”

Darnow glanced at the women in the water before drawing back his hand. He didn’t say anything but still glared.

“Tournalan has given us more than we need.” The old man gestured at the stone buildings. “You are welcome to use one.” He looked coy as he said, “Maybe you’d like to learn more of our goddess.”

**M**angos ducked his head as he entered the small building. The thick slates forming the roof remained solid, successfully protecting the massive timbers that supported them. The heavy cut stones of the walls remained straight and true. Leaves gathered in the corners, but somebody had swept most of them out so it looked like autumn on the ground outside. An old blanket hung over the door.

“I don’t think he’s letting us stay from any feeling of charity,” Mangos said. “He just wants to keep an eye on us.”

“There are four people who matter,” Kat said with a nod. “The High Priest, of course, and the old woman who sat next to him. She didn’t

talk, but she also didn't work, so she has some influence. The girl who was fishing in the water—she wants to be the new leader, you can tell by how she acts. The man weaving fish traps is the other. I don't know how smart he is, but he's clearly willing to fight. The rest are sheep.”

Mangos scratched the back of his neck. “I'm willing to bet any of them could get a Burning Fish pretty easily. Maybe somebody will quietly sell us one.”

“Can't hurt to try,” Kat said. “Except the trap weaver is a fighter. A tough and dirty fighter, if I had to guess.”

Mangos thought of the villagers. The High Priest was Barnor, and though he tried to hide it, his left leg was horribly scarred. The woman who stayed near him was Saralyn. The young woman was Danielse. As Kat said, Darnow was a scarred fighter, younger than Barnor, but still older and more experienced than Mangos. There were more who kept to the back. Barely individuals, together they gave strength to Barnor's refusal.

“There's a stream flowing from the east side of the lake,” Kat noted. “It might be a good place to trap fish.”

“I'll try to get a Burning Fish the easy way.”

“Cooking it?”

Mangos laughed. “Getting one from those who know best.”

*I'll start with these two,* Mangos thought.

Saralyn crouched at the water's edge, washing reeds.

Danielse carried a bundle of yellow flowers to the altar. Bowing her head, she arranged them around the fish carving. Dropping to her knees, she bowed her head again before brushing the sand smooth.

She rose and came to the edge of the water, humming a tune that wandered like a lost adventurer—going nowhere, but happy about it. She

sat, putting her feet in the lake, and began to braid the flowers in her hair.

Saralyn frowned at her but didn't say anything. Danielse kept braiding while the older woman worked.

"Have you seen a Burning Fish?" Mangos asked.

"They're beautiful," Danielse said. "They leap high out of the water and burst into blue flame." She sighed, enraptured by her memory. "So lovely. The goddess favors me," she added.

Saralyn rolled her eyes. "So you keep reminding us."

"You saw one?" Mangos prompted.

"My first day," Danielse replied. Her smile was vacant, as if the past was still before her. "The spring rains had flooded my family's farm and drowned my parents. I tried to reach town, but I got turned around avoiding the floods and wandered until I ended up here. The goddess welcomed me with the sight of Burning Fish." She blinked herself back to the present and returned to braiding the flowers into her hair.

*She's not going to give us one,* Mangos thought. *The Fish are too holy.* He turned to Saralyn. "Have you seen one?"

Saralyn pursed her lips. "No."

"She cleaned the High Priest's house for years without the goddess revealing her sacred text," Danielse said.

"Don't sound so smug." Saralyn glared. "You can't read it. Nobody can."

"A text?" Mangos felt he was in the middle of an old argument and didn't know half the terms.

"A worthless old book," Saralyn spat.

"A sacred book," Danielse insisted. "It's written in the goddess's sacred script."

“So you claim!” Sarilyn retorted. “By the goddess, your foolishness makes me ill!”

“You,” Mangos hesitated to suggest, “could leave?”

“Leave? Where would I go? Beyond fishing, I have no woodcraft. Besides, except for *her*, it’s not so bad. Quiet. And I have a certain influence with Barnor.” She smiled a prim smile at Danielse.

“What she means is she’s a slave and can’t leave,” Danielse said.

Saralyn gasped. “It doesn’t matter here,” she snapped. “My life is no different from anybody else’s.”

Danielse smirked.

“*You* could leave,” Saralyn said. Her tone betrayed her eagerness.

Danielse looked incredulous. “Go out in the world? Serve a baron or an earl? Why? Here I serve a *goddess!*”

*This isn’t helping,* Mangos thought. *Danielse won’t give a Fish, and it’s clear Saralyn never leaves the village.*

At the edge of the trees, Darnow lurked. He caught Mangos’s eye and motioned him over. Mangos gladly excused himself and trudged up the beach.

Darnow looked around. “How much will you pay for one?” he whispered.

Mangos looked up. Darnow could only be talking about a Burning Fish. *How much would we pay for one?* Mangos wondered. Better yet, *does he truly have one to sell?* It seemed too easy.

Darnow drew him closer, as a conspirator would. Mangos could smell smoke and sweat and rotting teeth. “How much?” Darnow repeated.

“You have one to sell?” Mangos asked.

Darnow scratched behind an ear, drew his hand down and pulled at his upper lip. “Course I have.”

“And you’re willing to sell the goddess’s sacred fish?”

Darnow turned his head and spat in the sand. “If your gold is good.”

*He doesn’t think much of the goddess, Mangos thought. But he thinks a lot of that fish.* He wondered why Darnow needed gold. He couldn’t spend it here. “You think a fish is worth gold?”

“You think a fish is worth coming all the way out here.” Darnow smiled, showing not just his rotting teeth but several gaps. “Think about it.” He stood, evidently having noticed Danielse fishing, and puffed out his chest before walking away.

“So,” said Kat.

Mangos jumped, spun, and glared. He hadn’t known she was sitting on the other side of the tree.

“Darnow is planning on leaving sometime,” she continued. “And my guess is he wants to take Danielse with him.” She snorted, a sound of skepticism. “He’ll need luck and a new set of teeth for that.”

“But he can get us a fish,” Mangos mused.

“Can he? He might sell us a fish, or he might murder us in our sleep. I wouldn’t bet either way.”

**T**hey told each other what they had discovered. Kat went first, telling him there would be no fish in the outflow stream. The water level was too low.

Mangos told her of Saralyn and Danielse’s argument, and she agreed there was little more to be gained there, though the book interested her.

“And,” she said, “we need to talk to Barnor. Alone would be best.”

They didn’t get a chance until late afternoon when the beach was empty and Barnor was limping alone to the altar. He took out a rag and began to wipe the top.

“I’d like to talk to you about the goddess,” Kat said quietly.

Barnor looked at her from the sides of his eyes then glanced over at Mangos. He repositioned his scarred leg to make it more comfortable. “Talk.”

“Tourlan was a prostitute in Denoit, famous because she could—” Kat cleared her throat. “Never mind why she was famous. She might still be alive, but she’d be old, and certainly not a goddess. Also, the Terzoli harvested Burning Fish for generations and never mentioned deities. Strange that one should suddenly settle in now.”

*Ha, Mangos thought, the whole thing is a sham.*

“I spent my whole life in these mountains,” Barnor said. “When I was a lad, a few old men hunted here, but they died, and I was the only one. I got tired of it, lonely if you will. I was starting to look for something else when I ruined my leg.” He slapped his scarred leg. “Hard to go anywhere then, worse now.”

“Live somewhere else,” Mangos said.

Barnor shook his head. “Maybe you would, maybe you bend to the world, but I bend the world to me. I knew about this village, of course, and of the Burning Fish.”

Kat leaned back, smiling. She nodded. She must have guessed Barnor’s story.

Barnor wadded up the rag and resumed wiping off the top of the altar. Mangos suddenly realized this was not really an altar, just a stone table once used for cleaning fish. It had a groove around the edge and a hole in one end to wash down the scales and offal. He couldn’t suppress a snort of amusement, wondering how many of the goddess’s sacred fish had been cleaned on her altar.

“So,” Barnor said, continuing his story, “I made up the story of Tourlan, the goddess of the lake. I became High Priest and went out to recruit acolytes.” He grinned, eyes twinkling. “The original Tourlan was something of a goddess, too, at least when I was a young man.”

“And people fell for it,” Mangos said, half a statement, half a question, for it seemed incredible, yet there they were.

Barnor snorted and smiled like a boy caught in a clever lie. “I had to buy my first follower because nobody would join. After that it was easier.”

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem for us to take a fish,” Mangos said.

Barnor shook his head. “The High Priest loses face if he gives away the goddess’s sacred fish.”

“Nobody need know,” said Kat.

“You still can’t have one,” Barnor shook his head again, “because there aren’t any left.”

The water lay flat, untroubled by wind or wave. A faint mist hovered over the surface. A large bird, a heron, glided down, wings not moving, coasting on the air until it nearly touched the water. It dropped its legs, flapped, and came to a stop standing in the center of concentric circles that rushed away from it. Further away, a fish jumped. A normal fish.

According to Barnor, it was four years since any there had seen a Burning Fish, and Mangos believed him. After confessing to making up the religion, Barnor had nothing to gain by lying about the fish.

*How could Darnow sell us a Burning Fish if there aren’t any? Mangos wondered as he leaned on the windowsill. Dusk was fast approaching. What does he know?*

Kat came into the building, walked right to the lamp and sat beside it. She pulled a medium-sized book from under her cloak and opened it.

“You stole the goddess’s book!” Mangos exclaimed.

“Quiet,” Kat whispered forcefully. “I’m pretty sure the goddess can’t hear you, but let’s not take our chances with the others.”



“Nobody can read the book,” Mangos reminded her.

“That,” Kat said, “is because they can’t read Terzoli.”

Mangos blinked, caught off guard. “Terzoli?”

“This is just a Terzoli log book. I told you they served Burning Fish at the Emperor’s banquets and they built this village to supply the fish.” She ran her finger down the first page.

“But—” Mangos started.

“It’s the same thing we’re doing,” Kat explained. “They just had a system to do it regularly.” She fell silent as she read. After a minute, she said, “And to ensure a predictable supply of fish.”

“Well, it’d be embarrassing if the Emperor didn’t have Burning Fish to eat.”

“And therefore unacceptable.” Kat turned the page, grimaced. “Some fool didn’t mix the ink right. Look at this,” she pointed half way down the page, where the words seemed to vanish. “It’s so faded you can’t read it.” She flipped several more pages until coming to one with writing. “Ah, better. New ink, mixed properly this time.”

“There is another lake,” she said after studying the page for a moment. She looked over toward the window. “It must be on the west side because it flows into this one.”

Mangos went to the window and looked west, where the mountains were further from the shore, looking for a break in the trees. He couldn’t see anything in the dusk, so he turned his attention back to the book on the table.

Kat turned the page and groaned. “They let that idiot make ink again.” She started to flip pages. Nothing.

“What can it tell us?” Mangos asked.

“Not enough. There was something important about the other lake. There were no Burning Fish in it, but the Terzoli did something,

something they felt would allow them to control the harvest of Burning Fish.”

“And?” Mangos prompted.

“And they ran out of ink. Finished the entry in a new batch, and it faded to nothing.”

Mangos found a break in the trees in a small cove. A shelf of rock sloped down to the lake. There was a hole in its flat surface about forty feet from shore. A pile of wilted flowers and a small cup of water sat next to the hole.

“Home of the goddess, I expect,” Mangos murmured as he surveyed the offering.

He could see the upper lake while standing next to the hole. Its surface was three or four feet higher than the lower lake, the water held back by a natural dam of stone packed with branches and leaves, held in place by grass and small shrubs.

Mangos walked up the shelf of grey slate. Water trickled over the dam, making a river an inch deep and narrow enough to step over. The river vanished into the “goddess’s home.”

The Burning Fish never appeared in the upper lake, yet the Terzoli fish keepers felt the lake important, and required great care.

He climbed onto the dam.

The upper lake was deep. He didn’t want to judge, knowing how water could distort distances, but it was at least ten feet deep near the sides, and in the center the bottom plunged out of sight.

Curious.

He just didn’t know why it was curious.

He walked off the dam, brushed his feet through the leaves on the forest floor. He wasn’t good at puzzles. Adventures were supposed to be

about fighting and drinking and treasures and pleasant company.

He sighed. What was the connection between the upper and lower lakes? A pittance of a stream too small for fish.

But there were no Burning Fish.

Maybe, Mangos thought, there are no fish because there is no connection.

Walking back onto the dam, he realized he had only thought it natural. Under all the grass and dirt, the stones had been fitted together.

Curious.

He crouched down, pulled up some grass, and ran his hand over the mortared stones. There was no doubt. Should he get Kat?

He jumped off the dam and walked down to the goddess's home. Cool air and darkness rose from it. He could hear water dripping. Home of the goddess or work of the Terzoli? He crouched down to see better.

The wind stirred. Mangos felt it on his back. It blew through the forest and brought with it the smell of flowers.

Something very hard struck him on the back of his head, and he pitched into the hole.

Mangos opened his eyes. A dozen halos of light danced above him, slowly revolving down to one. The light felt painful. He shivered. He was cold. His muscles felt tight and his head pounded, but nothing worse. Lucky.

He sat up and felt water run from his hair, heard it drip. He was sitting in three inches of water on another slate shelf. Luckily, he had been lying face up, or he would have drowned.

He reached up and touched his head. His hand came away wet, but not bloody. Lucky again. A man had no right to expect such luck.

He was at the end of a cavern, the area around him lit by the hole above, the rest melding to darkness to his left. Water fell through the sunlight, like diamonds into darkness to splash beside him as mere water again.

A few feet away the rock shelf ended, the pool suddenly dark, and Mangos had no idea how deep it might be.

Branches and bones wedged in the rock wall showed the water had been higher in the past. Some sort of plant grew from cracks in the wall. It looked like kelp, with long vines and narrow leaves, and it trailed in the water.

As his eyes adjusted, he could see the further walls. Walls, he realized, that separated him from the two lakes on either side. He hoped they were thick.

A large fish swam up and nibbled a trailing plant. After a few bites, it swam away, but there were dozens more, appearing and disappearing in the dark water.

Mangos picked up a plant; it felt warm to his touch. He rolled it between his fingers, crushing the leaves. Heat flared on his fingertips.

There was a splash. Mangos saw a twinkle of light out of the corner of his eye. When he turned his head, all he saw were small waves rushing from where a fish had jumped.

Then another. The fish hung over the water, longer than he would have suspected, and he saw it clearly illuminated by blue flames. Then it splashed back into the pool, and the flames vanished.

*Burning Fish!* He scrambled to his feet.

The fish darted away, but he didn't care. He had found them!

His stomach growled. He didn't worry about starving, though. Not with all the fish around just waiting to cook themselves. He was more concerned with getting out. He had no idea how.

The hole was twenty-five feet up, high enough that he considered himself lucky not to have been injured when falling, but far too high to reach. The ceiling overhung the walls. He might climb the walls, but he couldn't stretch far enough to reach the hole.

He gave up trying and searched for some way to catch a fish. A shadow fell on the floor. Mangos looked up.

Kat leaned over the opening, her hair hanging down.

"Get me out!" Mangos called. "I found the Burning Fish." He told her of the fish, and the plants, and the inability to climb out.

A rope snaked down and splashed in the water. "Why did you climb down if you can't get back out?"

Mangos grabbed the rope and pulled himself up. "I didn't." He tilted his head as if she could see the bruise through his hair. "Somebody knocked me in."

That wiped the grin from her face. "Who?"

"I didn't see them."

Kat turned toward the village, as if she could tell Mangos' attacker just by looking. "Did they think the fall would kill you, or that I wouldn't be able to find you?"

"I don't know," Mangos replied. "They likely believed the fall would kill me."

"Then it's decision time," Kat said. Mangos looked at her in surprise. "We can grab a couple fish and take them to the Baron. Or we find who attacked you and sink them in the lake."

"That one." Mangos rubbed his head meaningfully. "We can get the fish afterwards."

Kat nodded.

Mangos felt, and heard, his stomach rumble again.

With a laugh, Kat dug into her pack and pulled out a small loaf of bread and some fish. “I got some dried fish from the village.” She held up the food, but seemed distracted, perhaps her mind on the attack.

Mangos reached for the bread. Kat gave it to him and took the fish for herself.

“To the fish,” Mangos toasted. They saluted each other with the food and took a bite.

Kat swallowed. She looked into the cavern. “Let’s assume it’s a combination of a particular type of fish eating the special plants that only grow in the cavern.”

“If the cavern floods, some of the fish can escape,” Mangos said. “Maybe without the dam it’s always flooded.”

Kat nodded. “That makes sense. And if the fish swim freely in the lake, they eat other things besides the right plant. By keeping the fish in the cavern, the Terzoi made it easy for themselves.”

Mangos waved aside the conversation. “I only want two things,” he said. “Find whoever pushed me and get a Burning Fish back to the Baron.”

“If we can’t figure who pushed you, I’m inclined to take the fish and leave.” Kat grinned, her expression feral. “Or we can kill them all.”

Suddenly she gagged, swallowed and gagged again. Her eyes went wide, and she stared in horror at the fish in her hand. She threw it out into the lake and immediately began to cough.

“What’s wrong?” Mangos asked.

She could not answer, she was coughing too hard, looking to be on the verge of throwing up. She doubled over, clutching at her stomach.

Mangos didn’t know what to do; something was very wrong. “Poison?” he asked, dropping his bread.

She nodded her head in jerky motions, slumped over, struggling to breathe.

“What can I do?”

Kat gagged and coughed. A trickle of blood leaked from the corner of her mouth.

Mangos scooped her up, lifted her over his shoulder. He started to walk, then jog, then run back to the village as Kat’s coughing eased and she went limp.

“Don’t die,” he told her, “don’t die.”

Barnor was sitting next to the lake with the others gathered around him when Mangos reached the village.

“What happened?” Barnor asked.

Danielse and Darnow craned their heads, looking curious, then alarmed. “What bit her?” Darnow asked.

“Nothing bit her, she’s been poisoned,” Mangos said. “Help her!”

“Poisoned?” Saralyn leaned over to examine Kat. “She knows better than to eat unknown berries and roots.”

“Somebody gave her poisoned fish. Somebody here.”

Mangos slid Kat off his shoulder, set her down, and laid her back. Her skin felt cold. Her face was white, giving the streak of blood a ghastly appearance. Her eyes were closed, but her eyelids spasmed.

“Help her!” Mangos commanded. It felt like Kat was slipping away and nobody felt any urgency. “If she dies, I’ll kill everybody here.”

Darnow glared, clapped his hand to his sword and stepped forward, the stink of him filling the air. But Mangos eagerly reached for his own sword. It might not save Kat, but killing Darnow would be doing *something*.

“Draw that sword, and I’ll turn the altar back to its original purpose,” Mangos growled. “But it’s you I’ll fillet.”

“Please,” Saralyn interjected. “It’s not that easy.” She shook her head. “I don’t know antidotes.” She looked at the others.

“I do,” Barnor said. “But I need to know what she ate.”

Mangos glared at the small crowd. The poisoner knew what they used. Who was it?

Barnor? He was a liar and a fraud. If they took a Burning Fish after he denied them one, it would make him look weak. He could be pretending not to know.

What of Darnow? He could be angry they wouldn’t pay him and afraid they would reveal his attempt to sell a fish.

Saralyn? Maybe she feared the group would disband if Barnor were to look weak. She could have done it without Barnor knowing about it.

Kat convulsed, then lay still. She would die soon.

Any of them could have poisoned her.

It would be the same person that knocked him into the cavern, he realized. They didn’t expect Kat to find him because they thought she would be dead.

A breeze stirred the smell of fish and ash and fresh cut pine, and another smell he recognized...

“What did you use to poison Kat?” Mangos demanded.

Danielse shrank back. “Nothing! What makes you think I did anything?”

“Anybody could have poisoned Kat,” he said, “but you’re the one who knocked me into the pit.” He curled his lip in contempt. “Barnor cannot walk that far. Saralyn doesn’t leave the village—and Darnow? I’d have smelled Darnow. Instead, I smelled flowers.”



Danielse clutched at her hair, let her hand drop, pulling one of the flowers with it. She lifted her chin. “You will not steal Tournalan’s sacred fish.”

“Damn the fish! What poison did you use? If she dies, you die.”

“Then I will be a martyr for the goddess.”

Mangos grabbed the flower from her and brandished it at Barnor. “She uses these for everything. Are they poisonous?”

“Yes.”

Danielse glared, and Mangos knew it was true. “Can you cure Kat?” he asked.

Barnor nodded. “I think so. Aanerberry juice should do it.”

“Let her die!” shrieked Danielse. “She would defame the goddess! Tell them,” she implored Barnor. “Tell them it is true.”

“I—I,” Barnor faltered.

Mangos sheathed his sword. “Don’t waste my time, and don’t waste Kat’s.”

“**S**he’s coming around.” Mangos nodded to Saralyn, who came to sit next to Kat. The old woman readied a glass of water.

Kat opened her eyes. She seemed dazed as she looked around. She focused on Mangos and said, “There’s something I need to do.”

Saralyn gave her the water. “Drink. You need to drink.”

“No,” said Kat, “that’s not it.”

“You need to feel better. It will take some time,” Saralyn said.

“What will make me feel better won’t take long at all,” Kat answered, pushing herself up. She wobbled a little and didn’t look any steadier as

she made her way to the door. She put her hand on the frame and paused, breathing heavily.

“You need to rest. The poison damaged your stomach.”

Kat ignored her. “You’ll want to come,” she told Mangos. “She tried to kill you too.”

Mangos nodded, he did want to come, but he opened his mouth to protest. He meant to say Kat should rest, but the look in her eyes and his own desire for revenge changed his mind. “I don’t know where she is.”

“What are you going to do?” Saralyn sounded both fearful and resigned.

Kat again ignored her. She walked to the beach, slowly, clearly concentrating on her movement. Barnor sat on the sand. He didn’t say anything, nor did he try to stop her.

Danielse was not on the beach or in the water.

Kat brushed the wilted flowers off the altar as she walked toward the water’s edge and around the west shore of the lake.

“Where’s Darnow?” she asked.

“Gone,” called Barnor from behind them.

“I wonder what he took,” Kat said, but kept walking.

Realizing she headed toward the “goddess’s home,” Mangos moved ahead of her. His heart beat faster as he neared, expecting to see Danielse kneeling beside the hole in the rock.

It was empty except for a scattering of yellow flowers.

“She’s not here,” he said as Kat approached. He looked down. Something caught his eye.

He crouched at the hole and stuck his head down, waiting a second for his eyes to adjust. Danielse lay, face down, in the shallow water. Jumped,

fell, or pushed; drowned or broken, Mangos couldn't tell, but she was clearly dead.

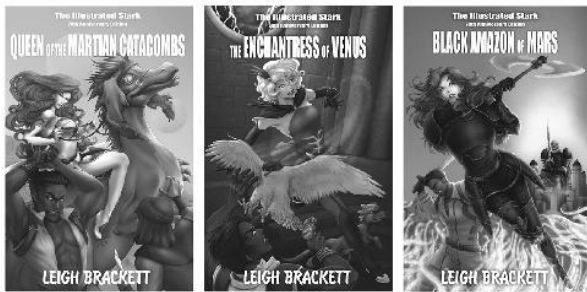
He straightened up and motioned to Kat. She came over to look.

“She found refuge in the arms of the goddess,” Kat said. “One way or another.”

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*Jim Breyfogle currently resides in Pennsylvania. When he isn't writing he is gathering an army of terra-cotta warriors with which to aggravate his English Mastiff—thus far, the dog still wins.*

## **CIRSOVA PRESENTS™**



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# **For I Have Felt a Fire in the Head**

**By ADRIAN SIMMONS**

*Irish prince Maenach MacScannal faces the hordes of the Danes  
on the bloody fields of mag sé liathdaimh, armed with his faith  
and his blade, Takes-The-Hand!*

*I have met a fifth Enlightened man in my travels—a simple Ainu carpenter near the northern border. He felt that he was one of the animal-man gods, and would have run wild and done foolish things had he not heard of the Buddha, and realized the matter of his awaking. I wonder how ignorant barbarians grapple with the lightning strike of Enlightenment?*

*-From Yako no Mitasuki to Empress Shōtoku, 7<sup>th</sup> Century, Nara, Japan*

The arrows of the Danes littered mag sé liathdaimh, littered the bodies of Leinstermen dead upon the field, and another deadly cloud of them shadowed the sky.

“Again!” Prince Maenach MacScannal shouted. “Down! Down!” He crouched like a toad in the mud, sunken to the earth, his fine wicker and hide shield held up to the coming storm. The arrows thumped and thudded into the ground around him, crashed against the stones of the field, crashed into his shield. Christian men screamed as they were hit, just as before. How many was it? Over a dozen volleys, a dozen cowardly blows from the Danes. Doubly so, as the Leinstermen’s few archers had exhausted their few arrows long before.

Arrows thumped and clattered as the air cleared of the cruel darts. The pagans began a great chanting and screaming, and above it Maenach MacScannal could hear the hiss of swords being drawn and the thud of ax and spear on shield.

A careful look around the iron rim of his shield: the Danes were moving, marching across mag sé liathdaimh; shields locked in a tight fence and blades glinting in the high afternoon sun.

Shouts grew from the Leinstermen, rough voices exulting to be at the invaders at last. Prince Maenach MacScannal added his own voice to them. “Up! Up!” He stood, loosening Takes-the-Hand from its scabbard and taking up a javelin. His bodyguard rose about him, those that could still rise; cries of war on their lips, ragged shields in their hands and straight eager spears in their grips.

“Up!” he shouted again and began to run, to be the foam on this wave of Christendom against these pagan invaders. “For St. Brigid and Christ! Let Lugh’s spear shine on our land and pierce those who would take it!”

Around him, men of Eire charged, a great pell-mell mass following a dozen kings, princes and saints. Charged the resolute line of the shieldwall.

He ran with his folk, good strong men of Ráth clochneamh. Ran upon the face of Danu, while Lugh watched from the sky and Christ watched from beyond that. Another pattering of arrows slithered into the air, another iron-tip tore through his shield, protruding a hand’s-length. Javelins arced across the narrowing distance, his own lost among the rest. His ears rang with the heavy thump and crush of spears piercing the ground, shields, and men. The wall of shields grew gaps like broken teeth as Danes faltered and fell.

“There!” Maenach MacScannal yelled, drawing and pointing with Takes-the-Hand, where the providence of Christ had caused one Dane to fall and trip the man beside him. His guard turned in their charge, and with the crash of drums and thunder, the wave of the Scotts met the wall of the Danes. Spears pressed a deadly hedge, shields pushed like bulls, and Maenach MacScannal pushed back.

All was chaos and disorder on mag sé liathdaimh. Maenach MacScannal stumbled, his legs weak, and Takes-the-Hand again met the thick haft of the Dane’s beard-ax. Again the Dane rammed at him, pushing him back with that great wooden roundshield. Maenach MacScannal floundered back, and on a burning arm hefted his blade for a blow to the Dane’s great blond head. Again, the Dane’s roundshield came up, as slow and agonizing as Takes-the-Hand fell; but still enough to catch the sword’s edge.

Then the great oaken shield dropped, the Dane stepping sideways, and Maenach MacScannal stumbled forward. The Dane, too tired to even grin at his trick, gripped the ax in two hands and swung upward at

Maenach's gut. The ragged wicker shield met the blow, and for a long moment Maenach MacScannal dared to hope that the ax was caught in the weave, but the Dane pulled back so fiercely that the battered device slipped from Maenach MacScannal's sweaty grip.

Then all was a blur as the man swung the ax again and again, and each time, by the grace of Christ and the luck of goddess Candida, Maenach MacScannal dodged it, or managed to get Takes-the-hand where it could parry the deadly arc.

There was no help, mag sé liathdaimh crowded with fighting, men fought in knots, men fought singly. His bodyguard, what remained of it, had been separated from him, but still stood as a tough clot against the Danes. Through that net he saw two more pagans slip, eager to cross the distance to be at him.

Maenach managed a swing that drove the Dane back, and then a stab that might have pierced a skin of milk but could not match the man's thick quilted vest.

Then, far away, he felt his left foot catch on something—stone or a body he didn't know—and like the gap between lightning and thunder, he felt himself begin to fall, as helpless against it as if being swept away by the foaming Aughrim River. Prince Maenach MacScannal faltered and fell, landing hard on his back, sprawled against the stones of mag sé liathdaimh.

He struggled to lift Takes-the-Hand, but the sword seemed as heavy as a cow, and he realized that the Dane stood upon the flat of the blade. He realized that the dull, notched beard-ax that lifted into the sky had yet to spill Irish blood today, but that its fast would soon end. He realized that his shield arm would come up too slow to do anything to avert it. And yes, he would put his bare sword arm in front of that deadly edge if he but could. But he could not, he did not have the strength, or the time, or the luck.

An eternal moment as the ax fell, an eternal second to realize that the ax was perfect, its nicks and notches were destined, that the sky was

perfect and that Lugh and Christ were in their heavens as ordained, and the mag sé liathdaimh was the bosom of Danu to receive him and that the stars hidden behind the blue tapestry of the sky were perfect. A timeless realization that all of it, the Dane, the ax, the body of Danu, and the veil of the sky, were of him, as much as were his skin and his tongue. His blood was no longer thunder, he was Thunder, he was the Moon in all her phases, and the fire of Brigid, and he was going to die, and he felt only a great awe and gratitude. Christ was his mercy, and Lugh was his spirit, and the grip he held on Prince Maenach MacScannal was his foolishness, and the heart-rending tales of the poets were the dung that was spread on the field exactly where it belonged.

And exactly as it belonged, that dull grey perfect blade slid off the end of the haft, and flew laughing across mag sé liathdaimh, and the blow that should have dashed out his brains instead cracked hard onto his helmet.

Like a man unfurling his sail to catch the wind, like a man swimming downstream in Aughrim River, it was as perfect as it was easy. An easy swing, like swatting away a fly, and he grabbed the ax haft and pulled, and the already off-balance Dane fumbled and fell like he'd been kicked by a horse, sprawling into the churned skin of mag sé liathdaimh.

Maenach MacScannal MakDanu found his feet, turned to meet the two Danes who'd slipped through his scattered guard. He was still tired, his limbs leaden, but it did not matter, his strength came from the earth, as surely and sturdy as the great stones of chocdonn dolmen. One Dane tried that small trick of ramming him down with his roundshield but Maenach MacScannal, with two little steps like one of his serving women, eased aside from it, and the man hurtled past in a blur of hair and chain and wool.

The other skidded to a halt, lifting his shield, hefting and swinging another perfect beard-ax. Maenach MacScannal squatted, again a toad happy on the soil. As the blade whistled overhead, he hooked his fingers around the iron rim of the shield and lifted, like passing one of the puppies of his fine racing hound up to his mother, and the far edge of the



shield crunched into the Dane's jaw. And Takes-the-Hand, as quick and unstoppable as the spear of Lugh, licked against the man's side, entering him like water into a pail.

The Dane fell, and Maenach turned to face his companion. The Dane had swung around, like a leather hulled curragh, floundering against the tide, dragging his great heavy shield up and drawing his great heavy sword back.

And sure as a fish darting under a stone, Takes-the-Hand slid forward, kissed the edge of the shield and drove itself into the man's fear-wide eye.

Two Danes in seconds. Maenach MacScannal had heard of men who fell into a great passion in battle, had seen the frothing bear-shirts of the Danes, but this, what he did, was nothing like that. He, Maenach MacScannal, barely *did* anything at all. Barely *was* anything at all! That great wind came through him, that was all.

Up from the ground struggled the first Dane, still gripping his headless ax, his face pale at the sight of the two dead pagans. He reached for the dying prince's sword, and Maenach MacScannal's foot crashed hard into his chest, bowling him back down to the stony ground. The Dane looked up, saw his doom on Takes-the-Hand's dripping edge. Saw he was too tired, too slow to even lift his bruised and battered arms as a sacrifice to slow it.

Maenach MacScannal reached like a child to touch a bull's flank, like the Christ breaking the bread, and Takes-the-Hand turned and the flat of the sword slapped the man's neck.

What happened next, Maenach MacScannal could not follow. That great wind, the course of the raging river that flew within him, was gone, replaced only with exhaustion, with the weight of the two dead men, the screams and clangor of battle, and the smell of mud and shit—surely some of it his own.

Three of his bodyguard ran, exhausted, to his side, and one leveled his spear at the stunned Dane.

“No!” Maenach MacScannal said, putting his hand on the sweat-slick shaft. “Not him!”

The Scott gasped; gawped at his prince, but did not argue.

In moments the horrors of mag sé liathdaimh swept over them again, and in moments more Prince Maenach MacScannal had no idea where his nameless Dane had gone, but he prayed quietly, to whom or what he knew not, that the man survived. That someday they might meet again and talk of this day.

---

*Adrian Simmons is a Norman, Oklahoma, based reader and writer. His essays, reviews, and interviews have appeared in Internet Review of Science Fiction, Revolution Science Fiction, and Black Gate magazine. His short fiction has popped up in Allegory Ezine, Strange Constellations, Apotheosis, and here and there at Heroic Fantasy Quarterly.*

# **La Molejera**

**By MARIE BRENNAN**

*An anthropologist seeks to solve the mystery of Chalchihuitlan's "grinding woman." What's her significance? What is it that she grinds? For what does she wait?!*

I hear the sound well before I reach the end of the path, an awful, rocky, percussive scraping that makes my teeth hurt. They say she's at it all day, every day; if it weren't for the charity of the village, the old woman would have starved long ago. She's not grinding corn in that metate of hers, and she won't be making any tortillas from the meal.

The path to her hut on the hill is overgrown and treacherous, and I keep an eye out for snakes. Hardly anyone comes this way, except the feather-boy, and his trips to bring her food aren't enough to make much of an impression on the lianas and ferns that threaten to choke the way off completely. I make my way through an oppressive green tunnel, sweating my bug spray off already even though it's barely ten a.m., and there's a corner of my mind wondering if I can make use of this moment when I write my ethnography. Wretched experiences, adding color to anthropological writing, for the use of. It helps me be philosophical about the mosquitos.

The tunnel of green finally opens up, and I emerge into a blaze of sunlight that makes my eyes water. I think at first that the movement I see is just from the tears, but as my vision steadies, I see snakes slithering off into the undergrowth. Fer-de-lances. I carefully swallow my heart, which has migrated up to my mouth. Why would a woman who's terrified of snakes choose to do research in a snake-infested region of Veracruz? All in the name of science, I suppose.

The old woman does not look up as I try to convince myself it's safe to move. Her wrinkled, bony hands grip the grinding stone, the mano, driving it forward, back, forward, back, and the awful scraping sound is even worse up close. It vibrates in the marrow of my bones. I force myself to take a step toward her, hoping that moving will help relieve the tension; it doesn't, but now I've committed myself, and have to keep going even though I want to turn and bolt back down the path.

She still doesn't look up. The villagers say she doesn't stop for anything except the feather-boy's visits, though how they know that when it seems like none of them ever come up here, I don't know. I can't even ask anyone. I'm pretty sure they don't want me visiting her.

The mano scrapes along, crushing bits of stone beneath it. Looks like limestone to me, pale against the darker basalt of the metate. I wonder if there's any way for me to get a sample of it. Where does she get the stone, anyway? Does the feather-boy bring it to her? And what does she do with all the powder she creates?

I can't ask the people of the village, and I can't ask her, either. I open my mouth to do it, to say hello, introduce myself, get a conversation going that will allow me to work around to the thousand questions I have, and nothing comes out. The woman grinds away, stone on stone, ignoring me as if I weren't there. I've found La Molejera, and now I don't know what to do with myself.

After an eternity of awkward silence, I mouth an apology I can't quite voice and back away down the trail, wondering how big a mistake I've just made.

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*Cultural Research Foundation Grant Proposal*

*Anita Muñoz, University of California at Los Angeles*

*Indigenous Religious Practices Among the Nahuatl Indians of Veracruz*

. . . the technological changes brought to the Huasteca region of Veracruz, as driven by a variety of government initiatives, in combination with social changes such as the recent influx of Protestant missionaries, have combined to decrease observance of the older *religi3n de costumbres* (the "religion of customs"). In many Nahuatl villages, no new individuals have been trained as shamans, so that the current elderly generation of practitioners will be the last . . .

. . . although many of the benefits the Nahuas (or Macehualli, as they prefer to be called) were formerly able to derive from their social position as

*Indians have faded in recent years, at least one small region of the Huasteca still maintains the indigenous religion to a remarkably high degree . . .*

*. . . the purpose of my project is to conduct anthropological research in the village of Chalchihuitlan and examine the question of why the indigenous religion is maintained there when other villages have decreased their practice of it or abandoned it entirely. What combination of factors makes its perpetuation in Chalchihuitlan a productive social, political, or economic strategy for the Macehualli of that area? . . .*

\*\*\*

I couched it in suitably academic language when I wrote my grant proposal, but the truth is I went there because of my abuela. Because of her stories. My clearest memories of childhood involve sitting on our back porch, listening to her talk while her old, wrinkled hands ground corn in her metate. Mamá used to nag her about that, in the half-hearted way you do when the argument's been going on for decades, and you know you're not going to win. *You don't have to grind that by hand, you know; we could get you a machine, or you could just buy tortillas ready-made . . . .* Then Rosa would give her daughter a dirty look for having the temerity to suggest she not make her own tortillas.

I burned every tortilla I ever made, but I learned the stories. And then I traced them back to their source, to the village where she was born. Chalchihuitlan, "the place of jade," a place which hardly seemed to have changed one bit in all the years since my abuela left. When villages all over the Huasteca were giving up on their old rituals and beliefs, the people of her home were different. And I wanted to know why.

Coming here was the strangest experience of my life. I'd been communicating with the village's municipal agent don Alejandro for nearly a year by the time I showed up, arranging everything necessary for my fieldwork, but that had been by mail, messenger, and a single international phone call. Before I started my dissertation fieldwork, I hadn't set foot in Chalchihuitlan (or Chalchi, as I called it in the privacy

of my head, where only the memory of my abuela could glare at me for chopping it short). I showed up expecting to be a stranger, and in most ways, I was—more mexicana than india, more chicana than mexicana. But I was *their* stranger.

Don Alejandro's wife Magdalena took me around Chalchi like I was some kind of exotic animal on parade, introducing me to one woman after another while the men were out working in the milpas, planting and tending the corn. At every house, we went through the dance again, explaining who I was, establishing me in the intricate web of relationships that makes up Chalchi. Anita Muñoz the anthropologist was a poor second to the granddaughter of Rosa Martínez, among these people. *María Elena's grandfather Pedro, doña Magdalena would say, you remember, who lived at the bend in the arroyo, he had a coyotl compadre in Tuxpan—*Compadre, not a simple friend as the dictionary would translate it, but a ritual relative, and a corner of my mind was taking notes on fictive kinship and its role in rural Macehualli life. Not the subject of my research, but you pay attention to everything in the field, as much as you can, until your head overflows. *And when the man Pedro's sister Rosa was going to marry died, his compadre gave her a job in Santa Angelina so she could earn some money, and would you believe it, they fell in love and got married.* And then the *really* strange part of the story, about how one of Rosa's daughters married another coyotl—around me, people mostly avoided calling him a mestizo, the offensive name for a non-Indian—and they emigrated to the States, to Texas, and when Rosa was widowed, she went to live with her daughter. Her daughter, not her youngest son, the way it would be done here. But Rosa had no sons.

At every house, I smiled nervously and said hello, excruciatingly aware, for the first time in my life, of how I spoke Spanish like an American, and how I spoke Nahuatl like a fumble-tongued grad student. And they smiled back and didn't comment on it, because they are more polite than that. Research was getting off to a swimming start.

Then I stepped on my first fieldwork land mine, in the form of seven-year-old Pepe Rodríguez.

He was helping his mother hang laundry when we showed up, me tagging along at doña Magdalena's heels like one of the dogs that wander all around the village. Small talk lasts forever among these people, endless rounds of commentary on casual subjects before we get to anything of substance, but we were only a little way into it when Pepe's mother ushered him forward and said with obvious pride, "This is my son. He's the feather-boy."

I misstepped. I'd read books on the Macehualli, and I'd dealt with my abuela, but she'd lost many of her native ways and books don't prepare you for real live people. I forgot to be indirect, I forgot to respect the pace of the conversation, and I jumped on that word like a starving anthropologist. "Feather-boy? What's that? Is it some kind of ritual position?"

The boy's mother smiled in a way I remembered my abuela doing when the situation turned awkward. "Go ask the shaman."

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*(excerpt from Chalchihuitlan field notes, undated)*

*Idiom translation guide:*

*"What does your heart say?" = How are you?*

*"To put down flowers" = to hold a ritual*

*"Go ask the shaman" = I'm not going to tell you, so please stop asking questions*

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I had my choice of shamans to ask; that was one of the things that made this place so unusual. But just because Chalchi boasted more than half a dozen shamans didn't mean I could just stroll up and start



asking them things. They were very good at gently dodging questions they didn't want to answer. Which made me impatient, so I pressed harder, and then they shut down more, because I was being pushy and aggressive like a mestiza, or worse, a gringa. They were half-willing to accept me because of my abuela, but not when I acted like this. I had to slow down, learn to be indirect, and chew on the trees in frustration only when I was alone.

It paid off. María Francisca, a seventy-two-year-old shaman who got around in the forest as nimbly as a monkey while I blundered heavily in her wake, finally let me come to a curing ritual. I kept my mouth shut and watched as she burned copal and waved brushes of leaves and chanted and tore up paper images of the wind spirits causing the illness, and then afterward we talked. And this time, I was indirect. In fact, I wasn't even thinking about the feather-boy. That, I was rapidly learning, was the way of fieldwork: you get your most useful information when you're not looking for it.

"She's very young," María Francisca was saying of her helper, eleven-year-old Catalina. "Some say too young. But it takes a long time to learn to be a shaman, to teach someone, and I'm old. I don't have much time left." She cackled cheerfully, sounding not at all old.

"Has she been helping you long?" I asked.

"Less than a year. But she's always helped in the rituals, the way a lot of the children do. Like in the winter, when we bring *tonantsij* out. You missed that one, but we'll show you next time. The children help in other ways, too. They gather things for us that we need in our rituals, or little Pepe Rodríguez, the feather-boy, he takes food to La Molejera."

I almost swallowed my tongue.

Instead, I swallowed the eight thousand questions that tried to leap past my lips and offered a tentative statement, hoping to nudge the conversation forward. "I remember my abuela telling stories about her. That she's always grinding stone, doesn't stop for anything."

“Except for the feather-boy. Yes. I’m not surprised your abuela remembered; she would not forget La Molejera.”

“I thought she was an old woman, though,” I said casually. “Even when my grandmother was young. She’s still around?”

But my attempt at delicacy failed. The shaman’s face closed up. “Oh, yes. We feed her well. But she doesn’t like visitors.” And the conversation ended.

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*(excerpt from Chalchihuitlan field notes, 6/21)*

*M.F. mentioned Pepe/feather-boy thing in context of RITUAL, of RELIGION. La M’s some kind of religious thing? Abuela said she was old DECADES ago. How can she still be alive? World’s oldest woman? Or always a La M, and they replace her when old one dies?*

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I have to assume people know I’ve gone to see La Molejera. Or do they? If no one visits her except the feather-boy, little Pepe, then they’ll only know if she’s told Pepe, and if he’s told someone else. Or if they saw me climbing the narrow path up her hill. But I don’t think they know, because no one’s said anything to me.

So of course I go back.

The green tunnel closes in on me again, and I wonder why I’m doing this. Is it good fieldwork? Not when they’ve made it clear they don’t want me prying into this old woman’s life. I can’t leave it alone, though. When I go to sleep, I hear her grinding stone, as if she keeps going all night, as if I can hear her through the thick forest that separates us.

I doubt going back will fix that, but I brave the snakes and go anyway.

She's in her usual place, hard at work. The Grinding One: that's what "La Molejera" means. Don't need to be a brilliant anthropologist to figure out where the name came from.

I wait for a while, as Macehualli often do when they arrive at someone's house, because they don't want to interrupt. She still doesn't look up, and I can't quite bring myself, in the face of her absolute disregard for my presence, to launch into the usual spiel about my great-uncle Pedro's mestizo compadre. But at least this time I find my voice.

"Good morning, grandmother," I say to her respectfully. It comes out in Nahuatl without me even thinking about it, and not because I'm afraid this woman doesn't speak Spanish. Most of the people of Chalchi know at least a little. No, I just can't imagine addressing this woman in some foreign European tongue. Her clothing is obviously hand-sewn, very traditional, covered in gorgeous but faded embroidery; she's sitting barefoot in front of a leaf-thatched house, working with *mano y metate*; this could be the fifteenth century, and I doubt there would be any difference.

Scrape, scrape, scrape, goes the *mano*.

"My name is Anita Muñoz," I say after a moment, when it has become obvious she's not going to return my greeting. "I'm a visitor to Chalchihuitlan. From the United States."

She continues to work, and I clench my teeth briefly against the unpleasant sound before I manage to go on. "I don't mean to disturb your work—" What a joke. She wouldn't stop grinding for anything less than the end of the world. "But I've been introduced to most of the people in this village, and I thought it would be rude not to greet you."

There are no piles of stone nearby for her to put into her *metate*, and no piles of powder from it. She *must* stop once in a while, then, to get more stone to work on, and dump the stuff she's done with. But I can't go prying into her house to find it. Forget anthropological ethics; I just can't imagine doing it. Somebody else's house, maybe. Not hers.

The silence stretches out until I can't take it anymore. Just being in her presence makes my hair stand on end, even in this heat. "I apologize for interrupting you," I say. "I'll leave you alone." And she takes as little notice of that as she does of anything else.

As I turn to leave a second time, flustered by my failure, dizzyed by the heat, for a moment my vision swims again, and the stone of her metate looks different. Not the darkness of basalt, but the green of jade.

Then I regain my balance, the stone goes back to normal, and I re-enter the forest tunnel, despairing of ever finding out who and what this ancient woman is.

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*(excerpt from Chalchihuitlan field notes, 8/7)*

*Collected Chicomexochitl stories today. Wasn't Chicomexochitl an Aztec god? Means "seven flowers." Connected with corn.*

*NOTE TO SELF: Lunch with Dr. Westerfeld next week. Go to office while in Tuxpan, change out books. Left too many books in town, brought wrong ones to village.*

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Fieldwork is supposed to be immersive; I felt like I was cheating when I made the trek to Tuxpan and found myself suddenly back in the mestizo world. After so long in the forest, where the biggest open spaces were the milpas crowded with growing corn, Tuxpan seemed gaspingly bare of trees. All around me voices were speaking Spanish, glorious Spanish, that I didn't have to struggle to understand; their regional accents were a cakewalk compared to the thicket of Nahuatl.

My relief at leaving Chalchi for a while was like a splash of cold water, reminding me of how much I *didn't* fit in there. Some of the villagers had

decided to accept me, but many still considered me nothing more than a pushy, meddling mestiza. I wasn't sure which attitude made me more uncomfortable—because I didn't know which way I felt, myself. Or which way I *wanted* to feel. I'm too much of an anthropologist to buy into the idea that blood wins out over culture, but at the same time, there was a part of me that wanted to belong, to lay claim to an identity as Macehualli, as one of them, by simple virtue of the fact that my abuela had been.

If Spanish was a pleasant surprise, English was an outright shock. I hadn't spoken the language in what felt like several lifetimes; hell, most of my notes were in Spanish or Nahuatl. When I met Dr. Westerfeld for lunch and she said, "Hi, Anita; how's your project going?" for a moment I could only gape at her as if she were speaking Klingon.

Her smile widened. "That good, huh? Have a seat."

Dr. Westerfeld wasn't my advisor; she was a UCLA archaeologist who happened to be working in the Huastecan region of Veracruz. Her dig was on the nearby Río Serpiente, so she'd offered to check in on me occasionally. I was pathetically grateful for the kindness. Even in these modern times, fieldwork was often a sink-or-swim experience, and my obsession with La Molejera and inability to learn anything about her had me afraid I was sinking. How many things had I failed to pay attention to, because I was thinking about her? How much damage might I do to my situation there, if they found out I had gone to see her? Doubt is an ever-present hobgoblin in the field, and I was tired of battling it. I wanted to pour all of my troubles out to Dr. Westerfeld, maybe cry a little in her lap. I wanted to call my advisor and beg *her* for help. I wanted to call mi mamá, and I would this afternoon, but she couldn't help me with this.

What I *really* wanted to do was talk to my abuela, but she was dead and gone.

As La Molejera, for some reason, was not.

I tried to put the old woman out of my mind. I made some noncommittal responses about my work in Chalchi, told a few stories about my language difficulties, got Dr. Westerfeld to laugh. I'd taken Classical Nahuatl in grad school, the only version of the language offered in a formal course; Dr. Westerfeld had been the one to teach me what she knew of the modern Hustequeño version of the language, so I wouldn't show up sounding like a refugee from the Aztec Empire.

"How's your dig going?" I asked her as the food finally arrived. "Any luck with Sister?"

Dr. Westerfeld nodded enthusiastically. "*Tons*. Bruce is still calling me every half hour, practically, checking in to make sure I haven't broken her or dropped her in the river, but we've been working her nonstop, and the results we're getting are fantastic."

The waiter must have understood English; I caught him giving her a startled look before he put his attention back on the dishes he was laying out. I swallowed a snicker. "Sister" was not a person; she was a machine, the Sub-Surface Imaging System, or SSIS. The brainchild of Dr. Westerfeld and Bruce Steinman, an engineer she was collaborating with at Caltech, SSIS was the latest innovation in remote sensing for archaeologists, making pictures of what was under the ground without digging it up first. She was also insanely expensive; from what I'd heard, Steinman had told Dr. Westerfeld she should let her whole crew die before she risked the slightest damage to Sister.

"Did some tests on structures, first," Dr. Westerfeld went on, oblivious to our waiter's reaction. He finished his work and left, casting one last glance back at her. "Now we've moved onto finer-grained testing—burials, in fact."

The way she said it clued me in that I was supposed to find this somehow important. I dragged my mind off its one-woman track and racked my memory. "Wait—I thought the practice back then was to cremate the dead, not bury them."

“It was,” Dr. Westerfeld said, and the grin she’d been trying to suppress broke over her face. “Which makes this all the more incredible. For that alone, the Río Serpiente project has justified its existence. And then on top of that, there’s something weird about the burials. Sister can’t *quite* make out the details—we’d still have to dig them up to do pathological examinations or anything on that scale—but they show evidence of a practice I’ve never heard of *anywhere* before.”

“What do you mean?”

“Removal of long bones, from every burial we’ve found.”

I didn’t know much about the time period Dr. Westerfeld was working with, although I needed to read up on it, as her research covered the time when the core ethnic group of the Aztec Empire, the ancestors of the Macehualli, migrated into lands originally held by the Huasteca. But I knew enough to find that odd. “*All* of the long bones?”

“No. A lot of the burials aren’t well preserved, unfortunately—that’s the tropics for you—but it looks like the femurs are gone. In juvenile burials as well as adult. There are traces of something where they should be; I want to excavate and see what they are. Looks like they might have had wooden posts put in place.”

I had a sudden, bizarre image of Aztec pirates. “Peg-legs?”

“In place of the *femurs*? With the lower leg still there? No, it has to have been done as some kind of funerary practice, after the person was already dead. Or at least that’s my theory. I’d have to excavate to know more; could just be they decayed badly for some reason, and all that’s left are bone stains Sister isn’t going to pick up. Maybe there was something placed over the upper legs that dissolved the bone.” Dr. Westerfeld shrugged and took a large bite out of a tamale, as if she talked about dead people over lunch every day. Which she probably did—archaeologists are like that. “It’s been known to happen. Look at bog bodies.”

I did not, in fact, want to look at bog bodies, whatever she meant by that. I was an anthropologist, not an archaeologist, because I preferred

my research subjects to be *alive*. “Why would they take the femurs out?”

“No idea. Like I said, I’ve never heard of this before, not anywhere. It’ll make a great research question for the future, though.”

We continued to chat about our respective projects as we ate. Later, when I went back to Chalchi, I regretted that; while it had been nice to run some of my thoughts by someone else, maybe I should have used the time to think about something *other* than my project for once. But by the time I thought of that, I’d missed my chance.

After lunch I called my family, chatted with them for a short time—too short, but they were busy, and I only had a limited time in Tuxpan. Then I went to the small room in the municipal building that had been loaned to me for the time being, and dug into my books.

I’d brought quite a few when I drove down from L.A., but most of them had stayed here in Tuxpan; it was just too difficult to haul them over the tortuous forest tracks that led to Chalchi. I’d written out a list of things I needed to look up in books I had foolishly decided to leave here, so I plugged in my little portable stereo that had also not made the trip and settled down to listen to music and do some reading.

I was right; Chicomexochitl *had* been an Aztec deity. I scribbled down a few notes on him, then paged idly through the book. No doubt when I went back over my field notes later I’d find more echoes lingering into modern times. For now, I just let my eyes glide over the pages. The previous “suns” or ages of the world. The creation of humans in this, the fifth sun, from the bones of the previous race. All the old gods, with their names full of snakes: Quetzalcoatl, Cihuacoatl, Coatlicue. Maybe Dr. Westerfeld had the right idea after all, studying dead people. At least they couldn’t make you feel like you were an idiot, but they were too polite to point it out when you said something wrong or burned yet another tortilla. Seriously, I was beginning to wonder if I’d been born without the tortilla-making gene or something.

But that led me back to my questions about who I was, to these people or to myself, and I’d had enough of those.



So I did my reading, and went out drinking that night, and woke up hungover just in time to slog through the forests back to Chalchi.

Back to the questions I could not answer, and could not leave alone.

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*(excerpt from Chalchihuitlan field notes, 8/16)*

*Feather-boys in other villages, too. ??? Old widows supported by youngest sons, or other family. Usually. Why multiple villages feeding one woman? Or do they have their own Las Molejeras to feed? . . .*

*. . . All other villages with feather-boys are daughter villages of Chalchi. Prob. carried tradition with when they split. But why? Not necessary; why is it that important?*

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In late August, I was allowed to observe a funeral. Not everyone wanted me there; the “Anita is not one of us” crowd argued against it in the meeting of elders, I later heard. But the family of the old man who had died was okay with me coming, and their voices won out.

The Macehualli take funerals very seriously; if they don’t treat the dead properly, they leave themselves open to all kinds of trouble from wind spirits and restless ghosts from *mictlan*, the underworld. They allowed me to come, but not to bring a camera or a tape recorder, so my experience of the event consisted of long stretches of time where I struggled to stay awake against the soporific effect produced by thick clouds of copal smoke and slow, droning music, punctuated by spates of mad scribbling when something finally happened and I had to try and write it all down.

The deceased was an old man who had been very ill for a long time; his relatives seemed torn between sadness and relief that he was out of pain.

It reminded me vividly of my own abuela's funeral, even though the surroundings were wildly different—the dark interior of the house, the copal incense, the marigolds laid on the body and twisted into a garland leading up to a roof-beam, forming a path for one piece of the multi-part Macehualli soul to find its way free of the flesh. Abuela Rosa, too, had been ill, and we'd been relieved for her sake, but I had cried for weeks. And now, in the darkness of the house, that feeling came back to me.

I tried to hold on to my tears, clinging to the myth of anthropological detachment, but as the hours wore on it grew harder and harder, and then another woman broke into a high-pitched keening, and I lost it. There in the corner where I'd stuffed myself out of the way, I broke down and cried again for my abuela, with the scent of copal filling my head. And this isn't the kind of thing you can ever write in a dissertation, can't even admit professionally, but for a short while there, I was one of them. Not an outsider. I keened along with the women, for my abuela as much as for the poor old dead man lying on the floor with a white cloth over his face, and I felt like I belonged.

The moment passed. I dried my tears, picked up my pen, wrote down the chant the prayer-leader read. The last hours of the night passed, and when morning came, we took the body to be buried.

I almost lost it in a different way then. Light-headed with the incense and the lack of food, the disorientation of a night spent in ritual, I was a little unsteady on my feet. They brought in the cedar coffin, drew a cross in the bottom with white ashes, laid cloth over it, followed by a set of women's clothes for the wife they expected the old man to find in *mictlan*. But when they lifted the body into the coffin, something about the way it moved was just *wrong*. As they wrapped the marigold garland around the body, the legs flopped loosely in their white pants, undignified and grotesque, and I almost threw up in my corner. I'd been there when my abuela passed, asleep in her bed, and I'd seen her in her coffin, but not moving between the two. Shouldn't rigor mortis keep him stiff? Or had that passed already?

I regained my composure while they placed objects in the coffin with the body, then trailed along in their wake as they carried the coffin out of the house and to the graveyard. There was a hole already prepared, and the men made quick work of setting up a wooden platform over the coffin after they lowered it, so no dirt would fall directly on the box. They filled in the grave, we set up a cross and hung it with yet more marigolds, and the funeral was over.

As mourners began to disperse, I saw Pepe Rodríguez among the assembled villagers. Not surprising; in the Macehualli way of things, it turned out that more than half of Chalchi was related to the old man in one way or another. Seeing Pepe, I had a sudden brainstorm, and contrived to drift over in his direction. I knew I should keep taking notes about the funeral, about what people did when the ceremony itself was over, but I didn't want to pass this chance up.

After all, nobody had more direct contact with La Molejera than the feather-boy. Who better to tell me about her than him? And children are easier to talk to, less close-mouthed than their parents.

All of them except this one, apparently.

Pepe shook his head when I came up, bypassing Macehualli indirection with all the straightforward, battering-ram charm of the young. "She told me not to talk to you."

I swallowed and revised my plan. "Doesn't your mother like me?"

"Not her," Pepe said, shifting to seven-year-old scorn at my blindness. "*Her.*"

The emphasis was unmistakable. "La Molejera spoke to you?"

For a moment, I thought I might be able to trick him into talking anyway. He caught himself at the last instant, though. "I'm not telling you anything. She'd be angry if I did." Quick as a snake, he ran away to join a small herd of other children.

I stared after him, feeling thwarted. It was such a good idea, too. Except that La Molejera apparently thought of it before I did.

Sighing, I gathered up the shreds of my anthropological discipline and went off to record the aftermath of the funeral.

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*(excerpt from Chalchihuitlan field notes, 9/1)*

*Tepecihuatl.*

*Didn't even hear it during the funeral; just scribbled it down. Only noticed it now. Hill-woman. Thought it was just random spirit, but HAS to refer to La M. Fits context of chant.*

*Not even the only place she's mentioned! In half the chants! Checked old notes, seeing her everywhere now. Tepecihuatl, tepecoatl, tecimaitl, tlaquiztlalcihuatl, lots of names. Obsession is justified. Must have noticed it unconsciously. SHE'S at the CENTER of their religion, their rituals. Subtle, but there. (I'm NOT crazy. Not imagining it.)*

*Can't give up on figuring her out, then. Too important to understanding why Chalchi's held onto the old ways. Betting now they DO replace La M when she dies, so they always have one. But why?*

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I climb the hill a third time, since no one has told me not to, and in fact the indirect hints that I should stay away have begun to die off. I feel as if everyone knows I'm pursuing this and is waiting to see what will happen.

I am, no doubt, imagining things, thanks to the stress and psychological weirdness of fieldwork. But that doesn't stop me from going.

At the top of the hill, I wait for the snakes to clear, trying to convince myself I'm less afraid of them than I used to be, and failing miserably.

When they're gone, I wait a while longer, for politeness' sake, while La Molejera grinds her stone into powder, before going and seating myself in front of her, but a small distance away. I'm getting used to the skin-crawling feel.

"What does your heart say, grandmother?" I ask her, remembering this time to say hello in the proper way. She doesn't answer me, and I don't expect her to. I just sit and wait, with the sun pounding down on my head and the sound of her grinding vibrating in my bones.

I can't be sure, since I didn't look that closely on my previous visits, but it looks like she's got more unground stone in her metate than before. Bad timing on my part, then, as it means I've missed her refreshing her stock; I may have to wait a while until she does it again. How long does it take to grind a metate full of stone? Longer than corn, no doubt. I just hope it won't take her all day. She's ignoring me, but she hasn't given even the faintest hint that I should leave, so I plan to just sit and observe. I'm not even taking notes. I won't have trouble remembering what I see.

The time creeps by. Under the scrape of the mano, I hear slitherings that are probably snakes, but I stay where I am. The awful sound of the grinding doesn't get any less awful, but I get accustomed to it in a way, lulled almost into a trance, and so I don't jump out of my skin when she finally speaks.

"You have patience."

I don't jump, but it takes me a moment to sort through her words. Her Nahuatl is hard to understand, although my time in Chalchi has gotten me to the point where I can usually cope with it. The words of my response rise slowly to my tongue. "I am learning patience."

Scrape, scrape, scrape. I wonder if that's going to be the extent of our conversation. Just when I've given up on more, she speaks again. "Have you brought food for me?"

I haven't, and I kick myself for not thinking of it. "I'm sorry, grandmother, but no."

More grinding silence. Her hands are old and wrinkled, but they look strong, hardened by who knows how many years of this work. I open my mouth to ask, then shut it. I've made more progress this time than ever before, and it hasn't been by babbling at her. I'll wait.

I think another hour passes. I can't be sure. The sun moves overhead, but in the blazing light and heat I can't really track it. I brought a small bottle of water; it's already gone. Heat exhaustion, here I come.

"For what do you wait?" she asks, and a small piece of stone cracks under her mano with the snap of a broken bone.

Information. Answers. Understanding.

"I don't know."

"Why wait without purpose?"

I have a purpose, yet I told the truth when I said I didn't know what it was. I risk asking her a question myself. "For what do *you* wait?"

"For the next one."

Next anthropologist? Next La Molejera? Next visit from the feather-boy? But we've lapsed back into silence again, and then the back of my neck prickles, and I look up to see doña Magdalena at the head of the path, her hands resting on the shoulders of little Pepe. He has no food with him, either; I notice this, irrationally, because I'm afraid doña Magdalena is going to be angry.

I murmur a farewell to La Molejera, who takes no notice, and go with doña Magdalena.

Pepe scoots off down the path ahead of us, mission apparently accomplished. I walk with the other woman in silence for a while. Compared to the silence of La Molejera's hilltop, this one is lightweight, breathable, *human*. In the shade of the trees, I blink and try to get my vision back.

"Now you understand," doña Magdalena says at last.

I don't understand a damn thing. I open my mouth to say so, look sideways at her, and swallow it. She's not angry, because she thinks I've learned whatever I was supposed to. Telling her I haven't may put us where I feared we would be.

"Yes," I tell her, and flinch at the lie.

She nods. "Good." And we walk the rest of the way in silence.

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*(excerpt from Chalchihuitlan field notes, 9/10)*

*I know why I had a hard time understanding her.*

*She wasn't speaking Huastecan Nahuatl.*

*She was speaking Classical.*

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The days after that drifted by in an ordinary routine of fieldwork. The various debates about me seemed to have faded out entirely; I was Macehualli now. Because I understood La Molejera.

Or so they thought.

I hoped for a while that I might be able to figure out what I had missed through conversation; now that they thought I understood, maybe they would talk about it in front of me. No such luck. La Molejera, apparently, was one of those things so fundamental to the culture that nobody *needed* to talk about her. Which made it all the more crucial that I understand what she meant to them, why she was there. And now I might have shot my only chance of doing so.

I turned to my data in the hope of finding a key there. I had reams of notes on rituals, and was gathering reams more. I remembered the days

when I first came to Chalchi, how long I'd had to wait before María Francisca let me come to that first curing ritual, and almost missed the free time; now, if I didn't show up for a ritual, more often than not they'd send a kid to fetch me.

It wasn't hard to spot the references to La Molejera in the chants for the rituals, now that I knew what to look for. But, in the usual way of ritual language, the chants didn't come out and say anything directly. She was the woman on the hill, the patient one, the one who worked. She waited. For what? Her hill was sacred—big surprise; half the landscape was sacred in one way or another. She didn't seem to be a shaman; the way the chants referred to her was the way they referred to spirits. But the definition of “spirit” was flexible.

Now I was more afraid than ever of doing something wrong. When I'd arrived in the village, I'd made all kinds of mistakes, but they'd been excused on the grounds that I was ignorant and an outsider. Now I was assumed to be neither, and that meant I had less leeway for screwing up.

I took notes, and observed, and lay awake long into the night, unable to sleep for the questions rattling endlessly through my mind.

Bad news came to the village one day. A young man named Luis had turned up dead—murdered. Rumor said he'd been killed by workers on a ranch that bordered Chalchi's territory; conflicts with ranchers were far from uncommon, as Macehualli and mexicanos competed for scarce land. The death of the old man in August had been expected, and in its way, a mercy. This was something different, and people feared it might lead to trouble.

Before anything could happen, though, Luis had to be buried, lest his spirit cause its own kind of trouble for the village.

I'd been at the old man's funeral, but only after the body was prepared and laid out in the house of his family. This time, Luis's little sister came around to ask me if I'd like to come see them prepare the body. My knee-jerk reaction was a visceral “hell, *no*”—funerals were bad enough—but I



looked at her solemn face, its usual smile gone, and I said yes. It was a generous gesture, and I didn't want to offend.

“Can you find your way?” she asked as we left the small house that had been given over to me. “I need to fetch Pepe, too.”

“Yes,” I said. The irregular geography of Chalchi had confused me when I first came, with houses tucked away in odd pockets of the forest, but I'd learned my way around by now.

She thanked me and trotted off, leaving me to go to her family's house alone. And only then did I notice what else she had said: that she needed to find Pepe.

I chewed on possible meanings for that as I automatically took the correct paths through the trees. Why Pepe? Children helped out on all kinds of things, yes, and not everything he did had to do with La Molejera—but was this really random chance?

A flash of light caught my eyes through the last screen of vegetation separating me from the house compound.

I stopped where I was on the path, looking at it, and had just enough time to identify it as sun glinting off the blade of the machete all adult men in Chalchi carried, before it sliced downward with a sound I'd heard before, on those rare occasions when villagers butchered animals for meat.

My feet carried me forward, one resisting step at a time, to the very edge of the trees.

Luis's body was stretched out on the ground, naked and bloody, and his elder brother had just finished cutting out his right thigh. As I watched, hands pressed to my mouth as if that would stop me being sick, the machete flashed again and cut off his left leg. A moment later, the left thigh was severed as well. The brother handed the pieces of meat to another man, a cousin one corner of my mind identified reflexively, who wrapped them in a thick piece of cloth and set them aside.

I sank to my knees on the path, just shy of the edge of the house compound, and watched through the curtain of leaves as they washed the blood from Luis's mutilated body and bandaged the remaining pieces of his legs. Then they dressed the body, pulling a shirt on against the resistance of the stiffening arms, buttoning it up, all with solemn, grieving faces, totally at odds with the violence they had committed against their kinsman's corpse.

Before they put trousers on what remained of his lower body, though, they brought out two pieces of wood, and put them in place of the missing femurs.

Just like Dr. Westerfeld had described.

My sudden wild speculations on continuity of funerary practices from ancient times to the present didn't have time to filter upward through my barely-suppressed urge to vomit. There was new movement up ahead; from another path to the compound, little Pepe Rodríguez, the feather-boy, darted into view.

The cousin put the bundle of butchered human flesh into his arms, and murmured something I could not hear.

I was moving before I knew it. Months in Chalchi had taught me all the paths, and the places that weren't quite paths but you could get through them if you really needed to; I knew how to move quickly.

And I knew where Pepe was going.

\*\*\*

*(excerpt from Chalchihuitlan field notes, 8/11)*

*Spanish term: chico de las plumas, feather-boy.*

*Nahuatl term: quetzalconej.*

*Quetzalcoatl = Feathered Snake*

\*\*\*

I slow when I see him on the path ahead of me, duck behind a tree in case he looks back. He doesn't. He's trotting up the hill with the heavy bundle in his arms, little face bright as he carries out his sacred duty.

I follow, at a distance, because I must see.

The snakes do not leave when Pepe arrives, nor when I conceal myself at the end of the path, but I have no eyes for them. All my attention is on the old woman, La Molejera, grinding away in her metate.

As Pepe approaches, she lays down her mano and the sound stops.

He sets the bundle on the ground in front of her and unwraps it. The smell of bloody meat fills the air.

La Molejera reaches out with her strong, wrinkled hands, and lifts the thigh of poor murdered Luis. As she opens her mouth, I see that her teeth are not an old woman's teeth. They are strong and white and sharp.

Nor is her eating a human eating. The meat vanishes too rapidly, gulped down in quick, tearing bites. She strips the bone clean, then starts on the other, and when she is done, the bones are white and dry.

And I see her for what she is.

She is taller, younger, fiercer. Her face is painted half red, half black, skull-like and staring beneath the pigment. On her arm is a shield decorated with eagle feathers. Serpents twine to form her skirt.

She takes the long bones and turns back to her metate. She places them in among the fragments and powder there, and strikes them with her mano. They crack with a dull sound. As she grips the mano and begins her work once more, my vision of her true face fades, and all I see is the old woman, La Molejera, grinding not stone, but bone.

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*(excerpt from the Leyenda de los Soles [The Legend of the Suns], trans. John Bierhorst)*

*[At the beginning of the fifth sun]*

*And then the gods talked to each other and said, "Who will there be?" . . .*

*. . . Then Quetzalcoatl went to the dead land, and when he came to the dead land lord, the dead land lady, he said to him, "I've come for the precious bones that you are keeping. I've come to get them."*

*Then he said, "To do what, Quetzalcoatl?"*

*And he answered him, "It's because the gods are sad. Who will there be on earth?" . . .*

*. . . Then he takes the precious bones. The male bones are in one pile, the female bones are in another pile. Then Quetzalcoatl takes them, wraps them up, and comes carrying them off. . . .*

*. . . Then he carried them to Tamoanchan. And when he had brought them, the one named Quilaztli, Cihuacoatl, ground them up. Then she put them into a jade bowl . . .*

*. . . Then they said, "Holy ones, humans, have been born."*

\*\*\*

**W**hat do I say now? Or do I say anything at all?

I know who and what La Molejera is. I know what she waits for. I've read the myth over and over again, going back to my office in Tuxpan, pleading illness as my reason for leaving Chalchi so abruptly. I said it was temporary, but I don't know if I can go back.

Do I react as an anthropologist would, and document this fascinating practice for all the world to gape over? Do I react as a mestiza would, and denounce the barbaric habits of the Indian peasants? Do I react as most Americans would, and refuse to believe that what I have seen is real?

Or do I react as the Macehualli would, as the people of Chalchi do?

I am not one of them. I will not live out my life in Chalchi, die there, and have my long bones cut from my body to feed La Molejera and provide material for her grinding. I will not be the dust from which the next race of people is made. But I have spent too long among the people of Chalchi to divide myself from them, either.

How do I write about what I have seen? Or do I write at all?

\*\*\*

*'The Place of Jade': Echoes of the Aztec Past in the Religion of Chalchihuitlan*

*by Anita Muñoz*

*Submitted to the faculty of the University of California at Los Angeles*

*in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree*

*Doctor of Philosophy*

*in the Department of Anthropology*

\*\*\*

I sit at my desk, day after day, staring at a picture of a statue of Cihuacoatl, and I can still hear her. Across two thousand intervening miles, I hear her, sitting on her hill in the forests of Veracruz, grinding

the bones of the human race, waiting for the end of this sun and the beginning of the next.

And I wonder how soon it will come.

---

*Marie Brennan is a former anthropologist and folklorist who shamelessly pillages her academic fields for material. She most recently misapplied her professors' hard work to Turning Darkness into Light, a sequel to the Hugo Award-nominated Victorian adventure series The Memoirs of Lady Trent; the first book of that series, A Natural History of Dragons, was nominated for a World Fantasy Award and won the Prix Imaginales for Best Translated Novel. She is also the author of the Varekai novellas, the Wilders urban fantasies, the Onyx Court historical fantasy series, and more than fifty short stories. For more information, visit [www.swantower.com](http://www.swantower.com) or her Patreon at [https://www.patreon.com/swan\\_tower](https://www.patreon.com/swan_tower).*



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# **Pale Moon's Bride**

**By VILLE MERILÄINEN**

*Her parents have been driven to madness, and her siblings are dead by their own hand—what unearthly curse has afflicted Amanda Corrine Dubois' family?!*

**M**y name is Amanda Corrine Dubois, and when I was small, I lived in a house of envy.

Since my youth, I was intimately acquainted with madness. Lithium and a string of lovers were my mother's way of coping with the emptiness my brother left in our home, whilst my father chose a more forward way of unhinging and spent his nights in the ballroom screaming. On those nights, my sister Iosephine sneaked into my room to tell me stories so I wouldn't have to hear him. Her stories are what I miss the most: They never ended unhappily, without hope. I've come to think this may have been her first sign of lunacy.

I often wondered whether my parents had two faces or if strangers inhabited my house. Whenever they held grand dances, from my parents' rooms emerged people who looked like them, but who wore smiles and spoke kindly to me. The songstress in a dress and tiara had none of the wine-dulled look I associated with my mother, nor were the brown tresses so much like mine ever sweaty from being touched by men too young for her. Her husband wrote plays and loved to laugh and entertain people. No one ever asked why his voice was always hoarse.

Watching these two strangers taught me how to hide myself in front of others. I was too small to remember my brother jumping to his death, but after Iosephine shot herself with our father's pistol, I found it easy to slip into a role and become a character to whom nothing bad had happened. This Corrine never cried with fear at night, because it wasn't her father raving donstairs, nor ever had to shudder when a man too young for her mother but much too old for her asked to come into her room. She was always happy and loved by all, especially her father, even though his smile was a little weaker now his twin had lost two of his three children.

I would have liked to invite in this other half of mine more often than I did, but she was a child of the singer and the playwright and could only live when the moon was bright and cold, when I watched snowflakes whorl outside my window and became the Corrine who was a charming young lady. Men with silver beards and women with silver bracelets all

thought someone with her grace should become a dancer, a ballerina maybe, and her parents adored the idea.

But, when no one looked, the other Corrine sometimes slunk away from the ball and I was myself again, a girl in a stuffy dress and shoes that hurt my feet, and I didn't feel graceful at all. I'd walk past the carts outside to the cliffs, along the tracks that looked like snakes, nothing but long tails and heads eating the lights of the town far below the perilous trails of the mountainside.

Whenever I stood there, amidst the firs and watching the vista over which my brother had flown, I always wondered whether I, too, should jump. I never much wanted to die—never quite understood the concept, despite burying two siblings before I was six—but I was always curious as to why Alexandre had felt he needed to escape our home. Certainly, it wasn't a warm one, but it couldn't have been so bad for him; Iosephine loved me and I loved her, and so I imagine she and he must've loved each other as well, even if our parents were poor at it.

I have not learned to understand death, but I have grown more vehement in my desire not to die. In late 1914, when I was nineteen, I left a dance to go watch the stars and the lights of the town, my home a temple of molten gold in the night behind me. The Great War was underway, but after the German advance was halted in Marne and Ypres, the naïve wish the war would not reach our mountain fastness saw to it we kept living as though nothing was happening. The nobility clung onto the old ways, uncaring of their uselessness in a changing world, and the common folk treated the horror stories of war with insouciance. I always felt there was an undertone of dread to the vehemence of both groups.

I sat on a rock near the ledge, far enough from home for the sounds of revelry to die away, and shivered despite the warmth of Iosephine's old coat. It occurred to me the stars were *too* bright, and one outshone even the great pale moon. Despite the intrusive thoughts the sight ahead evoked, coming here was supposed to be my haven. Now I was only perturbed and felt as though I was not alone.

When I held my breath to listen to the surrounding silence, I heard whispers in the dark around me. At first, I thought my dread was spurred from unwittingly having imposed myself amidst a tryst, but when I looked around, I found no source for the chatter. It was not so dark one could've hidden near an open precipice, but I rose anyhow and called, "Is someone there?"

The sounds did not cease, and as I listened, a malaise made me head back to the house. Whosever the voice, their language wasn't one I could recognise, though it clearly was one. The sounds were too complex for an animal to form, and though I understood none of it, I could tell they repeated phrases.

Halfway to the gates, I cast a look over my shoulder. For a passing moment, I thought I saw something silhouetted against the moon, but couldn't make sense of it. The strange shadow remained when I turned toward it, and as I watched unblinking, invisible fingers brushed my cheek.

"Ah! There you are," said my mother when I burst indoors. "I've been looking all over for you. There is someone you must meet." She scrunched her nose upon noticing I had changed out of the new dress, but didn't comment on it. Instead, she noticed my distraught demeanour and asked, "Have you been running?"

"Who is it?" I said, ignoring the question and trying to keep my breath steady. Her brows rose at the way my voice squeaked, and I cleared my throat before continuing. "Not another suitor, I hope."

"No, no," mother said absently. She glanced me up and down, then met my eyes and smiled. "An old friend, a patron of the arts. I told him of your paintings, and he's dying to see the gallery."

Though still shaken by the encounter with the moon's shadow, I put my practice to use and let the other Corrine shine through. A suggestion of warmth traced down my arm, as though her ghost held my hand and soothed me. "How lovely. I'd be delighted to show him."

“I thought you might be. Come, come! He’s busy talking with your father.”

Mother led me across a floor of lavish dresses flowing to the tunes of a string quartet, toward a group of men waxing philosophical at my father’s table. One looked our way, a man of perhaps sixty, with a robust frame, a full head of combed white hair and a thick moustache. He disengaged from the conversation to meet us, one hand behind his back and the other reached out for mine.

“Why, you must be Lady Corrine. I am Dr. Matthew Creed.”

I curtsied when he leaned to kiss my hand. His French was good, though I couldn’t help but smile at the American way he pronounced my name. “Our house has neither a name nor a title to it. Corrine will do.”

“Your father has sung your virtues all evening,” the doctor said. “A dancer, a violinist and a gifted painter, too? You sound like quite the renaissance woman.”

I thought of adding actress to the list but kept it to myself. “I’m afraid my feet are too tired to let you lead me onto the floor, but mother tells me you were more interested in the gallery anyhow.”

“So I am,” he said. “Would you show me the way? It has been such a while since I’ve last visited.”

I guided him upstairs, to one of the rooms that had lain unused until my works were so many there was no more space in my chamber. It was now my own private showcase, a set of windows into the workings of my mind. I never painted the natural; I was fascinated with the macabre, and so the doctor’s revelation he specialised in psychology made me reconsider showing him my phantasies. Even under the perfect maquillage of the other Corrine, I found myself fidgeting while the doctor inspected my works, silently, hands wrapped behind his back.

“Interesting,” he finally muttered, halfway through the collection. “Quite interesting, indeed. You have an able hand with the brush, my dear, and a fascinating soul.”

“I can attest to the first, sir,” I said, “but of the last I’m unsure. I doubt you can judge the quality of my soul from some pictures alone.”

“These are hardly ‘some pictures,’ Corrine. Your work is astounding.” He hemmed while moving between paintings and stopped by the last. “Is this how you see yourself?”

It was a self-portrait blended with the other Corrine, myself wearing a mask of me. I had painted my hair blonde instead of the chestnut tones I shared with my mother and sister, and the mask my avatar lifted from her face had blue eyes instead of my own wintry grey. It wasn’t how I saw *myself*, but felt like an apt representation of my other half. “I don’t care to explain my works, doctor. I’m sure you understand.”

“I certainly do,” he said. “I would love to hear you play the violin some time.”

I raised a brow at the change of subject. “Why is that?”

The doctor returned to the first painting, and for a moment, I thought he would start another round. Instead, he went to the window and said, “I firmly believe art exposes the soul of its creator. I see beauty in yours, but also sadness, isolation, and darkness. There is nary a piece with more than one subject, and the few where many appear have a funereal feel. Your brother and sister did not paint, but I found the same atmosphere in their music.”

“My brother and sister? Did you know them well?”

“Oh, yes. Until the war brought me back to Europe, I was away from the country for quite a while. I used to frequent here before I left. I suppose you were too young to remember.” He frowned, ruffled his moustache. “It’s a shame what became of them, a damn shame. Such talent gone to waste. Pardon my asking, but do you harbour suicidal thoughts? Looking at some of your thematic elements, I am led to wonder whether I should worry.”

I hesitated, and I think he noticed. There was the wish to leap when the dances went on for too long, but I wasn’t comfortable telling him

that. I balled my hands into fists behind my back, to summon the other Corrine's charm into my smile. "Good doctor, our views on art seem to differ. To me, this collection is nothing but escapism. Whatever you see, I assure you it is stuck on a canvas and out of my head."

He chortled. "I'm glad to hear that. You are a gift from above, Corrine. It devastates me your siblings let their lives go to waste, with the miracles they were."

"Sir, I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

The doctor turned from the paintings for a glance. "Hmm? Ah, never mind. I'm merely babbling."

The doctor said nothing further, and I was unsure of how to reply. When he was through the collection, he faced me and said, "Corrine, I notice a recurring element in the paintings. Would you offer a hint as to what this is?"

He gestured at one of my early works, of a man transforming into a wolf under a full moon. I stepped closer to see what he meant. My breath caught in my throat when I found a shadow over the moon.

"Corrine?" he asked.

I exhaled slowly, trying to look natural. "I'm afraid you'll have to decrypt it yourself."

"Ah, well. I would imagine it is a signature of sorts, given it appears in every painting."

I stared at the figure, little more than a blotch of ink, but somehow... telling, as though shapes emerged when I looked at it long enough. I thought I made out a mess of hair, a lithe body, though decidedly not humanoid. Then I blinked and it was gone, only a blotch again.

He was right. It was in all of them. If I hadn't kept the door locked, I'd have suspected one of the servants to have vandalised my works.

Then I noticed the alterations went deeper. Every character faced the shadow. It was more than the shape being added in their lines of sight; some had turned around completely.

“Corrine?” the doctor said again. “Are you all right? You’re hyperventilating.”

“Mm?” The sound came out a high-pitched squeak, and I realised the room was spinning. “Um, now you mention it, I do feel a little poorly. Would you mind if I excused myself for some rest?”

The doctor placed a hand on my forehead, felt my cheeks. “You do feel feverish. Lie down, and I’ll ask one of the servants to bring you hot tea.”

I fell asleep the instant I slipped under covers and woke up with a start. In the first moment of waking confusion, I thought no time had passed at all since I’d come up, but then I noticed the saucer and a cup of now-cold tea on the nightstand.

The moon hung low over the valley and turned the snow-laden firs beneath my window silvery. It shone brightly into my room when I got up, opened the glass doors to the balcony and stood there, shivering in my nightgown. Sweat turned into icy armour on my skin, made the fabric cling. The stars’ glow had waned with dawn’s approach, save for the one who seemed intent to remind the moon it was only a mirror to the sun and had no shine of its own.

I’d had a nightmare. Instead of mother catching me after father’s cry and the bang that followed, I walked into the study in his stead and witnessed Iosephine’s suicide. She looked at me, tearless, though I wept and pleaded with her not to do it. “Beware the pale moon, sweet Corrine. Beware that to which you are promised,” was all she said, and even now I was unsure whether I shivered from the cold or from the impassiveness of her tone before she painted the wall with her mind.

A crash and a scream startled me out of my trance. The yard was empty, and so father’s sciamachy was set to begin. I listened to his wrath, eyes closed until my eyelids began to sting with the onset of tears



in the cold. When I pried apart my lids and looked at my hands resting on the railing, I gasped and staggered back into the room.

I stood within an eclipse cast by a lunar pall. It looked like the invading element in the paintings, but now its edges undulated, as though its contour flowed on astral winds. I backed away until I stumbled and collapsed into my bed, eyes fixed on the shadow consuming the moon. My father still raged in the distance, and I staggered to my feet and closed the doors to block out his clamour.

When I pressed the glass doors together, someone stood on the balcony. The shadow had not grown; it had descended. It took my breath away, and with the sound of my shuddering gasps gone, I heard the whispers.

I recognised the phrases from before, but they were no more sensible now. I did not turn from the dark spirit to look for speakers, for I knew I would find none. It devoured my attention, yet I cannot detail what I saw save for the most cursory of descriptions—no matter how much I tried, I could not *understand* the entity before me. Despite the shroud it cast, the creature was morbidly thin, had a disturbing number of limbs with too many joints, and the distinct shape of a face within the veil of dusk. Of that face, I saw nothing more than the outlines of its features, and a spider-like set of eyes blacker than the shroud around them.

When I found the eyes, I felt it found mine as well. The sight sent me running out of the room.

I have always felt my home was much like my parents. It was beautiful to look at, but inside it was a tangled complex and, above all, empty. I ran through the gloom of the few candles and lamps to the care of none. My father may have shouted something, but I doubt he realised the voice was mine and not one in his head. For some primal, childish reason, I wanted to run to my mother but did not know which bedroom she had chosen tonight.

When I reached the foyer, I found enough clarity to stop myself from running outside, where the dark spirit would find me. For a while, I only

sat on the stairs, arms wrapped around my shoulders and listening to my father. He silenced the whispers, until I began to listen to him, really listen.

He repeated the same phrases as those immaterial throats, in viler tones. I cannot say whether he did it now for the first time or if, in my efforts to ignore him, it had eluded me all this while.

I gained my feet, raced upstairs, and locked myself in the gallery.

The oil lamp still burned with a low flame from when the doctor and I had been here. I went to sit by the window, to see if anyone was out there. The garden bathed in moonlight, but the only shadow there was the house's.

I thought the dark spirit stalked somewhere close by. The whispers still haunted me, like echoes of my father's madness. When I could not bear them any longer, I rose from my seat. I passed the self-portrait without thought at first, but then did a double take and found myself chilled.

The alterations were no longer subtle. Behind my avatar, where the backdrop before had been nothing but tones of black and blue and grey, the full moon formed a halo. The mask was gone from the picture, and my painted reflection stared straight at me with eyes of deepest dark. Shadows touched the hand that had held the mask, and when I looked closer, I found them having taken the form of fingers.

I blinked at the dim light playing tricks on my eyes, leaned closer to where the hues seemed to change. On my painted skin were darker drops of colour, and even as I looked, they stretched out into another hand to caress the shoulder. I shrieked and jumped back, spun and ran for the door. When I glanced out the window, I thought I saw the spirit watching me, but didn't care to look twice.

Leaning against the gallery door, heart pounding in my chest and father's mania ringing in my ears, I pleaded in my mind for the other Corrine's iron will to help me. She did not respond. I stayed in place for a time, forced my nerves to calm enough to think rationally, and found myself recounting Iosephine's words from the dream. I wondered if her

sudden demise was the fault of my hunter, and if it was also to blame for Alexandre's fall.

Doctor Creed told me he knew them. Could he have been more than a friend of the family and treated them?

Mother kept the addresses of all her contacts in a notebook downstairs, in a drawer under the telephone. I descended the stairs and the hallways, keeping my eyes fixed on the rug whenever I had to pass a window. I saw no reason to hide—if the spirit wanted to find me, I was certain it would. I had never felt particularly safe in my home, but more than the intruder, the lack of the other Corrine's presence made my skin crawl.

Once downstairs, I riffled through the notebook with shivering fingers until I found the doctor's details. His latest address was in Congo, but his prior notes, now crossed over, were still legible. Beside the address in town was a phone number. I hoped it was still in use, and that mother had simply not had time to update the notebook following his return.

To my relief, the doctor answered with a yawn and a half-grumpy, half-drowsy, "To whom am I speaking?" in English.

"Doctor Creed? This is Corrine Dubois. Pardon the late call, but there is something I must know."

Both lesser emotions present in his tone gave way for concern. The sudden language shift thickened his accent, but he recovered as the conversation went on. "Corrine? Are you all right? What is that racket?"

"Nothing, nothing. Father is acting out the climax of his new play. You know how it is, when inspiration strikes."

"I see." I thought he sounded unconvinced. "What's the matter?"

"I wanted to ask you about my siblings. When you said you frequented here, was it because they were your patients?"

"My dear, could this not wait until morning? I will visit first thing—"

“I’m terribly sorry, but it cannot.”

“Why is that?”

I tried my best to piece together an excuse, but I was at loss for words, even false ones. Eventually, the doctor sighed over our silence and said, “I ought not to discuss confidential matters, but I must admit our meeting today left me worried. This shall be our secret, you hear?”

“Absolutely.”

“I did treat them, yes, to no great success. By the time your parents introduced me to Alexandre, he was catatonic. I only had the chance to meet him twice before his passing.

“Your sister was not in a state as dire when I began treating her, though I recall feeling oddly uncomfortable near her.” He sounded as if he was about to add something, but cut himself off. I took it as a hint his worry for me may have stemmed from similar discomfort.

He cleared his throat. “She suffered from severe insomnia brought on by recurring nightmares, but other than that seemed fine. As our sessions progressed, I caught hints of something more being off.”

“Like she was putting on airs to keep you from worrying?” I asked, quieter than I’d meant. I heard the doctor grunting softly.

“Yes, Corrine,” he said after a pause. “How did you guess?”

“Mother must’ve mentioned it sometime.”

“Hmm. In any case, after what happened to your brother, I suspected Iosephine was exhibiting early signs of schizophrenia, and attempted hypnosis to coax her to tell me more of her nightmares. She claimed a strange creature visited her nightly and that she heard its voice whenever she was alone in a dark place, confirming my fears. When I asked her if she could hear them during our session, she first went quiet, then began to sob, and then to scream uncontrollably. That was the last I saw her—she refused to meet me after that, and committed suicide shortly after.”

I had begun to tremble and clutched the earpiece so hard my hand was white. “When we spoke of them before,” I said, “you told me we were gifts from above.”

The doctor fell silent, cleared his throat. “I did, yes.”

“It was not only idle banter, was it?”

Another stretch of silence. “I suppose no one ever told you your mother is barren.”

“Barren?” I stammered. “She has had three children, doctor.” Although, given all her inamoratos it was a marvel the house wasn’t full of the tipper-tapper of tiny bastard feet.

“And each of you was a shock and a thrill, but no less a mystery. I cannot guess what caused the seed to quicken, save for divine intervention.”

“Thank you, doctor,” I said, almost interrupting him. The other Corrine’s coolness returned to my tone, drawing a sound of surprise from the doctor when I went from near hysteria to serenity with the rapidity of a lashing whip. “I apologise once more for troubling you. You’ve been so helpful.”

“If you don’t mind,” he said, poorly concealing—or not attempting to conceal—his surmounting worry, “I’d like to visit tomorrow. We could talk some more over tea. Perhaps at noon?”

“Of course. I’m looking forward to it.”

When I turned to head back upstairs, I found mother standing at the foot of the stairs. I couldn’t tell which one it was; her dismal face made her a stranger.

“Corrine, my love, who was that?” she said, and I recognised the singer. Her light cadence was disconnected from her expression.

“Doctor Creed,” I said. “I needed to know something about Alexandre and Iosephine.”

Mother tutted and shook her head as she came to me and took my hand. She flicked a look down at it, and I caught the ghost of a frown. “And where have you been?” she whispered. A wave of shame visited me, as though I was being chided for a mishap I hadn’t known I’d committed. “Hiding when she needs you the most. There’s nothing to fear.”

“Mother?”

She lifted her gaze and smiled at me, brushed a lock of hair behind my ear. “I suppose you’ve caught someone’s eye, have you?”

I replied only with a startled, “Uh?”

She frowned, turned toward the shut doors of the ballroom. “I was expecting it, though not so soon. You can hear her, then, or even see?”

“Do you mean the... the shadow?”

“Ah, not quite. She hasn’t revealed herself to you yet. Suppose that is for the best—they can be a... shocking sight, to say the least.” Father’s scream cut her off, and she quietly added, “Even maddening, as some might attest.” She placed one hand on my shoulder, another on my wrist. It didn’t occur to me then, but she touched the same places as the intruder in my portrait did. “Come with me. I’ll accompany you to see her.”

“Mother, I won’t—”

“Hush, my love. It’s for the best.”

I still recall it, how she disarmed me with a whisper. All my terror vanished at once, and I let her guide me outside. I wasn’t cold anymore, despite wearing nothing but a nightgown, and when the shadow over the moon descended to meet us, I was not afraid.

I remember little of the creature that landed before me. When I try to think of it, I recall something ethereal. Its touch was real, however, when it caressed my cheek with one of its many limbs, this one much like a human hand.

I heard those whispers again, and now I understood. The language itself remained as arcane as it always had, but filled my thoughts with a sequence of images as if it had been clear, even more so than human speech. Only Iosephine's stories had ever evoked scenes as vivid. They were disrupted by my father's distant shrieks, for I understood them as well. Though the words themselves sounded the same, there must've been some nuance lost to me: While the creature's imagery was pleading, father protested it all.

"We found one of her kin, your father and I, when we were young," mother told me. I suspect she knew I could not make sense of it all, particularly with father disturbing us. "He was wounded escaping pursuers, and begged us for help. In return, he gave us everything we desired." The creature drew away, and mother moved to my side to hold me instead. "He was a godsend to two hungry artists. We made barons sing our praises, charmed dukes out of their wealth. More, we were given children, bedevilled though you are by your dual nature.

"I know she looks frightful, Corrine, but you must let your mind stay at ease. With us is a child, as terrified as you are, and communicating with her is difficult.

"I am past helping her. You are not. She won't be thankless, either."

I bowed my head to consider what she had told me, then asked, "What do you mean by 'dual nature'? Does something like her dwell within me?"

Mother nodded. "Two more came to us later, called to safety by the traveller who hid within Alexandre. I suppose yours guided this one here. Their song is silent but for those who know how to listen."

"What would you—she—ask of me?"

"To give birth. Let her be born into human form through you, to hide from those who hunt her."

I faced the creature, found an imploring undercurrent in the stream of consciousness I swam in. Even with the soothing effect of mother's voice,

the thought of baring myself to something inhuman made me quiver. “How?”

“Breathe her in. She will do the rest. The birthing will be painless, and you may ask her whatever you please in return. Fame, wealth, good health... Anything you wish, and she will see that you will have it.”

As I ruminated on the choice, the sense of dread from when I first saw the creature returned to me. It waited for my decision with a patient air, but something about it filled me with discomfort. Mother seemed to take notice and cocked her head. The fading of her smile only fed my troubles... but next, she skipped from a compelling calmness straight into panic mirroring father’s. Her gaze shot toward the moon, then to the much-too-bright star, now blinking, growing, burning.

“Oh, god,” she uttered, in a voice that broke her enchantment upon me. “Corrine, I’m so sorry. I should have seen it waiting.”

The creature spun, and its imagery became one of profound terror. Now I saw what mother meant, calling it a child. With its fear exposed, I found it more trustworthy than for all its cajoling.

“Please,” mother whispered, staring at the whitening sky. “Please save her.”

It did not occur to me this might be a trick; the emotions flooding from the creature were much too raw. I did not know which of us mother addressed, but consented to the plea of both, and within a single moment, the creature and I formed an unspoken covenant in our minds.

I asked for it to protect me from whatever made it so afraid.

The too-bright star lit the horizon into flaming day, fell upon the valley like a spear of judgement. Amidst the calamity, I was sure I had perished, and that the roar and brilliant light were the choirs of heaven rising to greet me and every soul reaped that night.

Eventually, I regained my senses. The snow around me was gone, driven away from earth become ash. My house had vanished, as had the



town. Nothing remained but charred earth and a black sky from which even the moon was gone.

I might've fallen to my knees then, or simply stood in place in a dreamlike state. When the clouds dispersed, and the pale moon returned to console me, I saw the creature again. It had folded itself over me, and from the resurfacing imagery, I understood it was dying. I reached out to touch one of its arms, but my hand passed through.

It faded further until it was only mist, and I inhaled deep to fulfil my promise.

**I** have since given birth to many children, though I have never lain with a man. I would not want to bind anyone to a life as strange as mine.

Those who've come to me for help have parted me with tokens of appreciation, and never anything small; I have retained my youth, my good health and my ability to charm those who hear my voice. I've learned that a part of everything I ask for is transferred to my children—to none of my surprise. The travellers adore the attention of others and enjoy showing off their talents.

Moreover, those who seek my aid have parted me with wisdom, and kind as they are, I've come to loathe them for it. The destruction of my home was attributed to some terrible weapon of war, though neither side ever took blame or credit for it. I know better. There is great power in the travellers hiding within my children, to be granted to those who would commune with them... or feed upon them. Knowledge has stripped me even of the capacity to hate—the beast that brought ruin to my home did not do so for the sake of greed, but because it starved and followed prey there. They are as sentient as worms and as numerous from where the travellers come. I fear one will follow every time another soul seeking help comes to me.

I tell my children of what they are sooner than my parents did, and most have survived to keep me company. Some have wandered away, even to fall in love, and their fates have been more miserable than the

fates of those who decided to take their own lives. Love is not meant for the ageless. They all find a heart can only be divided so many times, and for some, once is enough to break it beyond mending.

The other Corrine has become quieter since the encounter with the celestial hunter, but I've learned she is more concrete than the imaginary persona I once believed her to be, and more vocal, in a manner of speaking. She has made me understand father's ravings and mother's infidelity; even with the other Corrine's support, I, too, suffer the risk of becoming a madwoman after being subjected to everything the travellers know. I used to wonder how my parents presented themselves so composed half the time, and have since come to doubt it was luck at all that brought them to the one who took shelter within Alexandre. Father was said to have had an uncanny knack for the theater since he was a little boy, just as my grandmother did.

For now, I've settled on making a home in the quiet countryside, interacting with as few people, who care as little about me, as possible. I move every few years, to avoid questions of my age and interest toward my eloquent, charming children. My sole enduring companion is the moon, and sometimes, when it hangs low and pleading, I invite in the light and the shadows it hides as a bride would her husband on the eve of her wedding. I speak to it so that those in need might hear my voice, and I will help as many as I can to escape through me, even knowing they will share with me more of their knowledge whether I want them to or not. I am now torn by my envy toward the simple-minded and my fear of what remains unknown to me. Knowing of all the things that hide past the veil of a starry sky has made me wish to become everlasting, for the terminal curtain is the sole one not yet lifted by even the most accomplished wanderer.

Until I learn to where the pale horse rides, I will dedicate my life to helping souls in need. Perhaps one day they will be human, but until then, I remain a faithful Endymion to my Selene.

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*Ville Meriläinen is an award-winning Finnish author. His horror and fantasy short fiction has appeared in various journals and anthologies online*

*and in print, including Pseudopod, Cast of Wonders, and Intergalactic  
Medicine Show.*

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# **Pawn to the Queen**

**By CHRISTINE LUCAS**

*At his mentor's dying request, the High Priest of Anubis must right a dreadful wrong—recover and return the canopic jars of Queen Tetisheri to end a curse!*

“By Anubis’ name, what have you done?” Ankhu regretted his yell the moment it left his lips. What difference would his anger make at this late hour, now that Merykare, his savior and one-time friend, lay in his deathbed? Even righteous anger over vile deeds? And still, the spectral host that never left Ankhu’s shadow screeched and howled in his ears—in his skull—and demanded justice for Merykare’s blasphemy.

“A foolish thing,” said Merykare, his voice low and weary.

“*Foolish?*” This time, Ankhu managed to keep his voice leveled. He held up the canopic jar. “You call this foolish?”

That spotted, gnarled *thing* on the bed reminded Ankhu little of the man he’d known for decades, the once Chief of Royal Scribes and Administrator to the King. Merykare opened his mouth to speak again, but barking coughs choked explanations and excuses. The healer beside him offered him a cup of water, which he downed with breathless gulps, spilling half of it on his chest. And again, a careful hand wiped his face and chest dry, may Hathor bless her heart.

Ta-miut, the old, mute priestess of Bast, sat beside Merykare on the floor upon a reed mat. Barefoot, clad in a makeshift dress of coarse fabric more befitting to a sack of grain than a priestess and healer, she raised her blue eyes to Ankhu: eyes that could belong to a princess of some faraway land of perpetual winter, set upon a spotted, wrinkled face. And yet something exquisite slithered through those wrinkles: languid, divine felinity. His friend was in good care.

Across the room, Ankhu’s cat Nedjem, perched atop a low table of polished cedar wood, mimicked a sphinx—if sphinxes sported flattened ears and twitching tails, and growled at funerary items that should never have left the inside of a tomb. Something sinister chilled Ankhu’s spine—something worse than a tomb robbery. In all his years of dealing with the Unseen, he’d come to trust his cat’s instincts. Spirits had often deceived him. Gods, too. But not Nedjem. Never Nedjem.

Ankhu sucked in a deep breath and wished he hadn’t, in this room that reeked of flatulence, urine, and imminent death. The smell had

seeped into the colorful tapestries on the walls, and all the incense from Punt burning in gold-plated vessels couldn't mask the stench. He gulped down bile, and when he spoke again, he managed a casual tone. He owed Merykare that, at least.

“Foolish is to raid the pharaoh's personal wine collection. Foolish is to insert lewd limericks into the peace treaty you decided to pen while drunk. As we both know you've done,” he added in a softer voice and earned a tired smile from his dying friend. “But not this.” He cradled the canopic jar in his arms like an infant, the jar with the baboon-shaped stopper, traditionally containing the lungs of an embalmed corpse.

*Whose lungs? Whose corpse?*

A whiff of embalming fluids brushed against his face: Anubis' breath, and the lost and the hidden unraveled before his eyes.

*Tomb seals, broken. Protective spells, unbound. A shrieking spirit, shrouded in Horus' divine light, terrible and magnificent like a thunderstorm over the desert. Wretched men, wretched deeds and the akh of a queen demanding vengeance.*

Anubis help him, Ankhu had been handed the remains of a Queen of Egypt.

“Did you rob a royal tomb? Why, Merykare? Why?”

Merykare opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it back. Beside him, Ta-miut sat paled. She pulled her hand from his and lowered her head, her fingers now pulling threads from the hem of her dress.

Merykare looked away, his own fingers picking at the sweat-soaked sheet as if picking coins. Spotted, emaciated hands that had penned countless treaties and degrees and, decades ago, had carried eight-year-old Ankhu away from his father's rage and into the Temple. When he turned his yellowish eyes back at Ankhu, something new—something merciless—had hardened his gaze.

“Does it matter? You owe me. So do this.”

“I know.” Ankhu met Merykare’s gaze, his voice just as hard. “I *know*. I’ve known every day of my life, every day I’ve had to carry the scars my father carved into my skin, every day that I wasn’t dead because you intervened. But my priestly vows cannot be broken. First and foremost, I am *hem-nedjer*. Servant to the Gods you have offended with this vile deed. This is beyond my power to absolve.”

“Not asking for absolution, boy.”

Boy? *Boy?*

“I have gold. It’ll buy me enough *ushabtis* of faience and clay to carry my sins. No. I need *this*. Fix *this*.”

Beside Merykare, Ta-miut seemed to have diminished in stature, her mantle of divine felinity now the hide of a mangy scar-faced tomcat. She pulled herself up and scurried past Ankhu, outside of this room of decades-old blasphemies.

Ankhu rubbed his throbbing temples. His ghostly host now buzzed like frenzied wasps, their voices shrieks at the edge of his hearing. Across the room, Nedjem had abandoned his sphinx impersonation to sniff the air, his elongated body now rigid muscle and evil-seeking nose. Then he hissed and fled. Not good. Never good.

Ankhu sighed. Where had he gotten himself into this time?

New scents slithered into his nostrils: blood and wine, and at the edge of his hearing a lion roared. Shezmu, Lord of the Wine Press and Osiris’ Executioner, approached.

“I took oaths, too, boy, in my youth,” Merykare said, his voice weary but steady now—determined. If he’d heard Osiris’ head-hound, he didn’t show it. “The Scribe’s Oath, to uphold Ma’at: Harmony and Balance, Truth and Justice. I failed. Allow me this: one final choice according to the wisdom that’s assumed of my age. Please.”

Ankhu stood silent, duty warring with debts owed inside his chest. New voices mingled with the lion’s growl: whispers in faraway



delegations he wasn't invited to. The suspicion that the decision had been already made for him wormed its way into his thoughts.

"Tell me more," he finally said. Truth was Truth. Surely, the gods wouldn't object to that.

"I was a fool. A young fool. An ambitious fool, who had access to the archives and the papyri with the layout of the tomb, and I heeded false promises. Along with two other fools, a guard and a stone mason, we were sent to retrieve a certain amulet from Queen Tetisheri's tomb. An amulet of Hathor said to carry divine blessings to the Queen's womb, the womb that bore the great Queen Ahhotep." His voice, although still steady, had diminished to a whisper.

"A fertility amulet?" Ankhu scoffed. "A *trinket*? The tomb was ransacked. It took several days and several *sem*-priests to restore spells and seals. I *know*. I was one of them."

A sigh so long from Merykare's parched lips, that Ankhu feared his *ba* would flutter out. "No. That idiot Nebamun, the guard, thought he'd steal the queen's gold and jewels. He convinced Hesire, the stone mason, to go along. They took her canopic jars hostage to deter her wrath." Another sigh. "They threatened to throw them into the Nile."

Ankhu held up the jar. "You did the same, didn't you?"

Merykare shook his head. "No. I took nothing. Nothing but the promised apprenticeship with the royal scribes. Nebamun brought me this, the night before he'd flee to Crete, before that crazed hippo trampled him to pulp the moment he approached the docks. After Hesire's arrest, he still thought he'd escape." He chuckled and choked on phlegm, and chuckled again. The bitter laughter turned to a moan and to one final, pained word: "Please."

Ankhu balanced the jar in one palm as if to weigh it against his own debt. There had been no mention of those missing from their container. An oversight? A cover-up? Something else? Wherever the truth lay, this was a ritual he'd left unfinished and a royal spirit angered and unbound, inviting divine wrath upon the land—upon the people. Not only those

like Merykare with enough gold to think they could buy their way into the Afterlife, but the farmers and the fishermen and the soldiers and the street urchins like his eight-year-old self. The simple folk that were Egypt's backbone and the first to suffer when the gods were angered.

Did he ever have a choice?

"I shall do as you ask, Merykare."

A sob, a nod, and a soul fluttering at the tip of an old man's tongue.

Ankhu had just crossed the threshold when the wings of Merykare's *ba* brushed by his face. Then metal against stone—the blade of Shezmu's *kopesh* scraped the limestone plates as he marched by in waves of fiery wind, scorched blood, and charred bones. Ankhu's gaze darted over his shoulder to the soul harvest behind him, and he tripped on a bundle of linen carelessly abandoned by terrified servants just outside.

No, not linen—Ta-miut, her face drawn and wet. She huddled by the wall, a bundle of hole-ridden clothes and wrinkled skin and bony limbs, with cats on her back and cats in her arms, a shield of felinity against the Executioner. And, of course, Nedjem perched around her shoulders, draped like a priest's ceremonial leopard skin.

"Ah, dear lady. No. Not there." Ankhu knelt beside her, took her hands, and helped her up. "Go home." He kept his voice calm as if dealing with a frightened kitten. "Go back to the shrine. Your job here is done."

She met his gaze for one breathless moment, then nodded. When she turned to leave, her furry host right behind her, her steps faltered. But they didn't falter long.

Ankhu wiped his sweaty brow, leaned on his staff and called Nedjem, who sat watching the dead man's bedchamber with dark, unblinking eyes.

"Let's go, boy. There's work to do."

Nedjem flicked his tail and darted off the other way—towards the shrine.

Tracking down the burial spot of a tomb robber proved to be time-consuming, even for Ankhu. Hesire had been buried alive. Neither the living nor the dead would speak of such ill matters. Shelves upon shelves of dusty papyri accounting trials eventually revealed the location to sore-eyed Ankhu, while Nedjem gutted yet another rat in the royal archives. At dusk, while the scribes dotted on their four-legged hero, Ankhu took the road west of Thebes alone. This was his burden, his last dues paid to the man who'd saved him. And whom could he trust? Those involved could still be in power.

Hesire's tomb and prison lay in a desolate strip of land, in a shallow cave dug up between rock and sand. A walled-up entrance barred the way with seals not of protection but of breaking and binding.

He put down the oil lamp and readjusted the leopard skin over his shoulders. The High Priest would not crawl through holes in the ground to speak with scum. He'd have him dragged out and thrown at his feet. He tapped the seals with his staff, invoking the power of Anubis to undo their magic. They glowed and sparkled, then shattered to ash. Another tap, another invocation to the jackal-headed god.

*“Oh Great Scale-holder, Guardian, Anubis, send up to me the host of the dead, forthwith for service at this late hour!”*

Beneath his sandaled feet, the earth trembled. The ground opened and spat out the lost and the forgotten: the runaway slaves, the famished beggars, the diseased peasants, the children carried away by jackals. Bones rattled, dried sinews stretched, desiccated muscles crept back to their mangled limbs. Empty, fragmented skulls reassembled and cackled, seeking their vertebrae. Whispers chilled the night, and the ruffle of countless wings stirred up the sand: the spirits of the dead soared seeking their mutilated bodies.

Ankhu wove a series of hieroglyphs in the air, naming the nameless, invoking the lost, requesting the aid of the dead no one honored. But he would, the High Priest of them all: the living, the dead, and those stranded in between. *In time*. For now, he sent them forth. Claw-like hands tore the walled-up tomb open, blackened feet with chewed-off toes trampled over bricks and stones, and the undead host dragged Hesire out and threw him at Ankhu's feet.

Oh, whose wrath had this wretched man invoked? Had he been punished for his blasphemy, or for his failure to keep the theft a secret? Burying him alive had been too harsh a punishment—almost unheard of, save from tales from past, less civilized times. But this? Ankhu had never seen the spells of breaking in effect. All that Hesire had ever been—name and shadow, spirit and soul—now swirled scattered and lost, and his body lingered between life and death. It could not bleed. It could not burn. It could not die. But it could whimper, perhaps even talk.

“Why?” A low whine that stretched on. A blackened hand that reached out.

Ankhu paced backwards, pulling his white linen robes away from the filthy clutch. Yellowish bone jutted out of his fingertips, the nails long gone. Had Hesire tried to dig his way out?

Ankhu tasted bile. This kind of magic was within his reach, but not within his choice. Never his choice, for revenge often mimicked justice and threatened to demolish the fine balance that was Ma'at. Common folk risked little more than their own lives and souls. One misstep from a High Priest might plague the entire kingdom. He gulped down his disgust and raised his staff over the abomination,

“Hesire, stone-mason! By the Gods of Duat, I command you! Name your accomplices and return what you've stolen!”

Hesire moaned. His head bobbed sideways, grinding vertebrae and loose jaw at every bob. Eyeless sockets fixed on Ankhu, and fetid breath flowed out from his throat.

“Accomplices? Hah! Dead! Loot? Spent. Answers? None.”

“I care little for gold. The amulet, Hesire. And the jar. You know which jar.”

Hesire howled and clawed at the strips of dried muscles that were his cheeks. He dropped face down on the dirt, his torso and legs stretching in abnormal angles. “Queen Tetisher! Forgive me, oh, Queen!”

“Her jar,” said Ankhu, his voice lower now. “Where is it?”

“Yes. Yes. That.” Hesire rose on his knees. A purplish tongue licked yellow teeth. “What for me? What?”

“Atonement for your blasphemy.”

“No!” He shook his head so fast that Ankhu thought that his neck would finally snap and the head would roll onto the ground. “Release! You, High Priest! You can!” He punched at his chest. “Judgment! Weigh my heart! Better in Ammut’s jaws, than....” He lowered his head. Fat maggots fell off his conchs, a mockery of tears. “...this.”

Ankhu leaned on his staff. Yes, he could do this. But should he?

A jackal howled nearby. A whiff of embalming fluids in the night breeze: the breath of *Him-who-is-upon-his-mountain*.

*Anubis.*

The fate of a soul rested with the gods and not at the whim of any mortal, even one capable of such formidable spells. Was the breaking of a tomb greater blasphemy than the breaking of a soul?

A fleeting push against his back, urging him forward. *Dance, little man.* At the farthest reaches of his consciousness, delegations he wasn’t privy to, whispers slipping through his grasp like the Nile’s flow through the reeds. And at his feet, a son of Egypt dismantled into so many parts that their sum would always be wanting. No Harmony here, and no Balance. What little of him Ankhu could restore, he would.

“Very well. Answer me, and I will release you.”

“Thank you, thank you!” He knelt before Ankhu as if in prayer, his arms crossed over his chest. “This... this un-life ate memories. Never knew much. But I remember jar. Buried. By my old home. Ruins now, maggots tell me. But east wall stands. There. Where nothing grows and dung beetles gather. There it sleeps and dreams of its queen.”

Ankhu nodded. At last, some answers. “And your accomplice? Who sent you to break into the tomb?”

“No! Release first. Release now!”

Oh, to Duat with the stubborn dead! How many times would he have to pry the truth out of dead lips? Then the jackal howled again, and Ankhu *saw* the poor man huddled at his feet. A mist of his essence shrouded him, a lost and frightened *ka*, the eyes wild, the face ashen, the hands trembling. No, not stubbornness. Hesire still feared the spell-caster who’d reduced him to that.

*Fine.* Ammut, Osiris’ heart-hound, might allow Hesire a final breath to speak the truth. Ankhu’s old bones had started to ache in the desert chill and his patience thinned by every passing moment. And restoring this broken man would drain him more than he’d care to admit.

He wove new, unfamiliar patterns in the air. Anubis would not assist him here—the power to restore the fragmented man lay with Ra himself. His temples throbbed with every new sign that called down the power of the sun. The hieroglyphs sparked and swirled and pulsated, an ethereal heart of merciless light. And behold, the benu-bird dawned over the sands to guide the lost one home.

Under the blazing warmth of the phoenix, the manifestation of Ra’s own *ba*, Ankhu’s necrotic host regained their substance alongside the damned. The spirits crowded around him, children and farmers and beggars and soldiers and slaves. They glided over the sand, forming a long, silent column, seeking their own way home.

Where was Hesire? Ankhu craned his neck, seeking the stone-mason amidst them.

“Hesire! The name! The name you promised!”

Neither with a howl and nor with a whisper, but with one long, final sigh, the name hit Ankhu like the paw of a granite sphinx.

“Lady Kemsiyet. Maggots tell me she’s called Ta-miut now.”

Ta-miut? That couldn’t be right. No, it couldn’t.

And why were the dead staring at him like that?

This was a road Ankhu didn’t want to take. He’d travelled the same path many a time, to consult with the old woman who lived in the company of cats. She’d walked into Thebes one day, many floods ago, barefoot and mute, her tongue cut off by unknown hands. No one knew her; if she had family or home, or even a name, she could not tell. Cats followed her everywhere. After a while, the city folk started calling her Ta-miut: She-cat. When her healing skills became evident, she was offered a place in Hathor’s shrine. She declined. Instead, one day she walked out of Thebes as quietly as she’d entered, and her furred host followed her south, to Sekhmet’s ancient statue.

Barely a statue, really; just a large boulder rooted into a pit of yellow sandstone: sand turned to glass by immense heat. Sekhmet’s fiery breath, some priests said. Perhaps. But Ankhu knew of other types of fire; he’d heard about them in the whispers of ghosts gliding by his ear, of souls reciting their deeds, their days and their journeys in the Hall of Two Truths. Sometimes, they said, fire fell from the sky. And in the heart of such fire nested a rock, sometimes the size of a pebble, sometimes larger—if it came to the size of the boulder, gods help the unfortunate denizens of that region, for it reduced all life to embers and ash.

Ankhu stopped beneath an acacia tree to wipe the sweat from his brow. He laid his staff against the trunk and swatted the ever-pestering flies away. He took a few mouthfuls of tepid water from his waterskin. As he raised his head, he spotted the glow overhead. There, amidst the

foliage, a string of unblinking eyes sparkled like a collar of amber beads atop the tree's highest branches: the shrine's cats, its guards and sentries. They measured him from sweaty head to sandalled feet and darted off with hardly a mew.

He wasn't far now. With the parasol in one hand, his staff in the other and his heart heavy, Ankhu started for the final stretch of his journey.

How could he not have known? He'd seen Kemsiyet in the court when he was merely a novice. A foreign princess, some said, from a sacred island up north—an island of ancient mystics, others whispered, their knowledge of the arcane older than the roots of the pyramids. Ankhu scoffed at the thought. Many tales grew at the telling.

But how much had this one grown?

The shrine should be in the center of a circle of ancient sycamore trees, their roots and branches intertwined after the passage of countless floods. And there stood the circle, but everything around it had vanished beneath a slow-swirling sandstorm—the low bushes and shrubs, the sparse acacias, the long stretch of sand, even the languid flow of the Nile. All sounds had died as well—the choir of frogs and cicadas, the buzz of mosquitoes and flies, the chirping of birds. Even the beasts of the earth kept their silence in this spot that bordered more worlds than one. Here, every sound held power. Here, even the High Priest should hold his tongue lest he proved himself more foolish than beasts.

He left his parasol beneath a scrawny apple tree; there was no sun where he was heading. One step closer to the shrine, through the slow dance of sand and twigs and dried leaves. Ankhu raised his hand to intercept the carcass of a dung beetle passing before his eyes. A hair's breadth before he touched it, it stung his fingertip as if it were a lightning eel and not a dead scarab. Power lay beneath this sandstorm; real power, laced with patience and precision. Even, perhaps, wisdom. Those who coveted arcane power—or those who stumbled upon it—hurried to summon enormous beasts, unleash fierce storms or call down fire from the heavens. Not here—another hand had woven this, as if weaving a multicolored pattern on a cloth, or slowly stringing beads to



make a collar of silver, turquoise, and crimson or dress wounds in clean linen bandages.

A patient hand. A powerful hand.

The maelstrom shifted. The central swirl bred countless smaller maelstroms, spawning from its rotation like a spider's legs. Upwards, downwards, outwards, they formed tunnels of slow-dancing debris, their ends clouded by sand, fog, and—Anubis help him—fire and smoke. He clenched his jaw and dared another step forward. The crush of star-sand and twigs beneath his sandalled feet mingled with the *woosh* around him. The newborn sound stretched as if bone ground on bone. Another tunnel formed in front of him, and at its end stood the shrine's boulder. If he tilted his head *that* way, it resembled the lion-headed goddess.

At the feet of the boulder sat Ta-miut, barefoot and naked. She cradled a kitten in her arms, while its siblings gathered at her feet. And around her neck, an amulet of turquoise and gold, tied with a worn leather cord. Ankhu squinted. So it was true. An amulet shaped in the form of the Mother Goddess in her bovine form. Made for a queen, stolen from a queen's tomb. Ankhu's fingers flexed around his staff. He drew a slow, controlled breath and dared a glimpse into the Unseen. The swirling mist around him formed hands and faces and jaws stretched in perpetual, silent screams.

*No. Not them. That.*

Ankhu willed his focus on the amulet and found it possessing less power than Nedjem's forepaws. Pretty though it was and made with great craftsmanship, it was as useless as all similar trinkets sold outside any temple. But it did possess a curse—the palmprint of the gods: stone and metal and skin and bone had merged, pressed together by divine will. She couldn't remove her unholy loot even if she carved her flesh to the bone, for it had grown roots that reached into her heart. On her day of reckoning, would it latch onto her heart? Would it weigh it down upon the Scales of Ma'at and into Ammut's jaws?

And what for? Did it even matter now? Sin was Sin. And Power was Power, and the maelstrom surrounding him—the otherworldly barrier he should cross—remained a mystery. Both Sin and Power sprang from the Heart, and knowing one might reveal the other.

Another step closer, another piece of glass sand crushed beneath his feet, another glimpse into the Unseen. A writhing knot of ash and silt and earthworms nesting into Ta-miut's gut. The mother cat at her feet turned her yellow eyes at Ankhu and mewed, as if calling her litter. A pierce through his gut, a fiery lance that spiraled outwards through every vein and squeezed the air out of his lungs: the void of a barren womb.

Quick breaths to rid his body of the alien pain that threatened to overwhelm every heartbeat of his remaining days. She'd desecrated a royal tomb, for that? Ankhu scoffed and then bit his tongue. *Old fool, harness your throat in this place where sound breeds power.* But the sandstorm had already snatched his scoff and gave it form and voice.

Loose, ethereal figures of countless women spurt around him. Thin, plump, old, young, some in simple *kalasiris*, some bare-breasted in peasants' skirts, others in fine linen and beaded collars. They headed west of Thebes and into the cursed emptiness in a slow march, all shoulders slumped, all eyes empty holes on faces of swirling sand. Every few steps, one of them would turn her vacant face at Ankhu, and a moan would fly upon the wings of dead dragonflies. Every few steps, one would halt her march, and spin on her heels to face him. In that one moment, her body thickened enough to resemble her living self, and she'd weep because of flesh hurt and scarred and bruised and bled under the kick and the fist and the cane.

*"...even cats had litters aplenty, why cannot I...."*

*"...sent me away...."*

*"... no one will have me..."*

*"...what have I done wrong? What is wrong with me?"*

“...worthless...”

No anger in those whispers, no accusation in those moans, only shame weighing down those slumped shoulders, those heavy feet. No divine tenet, no holy scripture spoke ill of childless women, but when did mortals ever hear their gods? And how many? How many spirits of daughters of Egypt had chosen exile due to this absurd belief that a barren womb could somehow outweigh a kind heart upon the Scales?

Too many.

A long sigh left his lips, carrying the burden of his own heart. He should have known. Merykare himself had spoken of relevant clauses in the marriage contracts he'd penned in his youth, contracts void in childless marriages. Had Merykare tried to confide in him, to lay the grounds for his own confession, all these years ago? But Ankhu hadn't listened. He had remained deaf to the pain of those he had sworn to protect, blind to the desperation bred by foolish misconceptions—a desperation that drove the dead to exile and the living to put their faith in useless trinkets, even to rob tombs. The yearning to call to them—to stop them—rose to his lips but found no words to console them. Not yet. One day, he would. He had to.

Then the vision dissolved back into the maelstrom, and he dared another step forward. What else remained hidden in this silent storm? Somewhere ahead a cat hissed, something beneath his feet cracked and clicked, and the sands shifted. Now the floor of the swirling tunnel before him turned to a series of plates of sandglass, yellow and dark in turn. Like a *Senet* board, and he a piece upon it.

Whose hand moved the pawns? Whose schemes granted mortals the illusion of free will to walk and speak and cast spells and curse as they saw fit? A sand-colored blur hissed as it darted over the board, against every *Senet* rule ever written.

*Nedjem?*

Trust on Bast's little children—her eons-lasting prank on Creation—to defy Order. But if *Nedjem* was somewhere ahead, then he should follow.

He always did.

Another step forward, another click beneath his feet, another feline hiss ahead—a warning? Then the tunnel leading up to the boulder branched out to a second one. But this new path sometimes blended with its twin, sometimes diverged through visions of fire, through dark, empty fields, or through halls with pillars higher than the Great Pyramid. Among all those places that no mortal feet should cross, one place persisted, clear and welcoming behind a curtain of ever-flowing water: a quaint little town, its houses with windows overflowed with flowers, its cobblestone streets lined with cats. His feet rooted on the board, his heart ached with longing. What was this place?

*It's where napping cats go in their dreams,* came the whisper. Fragrant lips brushed against his ear, lips of a woman not there but everywhere in this place of unknown and rewritten rules.

Ankhu squinted, trying to take a better glimpse of that place, when the liquid curtain before it glittered as if embroidered with dark stars. Pinpricks spread all over his skin as if stung by countless mosquitoes. Somewhere in the center of that town power burned with the fierceness of the benu-bird. It spiraled strong, steady, barely below the surface where soft paws trotted seemingly careless. Unfamiliar to Egypt but not unknown to Ankhu, this power pulsated like a slumbering god waiting to be awakened. With a ripple through the sandstorm around him, as if the Nile itself let out a long sigh, the vision of the feline dreamland vanished.

But not the power. Fragments of it coursed through Ta-miut's veins, lined the tips of her fingertips and laced the moisture in her eyes. Ankhu's grip on his staff tightened. She'd done unspeakable things; he knew that now. But she'd done them as a Daughter of Egypt, even the spell that undid Hesire. What happened to her, after that? Now, she was more. She was... Other. This power she wielded now came from ... elsewhere. No god would overlook such a transgression.

What kind of defenses would she raise against him now? What kind of blades and spears? What sorts of malformed abominations would she

summon against him? He clenched his jaw and took another step forward.

*Be my will and my justice in all those places I cannot walk.* The command reverberated inside Ankhu's head, with a lingering howl behind every word. Anubis had added his own strength to his grip.

*The Lord of the Wine Press walks in your shadow.* Another deep, masculine voice. Osiris added his own blessings and his lackey to Ankhu's aid, and the smell of blood and wine engulfed him.

No other voice followed, only a roar over the desert to the Nile's springs and back. Sekhmet pounded the dirt behind him, her right forepaw Wrath and her left one Vengeance.

All across the edge of his hearing, the demons of the Underworld howled in anticipation of the kill. Ankhu dared another step forward, expecting the fiercest fight of his life against this blasphemer. Another step on glass sand, another spike in the howling around him. Then the maelstrom spat out forms with elusive faces, thin, fleeting, voiceless.

There a beggar held a bowl of food. There a farmer wept with his broken leg mended. There a woman held an infant to her breast, now overflowing with milk. There a soldier with maggots crawling out of his festering wounds watched them slowly heal beneath Ta-miut's touch. The forms multiplied in every possible pathway around him. Through her flight from Thebes, through the lands lingering between and beyond dream and waking, after her return to Egypt, they came pleading on her behalf. Not one, not two, neither a hundred nor a thousand, they came counting her deeds and her days, and they found them more than the specks of sand in the desert. In a moment that tiptoed between Vengeance and Mercy, the Nile itself sucked in a deep breath and shattered the maelstrom. It spiraled inwards, the loose sand condensing more and more, the forms dissolved until the sand settled in a single feline form.

Nedjem.

It had to be his own cat standing in his path, before the crone who now sat alone cross-legged at the feet of the statue. Ankhu had expected rage at her time of reckoning. Or perhaps some sort of bargaining, to have her life spared in exchange of power or trinkets. Or even despair and tears and cries and tearing of garments. He found none of these. She sat with her back straight, her gnarled hands folded on her lap, measuring him with eyes free of trepidation. And Ankhu found himself in the presence of a queen.

Ethereal hands nudged him onwards, toward his duty. With every step, his staff gained weight and shifted in substance, until he found himself holding the very Scales of Ma'at. And with every step, he became fully aware of the ethereal Senet board he trod on. Was he a player or a pawn?

The vision of the board vanished when he stopped an arm's length away from Ta-miut. He settled across her and placed the scales between them. Divine howls, curses, and roars lingered just behind his ears. Then the tingling started in the fingertips of his right hand, until it coursed upwards to the wrist, until his palm burned with the fire of the benu-bird and his hand became his scalpel. And the Lord Embalmer of Thebes reached out, between one rib and the next, and cut out her living, beating heart.

She did not scream. She did not die—not yet, not until the Judgment, when the demons of Duat could charge in for the feast. He placed it upon the scales, against the shimmering feather of light that was Ma'at. For one heartbeat, it seemed that it would plunge to her conviction. Then Nedjem jumped upon the scales and curled around the heart, and the breeze carried a whiff of honeysuckle and the rattle of brass sistra. The Cat-headed Goddess had chosen, ignoring the howls of her brethren.

The moments stretched on for too long, and the Scales seemed to hang in balance. Unacceptable; the heart had to be found lighter or heavier. This outcome resolved nothing. Then Nedjem growled and shifted upon the scales. In that blink, a knot of darkness lurked beneath the heart. Ankhu reached out, his fingertips still pulsating with divine grace, until

he spotted the blackened, shriveled flesh that festered here, oozing pus and maggots: the corpse of a barren womb.

He held it up, in the hallowed space over the scales. “This does not belong there.” He squeezed it in his grip until all that remained was embers and ash.

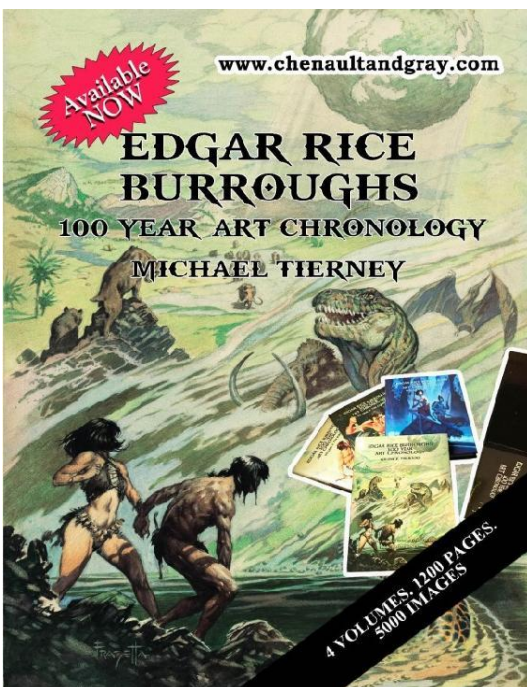
Beneath his grip, the scales found the heart light.

In a deep sigh that left Ankhu breathless and bereft of divine presence, it was all over. Nedjem curled up in his lap. Ta’miut, keeping her gaze downcast to hide the tears welling up, scurried somewhere behind the statue. She returned with a wicker basket filled with figs and dates and a jug of wine.

Upon the shattered remnants of a Senet board, a former pawn shared a supper with a queen.

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*Christine Lucas is a former Air Force officer from Greece, and mostly self-taught in English. Her work has appeared in several online and print publications, including Daily Science Fiction, Cast of Wonders, Pseudopod/Artemis Rising 4 and Nature: Futures.*



# **People of Fire**

**By JENNIFER R. POVEY**

*A sinkhole swallows a research expedition in Siberia, and only one woman survives! Beneath the earth's crust, in halls of fire, Peri finds a lost civilization!*



The cold wind gave the lie to the idea of global warming. Peri pulled the fur-lined parka around herself.

The crater, of course, refuted that lie, or so they assumed. Or maybe sinkhole was a better term for it. Nearly circular, it looked like an entrance to hell.

“Don’t smoke,” Makar suggested wryly.

“I wasn’t planning on it.” Peri shook her head. “How many of these are there now?”

“Enough.” Makar studied the hole. “And of course, every one that pops adds to the methane trouble.”

Peri thought she heard a rumble under the ground. She frowned. “Did you hear that?”

“Yes. I think we may want to be somewhere else.”

Makar’s usual Russian understatement. Tilting her head, Peri tried to place the rumble so that she would know which direction to run in.

Then she set off across the permafrost. She wasn’t the only one running—a small herd of reindeer had apparently also heard it and were trying to vacate the area. She could not hear their hooves.

What she did hear was a boom, and then she was flat on her face on the ground. “Makar!” she managed to yell.

No response...and the ground was sliding out from under her. It seemed so unlikely, but it was happening. She clutched at the tundra plants, but it did her no good.

She slid down into darkness. Or perhaps the darkness was in her own head and behind her eyes.

Either way, she felt herself fade out and her last thought was that this was the stupidest way to die ever.

Peri opened her eyes slowly. She felt like a bruise—her entire body, head to toe—which told her she was alive. Being dead could not possibly hurt this much.

She was lying on what felt like rocks, and there was a dull red glow. Fire.

Something not that far away from her was on fire. She realized she might be dead after all. It might just be taking a little bit longer.

She tried to get up. It took two attempts, her legs wanting to buckle under her. She blinked a few more times. The light in her left eye seemed darker than in the right...she brushed some dirt away from it to no avail, but things were slowly evening out.

Peri checked all of her limbs. Nothing broken. She was lucky. Well, no, maybe she wasn't. Dying in the fall was better than burning in the fire, although the flames didn't seem to be getting any closer.

“Makar!” she yelled.

There was no response. She didn't see him down here with her, alive or dead. That could be good or bad.

He could be dead. He could be going for help, but most likely...

She *was* dead. As in, there was no way anyone would believe she had survived.

Looking around, she frowned, then started to walk towards the fire. It was not exploding, it was not growing, and it was beneath her, a pit of flames. Maybe she was dead after all, but she could not think of anything she had done that was bad enough to go to Hell for. Well, there was the time she'd accidentally picked up...

...never mind. If she was in Hell, then those who said God hated people were right, and she would rather be in Hell with the people who refused to follow such a God. More likely, she was still alive.

The pit of fire had a narrow bridge over it. “Well, as long as I don’t meet any balrogs,” she finally said out loud. She looked up. There was no way she was climbing out through the hole, but that natural bridge might lead to a better escape route.

She set foot on it, carefully, keeping to the center. It was almost wide enough for a cart track. Almost. Certainly wide enough to stay on, although the heat beat at her—not as much as she had expected, but it did. She walked across the bridge, and then she saw on the other side a worked stone staircase leading down, not into the fire, but into a tunnel that ran next to it. No, she’d found something. The bridge might not be natural either.

An old mine, obviously. That explained the double explosions. And mines had entrances. Down, though, was not the direction she wanted to go.

She looked for anything leading up, but found nothing, except the licking of the flames and heat.

She shed her parka, folded it up, and put it on the ground. It was damaged anyway, but she’d take it out with her if she could.

Part of her wanted to forget it, though. Leave it here.

Part of her wanted to go down those stairs into the warm darkness.

No exploration revealed a way back up. Any entrance here had long since collapsed.

Peri was thirsty—desperately so, in fact. She was going to die here, and perhaps that was how curiosity won out. Her throat hurt, but those stairs beckoned.

She might as well die venturing into the unknown. Maybe she would get to see something, experience something, before leaving this world. She stepped onto the stairs.

The steps were slippery. She had to fight to keep her footing, and they spiraled downwards to the left. Not the right. The reverse of castle stairs.

Castle stairs were built so the defenders could use their right hands and the attackers had to resort to their left.

Surely it could not be made to defend what was below. It was just... an old mine. But where was the lift? It could not be older than the lift.

Peri approached the stair. The passage was warm and her throat was swelling with thirst; she could not keep going much longer before dehydration and heat exhaustion claimed her. She could not strip down—or could she?

She left her pants and sweater on the stairs, wearing only a blouse and her underwear. It wasn't decent, but it felt better.

Heat swelled, and the flames licked around the top of the stairs, leaving just enough space for a woman to walk between them.

She shivered despite the heat, and it took everything within her to walk through.

Beyond was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen. The flickering of flames lit an arching cave with stalactites emerging from the darkness overhead in hues that were probably less pink and red in truth than they appeared.

Yes. This place was worth dying to see, she thought as she collapsed to the ground.

Once more, Peri opened her eyes. She had died twice today.

“Drink,” a voice said. There was a cup held to her lips.

She drank. It was water. It was not cold water, rather tepid, but it was water nonetheless.

“Slowly,” the voice admonished.

Frowning for a moment, she took the voice's advice, then opened her eyes.

Before her was a woman with red skin. She was topless and wore only a simple skirt around her hips. She looked more like a South American tribeswoman than anything Peri should have found buried under the Siberian tundra.

“Where am I?”

“We found you in the cave of pillars. You are not from here.”

“Where am I?” she repeated, her voice clearer this time.

The woman pursed her lips. “Here. You are...home.”

The words of one who had no language for where she was because she thought there was no other place. Peri recognized the woman's speech as Yukaghir, but she spoke it in a way that sounded strange to her ears.

Red skin.

What was this place? Was she in Hell after all? A succubus might look like that, although Peri was in no state to rate the woman's level of physical attractiveness.

No state at all. She drank, slowly, and felt her faculties return. She was lying on a stone bench covered with some kind of reed-like fiber, perhaps similar to what the woman's skirt was made out of.

The light was still dim and red, but brighter than it had been, and her eyes seemed to be responding normally. “I'm sorry...”

“You are a strange one. Pale, and unable to take the heat.”

“I'm from...up there.” She pointed towards the ceiling.

“Nothing can live up there. The land is no more than ice.”

These people...had been down here since the last Ice Age! They'd been hiding down here.

“It’s a bit warmer now...although it’s not exactly hospitable.”

“You mean the ice is gone?”

“It’s been gone for a long time. In fact, we’re starting to have the opposite problem.”

“Then we can...we can go back.”

“Maybe. You might have become, well, adapted to these caves.”

The woman considered that. “I will try. I alone. I will go back with you.”

“That might be...difficult.” Peri tailed off. “I saw no easy way back to the surface.”

“Then we will find one.”

Peri recovered with a bit of time, more tepid water, and a plate of mushrooms and some kind of meat. She did not ask what the meat was. She did not want to know. It tasted vaguely like rabbit. It did not taste like pork, or she might not have eaten it. Just in case.

She had been brought to a city. Not a large city, no, but a city nonetheless. It was filled with people of all ages, but all were red skinned and with black hair, like the classic stereotype of “Red” Indians, except it wasn’t body paint. And they were even less “Indian” than those who were wrongly called that. And they certainly weren’t savages. True, they wore little clothing, but it wasn’t needed down here. They didn’t have computers and the internet, but they didn’t need those either.

Cleaned up and in modern clothes, Rora, as she named herself, would stand out, but people would probably get used to her.

They answered each other’s questions as Rora showed her the city; how they lived; how they lived without sunlight. She wondered at the red skin.

Rora practically walked into a stray flame, and Peri wanted to stop her, but then she held back, watched. The woman was unharmed by it.

Red and fire. People of fire. They didn't call themselves that; they called themselves humans. Peri figured that any aliens they met would call themselves that, or rather when you translated it, it would mean the same.

Us. People. All people were "the people" to themselves. But there was something about that casualness with the fire that worried her.

Adaptation? She was not sure how one adapted to not being burned. Or maybe the red was body paint after all.

"Are you naturally that color?"

"Of course. Are you naturally that one?"

Peri laughed. "I'm asking because some people like to paint themselves. And the flame...that would..."

"Have harmed you?" Rora frowned. "The fire is how we stay alive."

"Which is why you..." Might not be able to leave—Peri trailed off before finishing the thought. But Rora was determined to try. If they could find a safe exit.

Peri wanted to lose her in the caves, find her way to the surface on her own.

Now that Rora knew the Earth was not a frozen iceball, the damage had been done. The next sinkhole might be deeper, might open up their city to the sky.

Rora was right. Somebody had to go. Somebody had to be the scout.

"I don't want you to come with me," Peri told her.

"I have to."

"Somebody has to. I..." Peri turned towards her, "don't know that I want it to be you."

“You find me attractive.”

“Yes. And I don’t think it’s just because you saved my life back there.”

“Then you will be my guide.”

Peri gave it up as hopeless. Rora turned towards another tunnel.

“Wait. It might not be frozen and nothing but ice up there, but it’s still cold. Do you have blankets?”

“I can find some.”

Rora did, made of the same woven fabric as the mattress. Once Peri had wrapped one around herself, they finally left, though not the way she had come in. They departed upward via another spiral staircase, which led them to a slanting tunnel.

It was night out there, she realized. Dark night, not long until dawn.

“Cold!” Rora exclaimed.

Peri nodded. “We can’t be out in the cold for long. We look, we see if there are signs of civilization, and if not, you go back into the cave, and I’ll signal for help.”

Peri stepped outside into the Siberian cold, wanting to flee, but looked around as well as she could, glad she had kept her boots. Nothing visible except the coming dawn.

“I’m going for help. You should stay in the cave where it’s warm.”

“First, I want to see.” Rora looked around. She took in the plants, she took in the stars overhead. “So many lights.”

“Stars.”

“Stars...” The word sounded disused to her. Pink glow was forming along the horizon. “What’s that?”

“The dawn. The sun will rise soon, and things will be...bright. You might want...” Peri rummaged in her bag, glad she hadn’t abandoned



that either. “These.” She offered Rora a set of sunglasses.

The red-skinned woman put them on.

The sun peeked above the horizon.

Rora cried out and covered her eyes.

“Go back into the cave.”

But she was frozen in place. “Bright. So bright.”

“It is.” This was part of what she was afraid of. Rora’s eyes either could not adapt to the sunlight or had lost the human ability to adapt quickly. Peri had once been told that a horse’s eyes could take as long as fifteen minutes to adapt to a rapid change of light.

Adaptation. It was all about adaptation.

“I..” Rora started to back into the cave, her arm still across her eyes. The full light of the rising sun hit her.

She screamed, and the red of her skin turning black almost immediately. A hideous smell arose as she burned, far too quickly for Peri to do anything about it.

Adapted to fire. Part of fire. But apparently not able to tolerate light. Infrared. Ultraviolet.

Whatever evolution or magic had allowed Rora and her people to survive the flames of the inner earth had come with a terrible cost.

Peri closed her eyes, unable to help, unable to do anything.

Then, she turned and walked back into the cave. If Rora’s people did not know, they would follow her.

Peri was dead. She knew that rescue teams would never find her, and therefore, she was dead.


Thus she would make sure nobody else burned. She would find a way to help them before the ice melt broke into their refuge.

Peri steeled her shoulders and walked back into the underground city.

---

*Born in Nottingham, England, Jennifer R. Povey now lives in Northern Virginia, where she writes everything from heroic fantasy to stories for Analog. Her most recent book is the compelling urban fantasy Daughter of Fire. Additionally, she is a writer, editor, and designer of tabletop RPG supplements for a number of companies. Her interests include horseback riding, Doctor Who, and attempting to out-weird her various friends and professional colleagues.*

Clock the chaos mage. A stranger out of time, hidden in the folds of shadow. He is the guardian of Coney Island's supernatural borderlands, and the only thing standing between our reality and the demons that thirst to destroy it.



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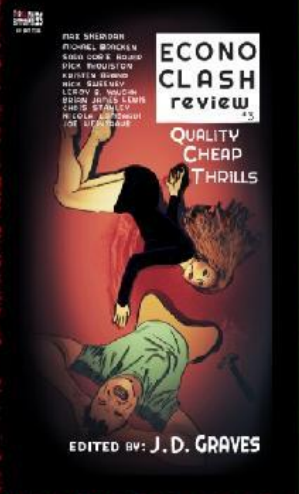
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# **Blue-Like-The-Sky**

**By SPENCER E. HART**

*Slayer-Of-Wolf's hunting party is alarmed when a mysterious fire falls from the sky—stranger still is the mysterious blue woman he finds where the fire has landed!*

Slayer-Of-Wolf turned his gaze upwards at the strange rumbling in the sky. The few clouds did not portend a storm; the mid-morning sun shone down on the land, raising a mist as the night's frost melted away.

There! A thing high in the sky, glowing red like fire, passed overhead with a roar like an avalanche. A sudden strong gust of wind nearly knocked Slayer-Of-Wolf from his feet, forcing him to plant his spear into the thawing ground.

A cry rose from the rest of the hunting party as the red thing fell like a swooping eagle towards Ice Mountain. A sudden flare of fire marked the spot where it hit. A cloud of black smoke rose from the side of the mountain.

As Slayer-Of-Wolf turned his face back towards the other men, he saw something out of the corner of his eye. A dark shape tumbled in the sky. No, there were two of them. Red billowed above them like tiny clouds, the plummeting slowed, and the shapes soared downwards in a spiral like stricken birds.

Another roaring blast of wind came, this time from the direction of Ice Mountain in the distance. Slayer-Of-Wolf maintained his footing but, from the yelled curse behind him, guessed someone had not.

One of the things looked like it was going to fall just beyond the line of hills to the north, while the other was closer to the mountain. Slayer-Of-Wolf watched until the shapes dropped below his sight, then turned to the men.

“Ho! Strong-Like-Bear! Are you hurt?” he called to the big man on the ground next to an elk carcass on a litter.

“I tripped when the big wind came,” answered Strong-Like-Bear as he got to his fur-clad knees.

Another man gasped out, “Was it a sign from the Sky-Father? A warning?”

Slayer-Of-Wolf said, “That, I do not know. But The People must be told of this.

“Strong-Like-Bear,” he turned to the big man who was now on his feet, “lead the others. Take the elk back to The People so the women and children will not go hungry this day. Tell my father Long-Tooth and Caster-Of-Bones what we saw here.”

“What of you, Slayer-Of-Wolf?” asked Strong-Like-Bear.

“I will scout the hills there,” he pointed to the north, “to see if the things from the sky might be a danger. It looked like one fell not too far away.”

“Alone?”

“If there is a danger, then only one man is risked. If I do not return by sunset tomorrow, then consult Caster-Of-Bones for my fate,” said Slayer-Of-Wolf.

Strong-Like-Bear looked deeply into the eyes of the other man and removed the covering from his hand. Slayer-Of-Wolf did the same, and they grasped hands skin-to-skin.

“You will come back to us,” said Strong-Like-Bear, “for are you not the one who killed a wolf on your first hunt as a youth?”

“The Sky-Father was watching over me that day. He guided my spear to the beast’s heart as it snapped at my throat.”

“Then if this is a sign, perhaps it is fitting that you be the one to go,” said Strong-Like-Bear.

“It might be so,” replied Slayer-Of-Wolf.

The men broke the grasp, and Slayer-Of-Wolf watched as the rest of the hunting party picked the litter back off the ground and started towards camp.

He turned to the north and began walking towards the line of hills. Smoke still rose from the side of Ice Mountain.

**I**t was past high sun when Slayer-Of-Wolf neared the top of the low hill. He crouched down, careful to keep his leggings clear of the wet ground; the sun had melted the bits of snow on the slope. He pulled his fur hood down and listened carefully.

There was a tiny hiss of wind in the air. An eagle cried in the distance. The small sounds of his own breath...

Slayer-Of-Wolf splayed his legs and waddled slowly up towards the crest of the hill until he could just barely see over it.

The red cloud had fallen to earth in the little valley below. It lay stretched flat across the ground. A short distance from the cloud lay the dark thing, long like a great fallen tree shorn of its branches. It almost seemed to shine in the sun like polished stone. Hints of white mist rose above it. The ground was torn up leading away from one end of the thing, as if a herd had stampeded through.

Slayer-Of-Wolf watched for some time. At one point the wind picked up, and the fallen cloud seemed to ripple slightly as if it wanted to regain the sky but was too weak.

When he turned his gaze back towards the dark thing, Slayer-Of-Wolf spotted something out of the corner of his eye. Another, much smaller shape lay past the shining dark thing. He thought it looked about the size of a fallen man.

Keeping an eye on the scene below, Slayer-Of-Wolf crept over the top and slowly started down into the valley. He had to use his spear to keep from sliding; the sun was turning the ground here to slick mud.

As he neared the bottom of the slope, Slayer-Of-Wolf lost sight of the smaller object behind the shining treelike thing. The closer he got, the more sure he was that it was a man. It did not move.

Keeping away from the fallen red cloud, Slayer-Of-Wolf circled around through the torn-up ground. The long gouge was as wide as the shining

thing and deep enough that the earth remained hard and frozen at the bottom.

The man was strangely-clad. Instead of the brownish furs and hides worn by The People, he wore a smooth, tightly fitted garb of yellowish hide. Despite being spattered and discolored with mud, the shade reminded him briefly of Golden-Flower's hair.

Slayer-Of-Wolf felt a pang of sorrow in his heart. *If only she had not died in childbirth before the winter...*

The man lay on his face in the mud, arms and legs outstretched. Footprints led from the big thing half a spear-throw away. Something was gripped in one hand. It glinted in the sun almost like the tree-thing.

Slayer-Of-Wolf crouched down and used the end of his spear for leverage to turn the man over—then gasped in surprise.

It was not a man.

It was a woman.

There was no mistaking the curves through that close-fitting hide.

Her delicate face was an odd, bluish shade, almost like that of one who had frozen to death.

Slayer-Of-Wolf put his face down close, and felt the tiniest wisp of air caress his cheek.

She was not dead!

*At least, not yet.*

Afraid that she was slowly freezing from long exposure to the chill and wind, Slayer-Of-Wolf whipped off his fur cape and spread it over her. He tucked her arms and legs underneath so that only her head was showing.

Then he crouched over her face again, took a deep breath, and held it for a few heartbeats. Slayer-Of-Wolf pressed his lips to hers and blew the warmed air into her mouth.



After a few repetitions of this, he was rewarded with a cough and obvious movement of her breathing. Her lips were not as cold and stiff as he had feared; in fact they, were rather soft and smooth.

Slayer-Of-Wolf watched her for a short time, but the woman's face retained the slight bluish color. If anything, it deepened slightly so that it was more the hue of a clear sky.

It was strange. Slayer-Of-Wolf had heard rumors from other bands to the south that there were people in the world with skin almost the color of tree-bark, but nothing like this blue woman.

He turned his gaze on the trail of footprints leading back to the tree-thing. A breeze momentarily cleared the rising white mist away, and he saw that one spot on the thing had a large circular hole in it. The footprints led to the hole.

Rising to his feet, Slayer-Of-Wolf walked carefully towards the shining thing. It was round like a true tree, and so thick it rose as high as his chest.

He raised his spear and prodded the thing. It gave off a sound like two stones being tapped together. He looked at the hole. It was big enough around that a man could enter if he slid on his belly.

Slayer-Of-Wolf poked the end of his spear into the hole a bit. He felt nothing, so shoved it in a bit deeper, until he heard a tap and felt something hard beyond. There seemed to be a fair-sized space within.

He was faced with only one obvious conclusion: the woman had come out from the space in the tree-thing.

The tree-thing and the red cloud had fallen to earth from the sky, after the roaring thing had passed and struck Ice Mountain.

So the woman had come from the sky inside the shining thing that lay on the ground before him.

*Then that would mean she had been sent by the Sky-Father!*

Recoiling away from the thing before him, Slayer-Of-Wolf turned back towards where she lay on the ground.

He saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Something was coming from past the fallen red cloud. More than one, low to the ground.

*Wolves.*

**T**here were two of them, approaching warily. Gray-brown and sleek, their heads were half the height of a man above the ground.

Slayer-Of-Wolf quickly scanned his surroundings. There were only two wolves; where was the rest of the pack?

His eyes fell back on the woman from the sky. She was still unmoving and would be easy prey out in the open.

Leaning his spear against the tree-thing, Slayer-Of-Wolf rushed over to the woman and picked her up in his arms. Hurrying back to the shining thing, he shoved her headfirst into the circular hole.

Her legs still protruded when the two wolves neared, and he grabbed up his spear with both hands. With his back against the tree-thing, Slayer-Of-Wolf shouted out at the beasts as he thrust his spear out.

Yipping and snarling, the wolves crouched, but stopped advancing.

Something made Slayer-Of-Wolf turn his head just then. Perhaps it was the Sky-Father, watching over him again.

A huge white wolf rushed silently at him from the side, jaws slavering.

Jerking his spear around, Slayer-Of-Wolf was nearly knocked off his feet as the beast impaled itself, the spear ripping red into the white chest.

The frothing jaws snapped at his throat, then the wolf shuddered and fell to the ground, dragging the spear downwards with it.

A weight slammed into Slayer-Of-Wolf's back as another beast leaped on him with a snarl.

A third wolf tore into his leg as he struggled to free the spear from the dead one.

As pain shot through his leg, Slayer-Of-Wolf felt himself falling to the ground.

He let go of the spear, drew his knife and stabbed down at the fury tearing at him.

Red spattered from the beast as Slayer-Of-Wolf stabbed again and again with the bone blade. The wolf let go with a yip and thrashed around wildly.

Rolling on the muddy ground, Slayer-Of-Wolf managed to dislodge the wolf from his back.

A flash of fur and snarling fangs were coming for his face. Slayer-Of-Wolf raised the knife one last time, then his vision faded...

A face came towards him out of the darkness.

A woman's face.

Golden-Flower?

*Thank you, Sky-Father, for bringing us together again...*

She spoke to him, but Slayer-Of-Wolf could not understand her words. It almost sounded like the songs of the birds in springtime.

He opened his eyes.

The slanting sun shone in his face, and the sky was a clear blue. He was sitting up, with something hard behind his back. There was a slight chill on his exposed cheeks.

A shape blocked out the sun.

It trilled at him.

A face. A woman's face.

But not Golden-Flower.

It was the woman from the Sky-Father, and her face was blue like the sky.

Blue-Like-The-Sky.

He would have to call her something, and since he could not know her true name, that's what he would call her.

With a flash, Slayer-Of-Wolf remembered the attacking beasts, the fangs coming for his throat. The tearing pain in his leg.

He reflexively reached his hand down towards his leg and realized he felt no pain. His hide legging had been cut away, and there was a smooth, hard substance in its place.

He realized he was leaning up against the tree-thing. Slayer-Of-Wolf looked into the face of the woman, into her yellow, almost cat-like eyes.

Her small mouth opened in what he took to be a sign of sympathy, as she huddled in his fur cape.

He tried to speak, but could only cough and clear his throat for several heartbeats.

“Blue-Like-The-Sky, did you treat my wound?” he managed at last.

She made the birdsong again.

“Your language is strange to me,” Slayer-Of-Wolf said.

He gestured to the leg with the hard substance on it, then pointed at the woman.

She pointed at herself with a yellow-gloved hand, then the leg, and nodded her head up and down.

“I am called Slayer-Of-Wolf, of those called The People,” he said.

She tilted her head as if trying to understand.

He looked about the area and spotted the three bloody wolf corpses lying in the mud. His bone knife still protruded from the neck of one.

He pointed at the nearest carcass. “Wolf.”

She looked at the dead beast and sounded a note.

“Wolf,” he repeated.

She made the same sound again.

He pointed to himself. “Slayer.”

She called a different sound.

He jabbed his chest with his finger. “Slayer.”

She repeated the noise.

“Slayer-Of-Wolf,” he announced, while pointing to himself again.

She made a complicated trilling that seemed to combine the two previous sounds. Then she smiled at him, as though pleased she had understood.

“And you are Blue-Like-The-Sky,” he said.

He indicated the air above. “Sky.”

“Blue,” he said as he pointed at her.

She made two new sounds.

Slayer-Of-Wolf pointed at her again, then above his head. “Blue. Sky.”

She nodded her head.

“You are Blue-Like-The-Sky,” he announced as he pointed at the woman once more.

She responded with another nod, then a long sequence of birdsong.

“I think it might be a long time before we understand each other’s words,” Slayer-Of-Wolf sighed.

She reached down beside her and lifted something from the ground. It was shaped like a short length of branch the width of her hand, but smooth and colored like green grass.

She reached the green object out near his hand and twisted one end. The end came off, and she offered it to him.

Slayer-Of-Wolf looked into the thing. It was hollow, yet filled with what looked like water. He gently took it from her and placed it under his nose. There was a slight tang from the green thing, but the liquid itself was odorless.

He took a tiny sip, just enough to wet his lips.

It was water, pure and clear like melted snow. He took a bigger swallow, then handed the container back.

“Thank you, Blue-Like-The-Sky,” he said.

He looked about and noticed that several items were arranged on the ground near the circular hole in the tree-thing. There was a flat thing like a blanket, but the color of fire. On top of that, the woman sat, keeping off the muddy ground.

There was a sort of large pouch, but it looked hard-sided like it was made of a strange wood. Blue-Like-The-Sky placed the green water canteen in the pouch and pulled out a small black object that fit in her hand. She turned it towards Slayer-Of-Wolf.

It looked like a sort of stone. Yet in one spot it was red like blood. As he watched, the red spot faded, then reappeared. A slight buzz like a gnat sounded.

He stared at the stone-thing in puzzlement. The spot faded and came back several times, and every time the buzzing was heard.

Slayer-Of-Wolf looked up at the woman. “I do not understand it, Blue-Like-The-Sky. It must be a magic of the Sky-Father.”

She pointed a finger at the object, then turned and pointed to the north. In the direction of Ice Mountain. She whistled some birdsong again.

Slayer-Of-Wolf looked to the north and remembered the thing that had streaked across the sky and hit the mountain. He no longer saw any smoke.

“The big roaring thing in the sky went to the mountain,” he said as he waved a hand overhead. “And the red cloud dropped the tree-thing here.” He pointed to the large black thing.

Blue-Like-The-Sky nodded her head, put the small rock-object down. She pointed to the tree-thing with one hand, while pointing to the north with the other. Then she brought her hands together, then apart, with one pointing again at the tree-thing and the other towards Ice Mountain.

He suddenly remembered; there had been two red clouds falling from the sky with their tumbling burdens. The second had looked like it was going to come to earth closer to the mountain.

“There was another tree-thing,” he started, “and it fell in that direction.” He pointed towards Ice Mountain.

The woman nodded excitedly and sounded several notes. She pointed at herself, then to the tree-thing, then to the north.

“There is another Sky-Person, in the other thing?” Slayer-Of-Wolf asked.

She pointed to herself again, then to the black stone that was still showing the red spot that came and went, then to the north. She stood up and took a couple steps in that direction.

“You wish to go to the north, to find the other tree-thing? The magic stone will guide you?” he asked.

Blue-Like-The-Sky smiled as if pleased he had understood.

Slayer-Of-Wolf looked up at the sky, and noticed that the day was almost gone.

“Night will come soon,” he said. “We must take shelter from the cold.” He managed to stand up awkwardly on the stiff leg and hobbled over to the nearest dead wolf. He pulled his bone knife free and surveyed the area again. The only other thing nearby except the tree-thing was the fallen red cloud.

“Forgive me, sky-cloud, but you must serve Blue-Like-The-Sky one last time, to keep her warm through the night.”

The rising sun glinted on the night’s snow as Slayer-Of-Wolf and Blue-Like-The-Sky broke camp. He had fashioned a crude tent from part of the red cloud and secured it over the tree-thing with the long thongs that trailed from it. This had kept out the worst of the wind and snow. Now he bundled up the piece of cloud and slung it over his shoulder.

Blue-Like-The-Sky emerged from the hole in the tree-thing, pulling her hard pouch out with her. Her yellow hide outfit was mostly obscured by furs. Slayer-Of-Wolf had given her his own, and fashioned crude replacements from the wolf-skins for himself.

She pulled out the magic stone and looked to the north, then turned to face Slayer-Of-Wolf. She sounded a long trilling.

“Blue-Like-The-Sky, I do not understand your language of the Sky-People,” Slayer-Of-Wolf said, “but clearly the Sky-Father wills that you go where the magic stone tells you. Just as clearly, he wills that I go with you since I passed the test of the wolves he sent.”

He pointed his spear to the north and began walking towards the next hill to leave the little valley. He turned his head to make sure the blue woman was following, then adjusted his pace so she could keep up.



**B**y noon, they had climbed three more hills and crossed two more little valleys. Clumps of stunted trees and shrubs began to appear in areas sheltered from the wind. The snow began to soften in the sun, even as the elevation gradually increased as they neared Ice Mountain.

Periodically, Blue-Like-The-Sky would halt and consult the magic stone. She sang at Slayer-Of-Wolf and pointed out adjustments to their course. She seemed to be getting weaker, struggling to keep up as the morning had progressed. Yet she grew more excited as the beating of the blood-colored spot increased in tempo.

At the top of the next hill, Slayer-Of-Wolf spotted the second red cloud below. It was tangled in a clump of trees and partially covered in the previous night's snow.

The second tree-thing lay against a large boulder a short distance from the trees. It did not look straight like the first thing from the sky, but was twisted slightly around the huge rock.

Blue-Like-The-Sky sang softly as she looked down at the scene before them.

“I think the red cloud caught in the trees, and the sky-thing swung about and hit the rock,” Slayer-Of-Wolf said.

He took her hand and helped her start down the slope.

They approached the tree-thing slowly. Slayer-Of-Wolf noted that there was a circular opening in the side, just like the first sky-thing.

There were recent tracks in the snow near the opening. Not the tracks of a man, he thought, but a beast. He bent down to examine them as the woman went to look inside the opening.

*Bear. A large one.*

Suddenly alert to the possibility of a nearby predator, Slayer-Of-Wolf backed towards the tree-thing as he swept his gaze around the area.

One end of the little valley was obscured by the patch of trees where the red cloud lay. The boulder blocked his view to the other side. The tracks seemed to criss-cross from the rock to the trees.

He looked behind him as Blue-Like-The-Sky let out a sequence of birdsong.

She was pointing into the opening in the tree-thing and shaking her head from side to side.

Out of the corner of his eye, Slayer-Of-Wolf saw the red cloud ripple in the breeze. Also something else: a spot of bright yellow among the trees. The same color as the hides under the woman's furs.

"There," he said as he pointed.

Blue-Like-The-Sky began walking towards the trees, with Slayer-Of-Wolf trailing a bit behind, still on the alert for danger.

She was nearly to the red cloud when the bear appeared on his left flank, walking from around the patch of trees.

Slayer-Of-Wolf turned to face it, trying to keep the creature's attention focused on himself.

The bear walked towards him, sniffing the air. The beast let out a rumble.

*The wolf-skins. It smells the wolf-skins.*

Slayer-Of-Wolf stood up as tall as he could and waved the spear over his head. "Yayaya! Ho! Ho!" he shouted out.

The bear hesitated for the space of three heartbeats. Then it reared up on its back legs and growled.

Slayer-Of-Wolf slowly backed away, still waving his spear and yelling. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Blue-Like-The-Sky had reached the trees and was frantically digging in her pouch.

The bear surged forward, falling back on all fours as a massive paw swiped out.

Claws ripped into the layers of wolf-skins on his side as the force of the blow knocked Slayer-Of-Wolf down. He toppled to the side and barely kept a grip on his spear as his body struck the snow.

Another paw came at him, and he tried to roll away before it could pin him down. The bear's roaring snout was only an arm's length away.

Slayer-Of-Wolf tried to smack it on the nose with his spear-shaft but failed to connect. The bear came closer.

In desperation, he held the spear above him to fend off the snout. The beast's jaws clamped down on the spear-shaft and crunched it neatly in half.

With death only a hand-breadth away, Slayer-Of-Wolf saw only the mighty teeth coming for his face.

*Sky-Father...*

The bear let out a high-pitched roar and spun about, away from him. Slayer-Of-Wolf became aware of a strong smell of smoke.

The bear's rear-end was on fire.

Orange flames licked along the brown fur, from the beast's tail up along the ridge of its back.

A tree branch on the ground behind the bear roared fire and smoke. A fur-clad figure darted back away, towards the trees.

Slayer-Of-Wolf watched through hazy eyes as the bear ran for a snowbank and plunged into it.

Blue-Like-The-Sky chirped and sang as she ran for the yellow visible near the red cloud.

*She's safe,* thought Slayer-Of-Wolf.

Then his head swam and he could no longer keep his eyes open.

There was a pounding sound in the dark. Slayer-Of-Wolf could not tell which direction it came from.

*Is this it, Sky-Father? Have I fallen and taken the last journey?*

*But where is Golden-Flower? I cannot see her in this blackness.*

The booming softened. Now it almost sounded like sharp gusts of wind, quickly rising and falling in endless repetitions.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the darkness thinned into a grayish haze. There was a shape in front of him.

As the haze continued to lighten, Slayer-Of-Wolf could make out that it was a fur-clad form, kneeling on the ground, head bowed down.

Suddenly his eyes came into focus. There was a patch of bright yellow visible among the furs.

Blue-Like-The-Sky was huddled over something on the ground among the stunted trees. Her whole body shook as she cried out again and again.

Slayer-Of-Wolf found he could not speak, and his side throbbed where the bear had struck. He managed to get to his knees and scan the area. There was no sign of the bear.

He half-crawled, half-staggered through the snow towards Blue-Like-The Sky.

He could see that she knelt next to a yellow-clad form on the ground, its limbs splayed wildly about it. Items from her pouch lay strewn nearby.

Despite his blue face, the man's blood was red, streaked and spattered crimson on the white snow. Something had been at the body.

Slayer-Of-Wolf managed to get fully to his feet and cleared his throat. The woman seemed unaware of his presence, for she continued to cry out in birdsong.

He placed a hand on her shoulder and tugged her slightly away from the body. “Come, Blue-Like-The-Sky. There is nothing you can do. His spirit has gone back to the Sky-Father.”

Her cries stopped, and she turned to face him, tears still streaming down her face.

She stared at him a moment, then reached down for one of the small objects nearby on the ground. She raised it to the tear in his furs, his side still oozing blood. There was a sharp hiss, and a feeling of numbing cold spread at the site of the injury.

“Thank you, Blue-Like-The-Sky,” he said.

Slayer-Of-Wolf took her hand, pulled her to her feet, and led her away from the body.

Slayer-Of-Wolf grunted as he forced the rock into the circular opening, sealing the battered tree-thing.

*Rest well, Sky-Man,* he thought.

Blue-Like-The-Sky stood nearby, head lowered as she averted her gaze from where Slayer-Of-Wolf had returned the body of the blue man.

The wind whipped up, blowing curls of snow around his legs, as Slayer-Of-Wolf turned to face Ice Mountain.

*What does it mean, Sky-Father?* he pondered. *I fought the wolves and the bear you sent. I protected Blue-Like-The-Sky, but it was too late to save her man.*

He stared off into the distance for a time, then felt a hand tug on his shoulder.

He turned away from the mountain and looked into her face. Her tears had stopped, and she wore a stern expression. Despite her strange skin and yellow eyes, Slayer-Of-Wolf was again reminded of Golden-Flower. Something about the determined set of her jaw.

He pointed to the south.

“Blue-Like-The-Sky, will you return with me to The People? Perhaps Caster-Of-Bones will have some insight into the Sky-Father’s purpose in sending you to earth.”

She slid her hand down from his shoulder to his own hand, and gripped it tightly. Turning to the south, she began walking back towards the hill.

For once, it was Slayer-Of-Wolf who had to hurry to match the other’s pace.

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*Born in the year of the Moon Landing, Spencer E. Hart was immersed in stories from a young age. His adventure stories have been published by Cirsova (3 so far), Storyhack, and DMR Books. He blogs at [spencerhartwriting.wordpress.com](http://spencerhartwriting.wordpress.com).*

# **Doomsday Shard**

**By KEN MCGRATH**

*Serenity Deadline has been hired to jack the Doomsday Shard, a deadly piece of hardware that could end the world—but she's not the only woman after it!*

As she was running away, Serenity Deadline's left leg, the mechanical one, froze and she fell forwards. It probably saved her life as shots whizzed overhead a moment later. Pulling her own weapon as she dropped, Serenity hit the ground with her shoulder and rolled, firing off a flurry of her own. They flew in a wild arc, but it was enough to force the two chasing Skull-Facers to have to veer wide, off to either side.

Serenity squeezed an eye shut and focused on the right one. It glared back over its shoulder at her, eyes black pits in a white, metallic, rust-pocked face, and lifted its own weapon.

"Not today," she exhaled, then pulled the trigger.

There was a spit of sparks, and the Skull-Facer's head erupted, a flowering burst of blood and oil, red and black. It rolled to a halt, slumped over at the waist where flesh met metal, its lower half, an engine and tank treads created by the crazed machinist Petronella, useless, now that the organic body was dead.

Behind her, Serenity Deadline could hear the other Skull-Facer turning. Leaning over backwards she pulled the trigger again, only this time to hear the blaster click, empty and useless, its charge depleted. Angrily she hefted the heavy weapon at the Skull-Facer, who watched with bored amusement as it landed harmlessly and sent up a cloud of dust. Serenity grabbed her useless left leg with both hands, cursing the dead metal, and forced herself to spin around.

"Come on," she growled fiercely. "I'm not gone yet."

She glanced around, looking for something she could use to defend herself. Slowly, the Skull-Facer drove forward. It was naked, and Serenity could see the tight, moist blackness just below its belly, where the chassis and wheels were. The surgery wasn't clean, and the Skull-Facer's well-muscled, male torso was marked with angry red and black wounds. This one's face hadn't been replaced, but the eyes staring out of the oil-streaked flesh were as blank as its companions'. Fumes and smoke surrounded it as it advanced.



It edged forward until its left-front tyre touched her mechanical leg. For a moment Serenity thought maybe it recognised some shared kinship with her through their replacement parts, then it laughed, a cross between a bark and an engine backfiring, and revved forward, slowly crushing her foot under its weight.

Sweat broke out on Serenity's face, but she refused to scream. Her stomach knotted and froze.

"Come on, come on," she muttered, looking around frantically, trying to find some means of escape. She wasn't going to let it end like this. This was no way to die.

The Skull-Facer had crushed her ankle when it stopped, grinned and levelled its gun. She looked up into the dark hole that was pointed at her, and there was the thundercrack of a shot. A black circle appeared in the middle of the Skull-Facer's forehead. Blood and oil gulped from the wound as it slumped backwards on itself, like an elderly relative fallen asleep in an armchair.

"Figured you could do with some help, Serenity," a familiar voice called out.

"About bloody time you showed up," Serenity called over her shoulder. "I almost thought you were going to let them have me."

The petite form of Belladonna Merrafax removed itself from the shelter of a nearby structure, a blaster held loosely in her hand.

"You're a fool for getting caught," the sneak-thief chastised, her voice sharp and heavily accented. She grinned down at Serenity. "Anyway, you're my lift out of here."

"Wow, nice to know you'll only keep me alive so long as I'm useful," Serenity spat, then gestured at the deceased Skull-Facer, still parked on her foot. "Help me get this thing off of me or nobody is going anywhere."

Belladonna leaned into the Skull-Facer. With a grunt and shove, she managed to roll it enough to free Serenity.

“Didn’t think you had it in you,” Serenity said, surprised, as she was helped to her feet. Belladonna was a pixie little thing, who barely reached her shoulder.

“What happened? Did you get it done?”

“Yeah,” Serenity tried putting some weight on her damaged foot. It was unstable, but it took it. It’d do for now. “I was placing a Dead-Out on the last of their flyers when those two tagged me. I was hoping to lure them around the side, but then my bloody leg went. Must have been from being in the water so long. Anyway, how’d you do? Get the prize?”

Belladonna opened her jacket and removed a canvas bag. She loosened the top and held it for Serenity to look. Inside, housed in a metal and glass tube, was a fist-sized rock. It glowed with a sickly green light.

“Nice.” Serenity pursed her lips. “So that’s the infamous Doomsday Shard. Hard to imagine something that small can contain so much destructive power. Any word yet from Shun?”

As if on cue a massive explosion detonated at the far side of the complex, sending a fireball and a black cloud into the sky. Three more followed in quick succession, from different areas of the island. Alarms squealed into life.

“That’ll be her now,” Belladonna smiled, tucking the Doomsday Shard back inside her jacket. “Let’s move.”

“That one,” Serenity leaned on Belladonna’s shoulder as they limped towards a row of Thopters.

The launch pad was near the edge of the cliff, and from this vantage point Serenity could see why Petronella had chosen to set up base here. Ragged Rock was less of an island and more a mountain that jutted from the sea, like the curved tooth or tusk of some giant, prehistoric sea monster, four miles off the northern coast of Braslavia. The dark, choppy waters of the Blo-Dask Sea crashed non-stop against its uninviting beaches, which made it the perfect base of operations for a maniacal, wannabe despot.

As Serenity Deadline hauled herself into the cockpit of a Thopter, she thought back on how she and Belladonna had washed ashore two days ago, along with Shun, the woman who'd recruited them for this job. Ragged Rock was so well-protected by the natural elements the only way to breach it was to use the most primitive of lo-fi solutions possible, floating there on rafts. No wonder her leg was wrecked.

Serenity slid into the pilot's seat and pulled the form-sheet over her, like a duvet. It settled in, adhering to her curves and edges until she was fully enveloped. The helmet came down and covered her from forehead to upper lip, and the machine became one with her eyes, an extension of her senses.

"Ready for liftoff." When Serenity spoke, her voice came from the walls of the Thopter.

There were more explosions outside, and then Shun appeared, running madly towards them, whooping Skull-Facers not far behind.

"Killing their flyers now," Serenity said and triggered the Dead-Outs she had placed in the engines of the other Thopters, blowing their circuits.

She lifted off slowly and flew in low, towards Shun. Belladonna, strapped in, hung by the open doorway, one arm dangling out. Shun leaped. Belladonna grabbed hold of her and Serenity tilted so that Shun fell into the ship. Shots hit the underside of the flyer, but Serenity, wincing at each impact, kept them airborne.

"All their Thopters have been disabled. Once out of blaster range, we'll have clear skies ahead, for a while, at least," Serenity's voice boomed around the interior. "This'll keep them busy for now."

The Thopter turned, tail up, guns firing. Shots ate up the ground around the launchpad and chewed through Skull-Facers.

"Buckle in tight, ladies, and sorry about the turbulence, we're being rocked from all sides. That door is jammed open, so steer clear."

With that, they flew out over the edge of the cliff.

“So, did you get it?” Shun asked.

Belladonna nodded. She removed the tube containing the shard and handed it over.

“Beautiful yet deadly,” Shun’s eyes reflected the green glow. She took it with one hand and with the other pulled a gun from her breast holster.

Belladonna froze as Shun fired.

The blast went just by the left of Belladonna’s head, and there was a rasping noise from the Skull-Facer who had been trying to crawl in the doorway. It lost its grip and then, with a whip of air, its corpse was whooshed away to where waves smashed against the coastline far below.

Shun smiled. “Be a shame to lose you after having come so far.”

Belladonna let out a breath as Shun opened a metal crate and carefully placed the Doomsday Shard inside then strapped it to the floor of the Thopter. They sat down on either side of the box and waited.

**I**n her control tower, back on Ragged Rock, Petronella smashed a machine-fist into a computer-terminal and crushed down, grinding the material beneath her.

“Work has begun on repairing the Thopters, leader,” one of her lieutenants said. “Do you have a plan to capture them?”

“Good. They won’t get away. I put a tracer in the housing unit. We’ll find them. Have a contingent waiting and ready to depart.”

More explosions rocked the control room, and dust and tiles fell from the ceiling, damaging equipment and sending underlings running. Petronella growled.

**S**erenity figured they were about half a mile out from the coast, flying very low over the water, when something surfaced just below them. It was big and dark, a smooth curve against the waves.

“What’s that?” She barely had time to register it, when a harpoon shot out from beneath the water and embedded itself in the side of the Thopter.

The flyer spun wildly, like an excited dog on a leash, as Serenity tried to pull away. Seconds later, another harpoon thudded hard into the same side, pinning them. The Thopter strained at the end of these tethers, but before Serenity could take evasive action, Belladonna was up on her feet, a knife in hand. With one smooth, flawless motion, she sliced the binds and freed the box containing the Doomsday Shard. She grabbed it and rolled out of the open side-door as the Thopter tilted.

In the three seconds it took Shun to react, it was already too late.

Belladonna landed on the curved, wet metal of the submersible with a thump. A port-hole immediately irised open and then sliced shut once she’d ducked inside. Shun’s blasts struck metal and boiled water as the ropes tying the harpoons went slack from the submersible’s end, and the machine disappeared beneath the waves once more. The Thopter juddered with sudden freedom.

“What the bloody what? What just happened?” Serenity called as she struggled to get the Thopter back under control.

“We got played.” Shun thumped the wall. Below them the water rippled gently, betraying no sign of what it had hidden in its cold depths. “Belladonna’s gone. Took the Shard with her.”

“Petronella?”

“Doubt it, not her style,” said Shun, shaking her head. “Someone else. There’s a third party involved now.”

“So... what’s the plan?”

“We follow them. No one gets paid unless we deliver the Shard.”

Serenity looked out over the vast ocean. “Best of luck with that, Shun, because this little beauty can’t exactly go underwater, so you’d better have something in mind.”

Shun smiled and removed a small black box from inside her jacket. There was a red light flashing in the centre.

“Of course. I always do. I popped a tracer on the container before locking it up in the box. Just on the off chance that it got misplaced.”

Serenity had a swap-out Thopter stashed in an abandoned farmyard a few miles inland from the coast. She leaned against it now and worried at a jagged fingernail with her teeth. She'd replaced her foot with a spare and was wearing fresh clothes, shorts, and a loose shirt.

“You always like to keep that limb uncovered?” Shun indicated Serenity's mechanical leg.

“It keeps getting caught in the material when I wear dresses or trousers. Just easier this way,” Serenity's eyes narrowed. “Anyway, we're not here to talk about fashion. Straight-up, if this is continuing, then I want three-quarters of what you were going to pay Belladonna on top of what you're already paying me.”

Shun couldn't help sneering. “You're renegotiating contracts? Right now?”

Serenity crossed her arms below her breasts and leaned back against the flyer. “Yeah. The job was to lift the Shard from Petronella. I've done that. This is new territory. The moment Belladonna jumped out that door, the old contract was torn up. I'm in this for the paycheck, nothing more.”

Shun pursed her lips and waited. Serenity let out a sigh and rubbed a hand through her short hair. It came away greasy.

“When I was sixteen my father had a heart attack,” she said. “He was piloting a transport flyer for AirFlorCor, with over a hundred people on board. I was in the cockpit with him, and the co-pilot was in the cargo hold, sleeping off a hangover. I stepped over my father's gasping body and took control. Family trade, after all. I knew how to fly, just didn't know how to land yet.”

“That where you got the leg?” Shun asked.

“No, that’s a different story,” Serenity said. “Anyway, when I crashed us down outside of El Mar-Tn, there were plenty of injuries, but no one died. Not even my father. You know how AirFlorCor repaid him? They sued him for the damage caused. I learned a lesson that day: until you’ve got the contract, you don’t do anything. Loyalty, like religion, is for fools.

“Now,” she concluded, “are you going to pay me what I asked, or am I going to take my flyer and get out of here?”

Shun tilted her head back and laughed. “I like you, Serenity. You have a good reputation, which is why I sought you out for this job, and I’m glad. Tell you what, I’ll give you all of that traitor Belladonna’s cut if you stick with me until this is done, and we bring that piece of the Shard in.”

Serenity put out a hand, and they shook on it.

“So how come you ended up hiring me and that back-stabbing dog Belladonna for this job?”

“Politics. The True Government can’t be seen to be taking a stand against Petronella or any of the other upstart factions. I operate in a shadow network, as a go-between. I bring the people with the skills required together to do what needs doing, and leave no threads to lead back to my employers.”

“So, who did Belladonna sell us out for?”

“As of right now,” Shun said, shaking her head, “no idea. What about you, Serenity? What motivates you?”

“Money.”

“Can’t be all. There has to be more than that. Surely there’s something in your life which...”

Serenity cut her off. “Stop trying to find hidden depths to swim in, Shun, there’s nothing there. I’m a straightforward lady. What you see is

what you get.”

“That’s sad.”

“Maybe. There’s a mix of clothes in the back. It’s probably all too big for you, but you never know what’ll show up. Give it a look. Now that I know we’re sticking together I’ve one last thing to do.”

With that, she went over to Petronella’s Thopter, doused it in fuel, then lit a match. She stayed long enough to make sure it caught fire.

The sun was going down by the time the tracer led them to a chalet hidden deep in the mountains. Fallow’s Ridge. It was thick with snow and evergreen trees and the reek of money. Serenity held them steady in hover under cloud cover, and they looked down at a large private lake surrounded by flats and then hills. On the water, docked at a wooden pier, was the submersible that had attacked them. It resembled a giant, mechanical fish.

“That lake connects to the ocean? From all the way up here?” Serenity shook her head in disbelief.

“Looks like it. How close can you get us?”

“There’s not much in the way of security,” Serenity said, pointing out the few obvious guards, who were clad in navy armour, “but still not very close. A direct assault isn’t going to work. Why don’t we try something a little different and see where that gets us?”

“What are you thinking?” Shun raised an eyebrow.

Serenity pulled the Thopter up and away.

Shrick Reck stepped away from his post at the perimeter of the northern end of the lake. He was guarding nothing. Once he was under cover of the treeline, he removed his helmet and yawned, his breath fogging immediately. With a gloved hand, he brushed a strand of



hair away from his eyes. It had been a long shift, and it was still far from over. He was young, barely out of his teens. Bored. Mercenary work was not what he'd figured it would be. It beat working on a Klow-Flower Farm, but not by much. If he didn't get offered a position somewhere good and sunny soon, maybe he'd jack it all in and return home. Surely Papa would let him work on the Farm, for a while at least.

Shrick rummaged about in his utility belt and removed a tube. Sucking on one end of it, he inhaled deeply, the sweet taste filling his mouth, throat, lungs and then the glow spread throughout him. Vapour clouded from his nostrils, and he imagined he looked like some great, majestic dragon.

“Bet that feels good,” a voice, soft as velvet, said in his ear.

The tube fell from his lips as Shrick fumbled for his weapon and a fist connected with his jaw, sending him falling into the snow-covered ground.

Quick hands were all over him, shoving his arms together as something was sprayed on them. He recognised it as Quick-Seal just as it began to heat up. It melted like solder, then solidified in a matter of seconds, fusing his arms together from wrist to elbow. His attacker was small and lithe, fast as a fox as she moved around him, pinning and fusing his armour.

From behind a tree, a lady emerged. She was as tall and broad as him, but it was her mechanical left leg, uncovered and exposed, that caught his eye, until his attention was drawn to the gun she held. It was so large it wouldn't have looked out of place mounted on the front of a tank.

“You even consider triggering any alarm or early warning system, I blow a hole in you the size of that lake.” Her voice was deep and smoky, and her head and face were covered by a silver visor in which Shrick could see his own pathetic reflection.

Shrick shook his own head in return.

“Is that you agreeing or disagreeing?” she asked and extended her weapon.

“Agreeing,” Shrick spluttered. “I’m agreeing. I won’t signal anyone. I promise. Just don’t hurt me.”

“What’s going on here?” the other voice said in his ear, the velvet tones now replaced with spines and shards of glass. Shrick felt the sharp, painful prick of something small and pointed pushing against the soft flesh between the bones under his ear.

“What’s going on here?” Shrick repeated. He really wanted to help but had no idea how.

“We want to know what this…” the one in front of him spread her hands wide, “is all about.”

“This? This is Chief Judge Last’s retreat home.”

“Last, that traitor,” the voice in his ear snarled.

Shrick nodded. In his head, he prayed to the Holy Mother to let him get out of here in one piece and go home to work on the Klow-Flower Farm. He didn’t care if it was a boring life, just so it was a long, long life. The more boring, the better.

“How soon before someone realises you’re missing? When do you have to check in?”

“Unless anyone notices something, not until the end of my shift. Five hours from now. There’s not much to see out here. We’re only a small garrison. Last wasn’t even here herself until a few days ago.”

“So, how’d the submersible get to the lake?”

“It’s linked to the sea. For safety reasons. This mountain is riddled with hidden passages and escape tunnels. There’s a rail-line that runs underground from the pier to the main house. Look, whatever it is you’re doing here, I don’t know anything. Please, don’t kill me. Please.”

The needle went in and fog surrounded Shrick. It closed his eyes as it shut him down, then he collapsed in a snoring heap on the snowy ground.

The entrance to the subterranean monorail tunnel was exactly where they were told it would be and Serenity gained entry easily, using the guard's access cards. The track in front of them only went one way, so they stepped on board and pushed 'GO'.

"What's the play here?" Serenity asked, out of the corner of her mouth when they pulled into the destination station minutes later. There were three purple-armoured guards that she could see.

"Just go with me on this one." Shun crossed her arms behind her back, blasters in each hand. The doors to the train swooshed open, and she stepped out. Serenity followed, trying to look as calm as possible.

"You better not get me killed," she hissed.

The trio of guards at the terminal looked up. One of them glanced back at a tablet, then up again, shook his head and nudged another guard. This second one approached them, a gloved hand held up.

"Halt," the voice crackled through the helmet's speaker.

Shun stopped and pulled her shoulders back. "We are here for the auction," she said, annunciating the words in a fake accent, like they were heavy and coming up from underneath her tongue. "Your colleague at the far end advised us to enter via this route."

The guards traded a glance.

"I don't know anything about an auction," the second one said, raising his weapon.

Shun tilted her head to the side. "You dare point that thing at me?" A sneer had snuck into her voice. She craned her neck forwards. "Don't you know who we are?"

Surprised, the guard wavered and looked back at his colleagues. They shrugged.

“You don’t know who we are?” Shun looked back over her shoulder at Serenity and winked. “They don’t know who we are.”

“They don’t know who we are,” Serenity echoed.

Blasters were revealed, but before the guards could react, there were four quick shots, and, in a moment, the three of them were in a smoking heap on the ground.

“That went well. So how are we going to find the Shard?” Serenity asked, inspecting a map of the complex. “This place is huge.”

Shun growled, nudging over the corpse of one of the guards. The tablet, its screen now cracked, fell from the purple-gloved hand. Shun picked it up then took out the tracer. Her fingers flew around the screen until she found what she was looking for and did a quick treble tap on it. “Okay, I know where we need to go.”

“Excellent. Hopefully, they don’t know us there, either,” Serenity picked up one of the blasters, checked the charge on it, and followed.

The skies above Fallow’s Ridge darkened as attack fighters emerged from the clouds and honed in on the mansion.

In the lead flyer, Petronella, fused to the machine through a physical and mental link, urged her troops forwards.

Lasers lit up the sky and missiles were fired.

Serenity and Shun were deep in the warren of tunnels beneath the chalet when the ceiling began to shake, and there was a series of distant booms.

“Petronella,” Serenity guessed.

Shun nodded in agreement. They paused and glanced around another corner. Servants and guards darted about the place, heading towards the

stairs that led to the surface.

“Maybe it’s what we need, a helpful distraction,” Serenity said.

Shun conferred with her tracer. Serenity rounded a corner, just as another explosion rocked the ceiling overhead, and spotted Belladonna in an open doorway at the corridor’s far end. Without hesitation or comment, Serenity drew her weapon, fired, and began running. The first blast struck the doorframe, and Belladonna ducked inside as others followed, hissing through the air. The look of surprise which crossed her face wasn’t lost on Serenity, before it was cut from view as the heavy door slammed shut.

“Damn it,” Serenity punched the door in a rage.

Shun grabbed her by the shoulder.

“This way, come on,” she shouted and pulled Serenity towards a yellow-lit emergency stairway. Serenity smiled as she noticed the sign indicating this led to the hangar.

The two of them burst out, all guns blazing. Chief Judge Last, obvious in all of her regal attire, and Belladonna were being led across the large space to a Thopter. At the first sign of Serenity and Shun, though, the trio of guards left them and immediately ran towards the interlopers.

Serenity dove behind a nearby trailer and began moving towards an unoccupied Thopter. Shun kept going, blasting away. Two of the guards dropped, chests smoking. The third was sharper, however, and managed to pin Shun down under return fire.

Serenity popped the locks and slid on board a small Thopter as Last cursed at Belladonna. The Chief Judge struggled to clamber into her own waiting flyer; her oversized robes snagged and caught underfoot, making the small doorway impassable. Belladonna elbowed her from behind and shoved her inside the Thopter just as it lifted off the ground.

Shun finally shot the final guard and came at them.

“Hurry up, move,” Belladonna urged, glancing around frantically.

“No room,” Chief Judge Last snapped. “You deal with it.”

She snarled and kicked out at Belladonna, missed, and then, as she tried to grab hold of the doorframe, dropped the canister containing the Doomsday Shard.

“No,” she screamed.

The pilot, clearly unaware of what had happened, took off, and as the flyer turned away, the look on Chief Judge Last’s face was pure fury.

Serenity aimed her Thopter’s guns and began firing at Last’s ship, putting them under pressure to force the escape.

Belladonna, sprawled on the ground, looked at Shun then held out the Shard.

“I’ll sell it to you,” she said, cool but unable to keep the fear from her eyes.

Shun lunged forward and, with an animal roar, punched her. Belladonna’s head cracked against the cold concrete with a bounce. Her lip burst open, red staining her face. The Doomsday Shard slipped from her hand and rolled away. Shun scooped it up.

“You got what you wanted. Just leave,” Belladonna growled.

Through the open hangar door, laser blasts filled the air as if it was a celebration, and explosions continued to rock the complex. Serenity kicked the Thopter into life as she prepared for their getaway. Shun turned the container around in her hands, finding the micro-chip tracers by touch; first hers, then the one she guessed Petronella had placed there. A snarl broke out on her face as she ripped them off the shielding and dove at Belladonna.

The surprised sneak-thief struggled and squirmed as her mouth was forced open and Shun shoved the two tracers inside. With one hand clasped over Belladonna’s mouth, she forced her to swallow them.

Behind the controls of the Thopter, Serenity looked away in disgust.

“There,” Shun growled, her eyes full of hate. “Petronella won’t be too pleased when she finds you instead of her precious Doomsday Shard.”

Belladonna was doubled over, choking, spitting and trying to dislodge the tracers, as Shun jumped on board.

“That was nasty,” Serenity said. She punched the controls and flew them out into the maelstrom.

“It’s not because she double-crossed me. It’s treason. She deserves everything she gets for that.”

“You really are a True Government loyalist, Shun,” Serenity let a smile creep onto her face.

All of a sudden, they were bombarded with blasts from Petronella’s forces. The Thopter went into a mad spin as the tail rotor broke away, like a flaming branch. Shun was flung forwards and slammed against the windscreen hard, the glass cracking like an eggshell where her skull connected with it.

“We’re going down!” Serenity gritted her teeth and ploughed the flyer into the snow.

Flames and sparks jumped from the control panel as the Thopter dug into the ground, burying itself sideways. Flames erupted all along the side, spitting and sparking dangerously.

Serenity opened her eyes. Cold sweat broke out all over her body.

“Shortest flight ever,” she said, then with a deep breath, she braced then hauled herself out from under the pilot’s cover, her entire body screaming at her, nerve endings frayed. Not at all carefully she grabbed hold of Shun and dragged her towards the back of the Thopter, banging her off hard surfaces all along the way and not caring.

Serenity shoved the door-release and pushed. Her shoulder juddered with the force of it. The door didn’t move.

“Please, Goddess, give me something,” she hissed, shook her head, and looked at the door. Then she roared at it, all her frustration and anger venting like a tidal wave from her.

With another breath, Serenity braced her mechanical leg against the door, then jackhammered it. The panel flew off, torn from its hinges. A jagged hole remained.

Serenity pulled Shun from the wreckage, out onto dirt and melted snow. Nothing remained of the peaceful chalet setting from earlier.

She looked around for something familiar and noticed they were at the water’s edge.

“Looks like we’re going for a swim, girl,” Serenity hoisted Shun over her shoulder, taking all the weight on her mechanical leg and made towards the docked submersible.

“I knew there was more to you,” Shun said quietly as they climbed on board.

“Ah, you’re awake again, excellent. Believe me, I was only worried that if you died I wouldn’t get paid,” Serenity grinned, winced, and put Shun down. “Lock up here.”

“Do you know how to drive this thing?” Shun lisped, then closed the hatch. She hawked, spat blood onto the floor, reached into her mouth and wiggled a tooth.

“Probably. How difficult can it be?” Serenity looked out the bubble-windows that were like amphibians’ eyes, out at the sight of Fallow’s Ridge being bombarded.

Shun removed the Doomsday Shard from her jacket. The green glow was eerie in the cockpit. Then the sub dipped below the water and left the chaos behind.

**P**etronella marched through the wreckage of the hangar, a hand-held beeping. She stepped around debris and corpses. The tracer pointed



her towards a fire-escape. Just inside the door, on the ground, was a toolbox, and beside this pliers and snips, both covered in still-wet blood, their blue plastic handles stained horribly with gore. There was also a spool of wire. Then, on the steps, a splatter of vomit and droplets of blood which lead back down into the bowels of the mansion.

The tracer was sitting in the pool of viscus and bright red liquid.

Petronella picked it up with mechanical fingers and with a growl snapped it in half and ground it to dust.

**D**ays later, Serenity Deadline, her head throbbing and the right side of her body still aching, piloted a flyer over high mountains and hidden valleys. She was alone for the first time in what felt like ages. The untouched landscape spread out below her, dark patches of forest and rock smattering the white. Every now and then an animal would burst through the trees and away, kicking up snow in a cloud.

Suddenly, there was a break in the monotony, revealing exposed stone and machinery. Silverdale, a hidden mecca of technology and religion.

Serenity skilfully landed the flyer and, with a sigh, hauled herself from beneath the pilot-blanket. A small, almost imperceptible door, to the side of the huge, intricately carved temple gate, opened and a team of brown-cloaked figures appeared, their faces hidden under vast hoods.

Ignoring everyone, Serenity entered the building and went straight to a room at the back. She stopped only long enough at the doorway to remove a dark-blue, subtly patterned sarong, from a hook. She wrapped this around her, being careful to make sure her mechanical leg was fully covered. Only then did she go inside.

Despite the stone walls and cold air coming in through the vents, the room itself was warm and cosy, small and nice, with heavy hangings covering much of the walls. The only noise came from the steady in-and-out repetition of a complicated breathing-apparatus that was hooked up to the small shape in the oversized bed. Beneath the blankets, there was

a young girl, hidden between colourful sheets; soft toys that had never been played with were piled high.

Serenity walked up and kissed the child on the forehead. White skin, pink lips, dark eyes, like clouds in a snowy sky.

“Mommy missed you, sweetheart,” she whispered gently, then turned to the person who was standing beside the bed, a data-tablet in their red-gloved hands.

Apart from the gloves which extended up over the elbow, the entire rest of the outfit was a shiny black material, tight on the arms and legs, but loose around the body. Where there should have been a head or face, between the shoulders, instead there was a tall cone-shape. It extended a full arm-length from base to tip and was completely featureless except for a series of pin-prick lights that covered the entire front-facing portion of it. These lit up light blue, turning on and off in various patterns.

“How has she been?”

“No change to her condition,” the attendee-doctor said in a voice that was flat and toneless, the face-cone lighting on and off in patterns, like an aurora. “We will require further funding.”

“Same as always,” Serenity sighed, under her breath. “And?”

“There is another job offer that has come through. Details are available on the wires. It is...”

Serenity held a hand up, and the attendee-doctor’s lights dimmed to a washed-out baby blue.

“Spare the details in front of my daughter, please. If you’re happy with what it pays, then tell them I accept.”

The bottom right of the attendee-doctor’s cone-face lit up, a sign Serenity had come to learn meant it was pleased. Without any other indication, it then turned and left, leaving Serenity alone with the child.

Sitting down beside the bed Serenity reached under the covers and took hold of her daughter's hand.

In a soft voice she whispered, "Once there was a little girl called Eloise Deadline whose mummy loved her very, very much. Eloise was the most wonderful, smartest, bravest and prettiest girl in all of the land..."

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*Ken McGrath lives with his wife in an upside-down house in Dublin, Ireland. His story 'Party Smashers' was featured in a previous issue of Cirsova, and his fiction can be found in various magazines and anthologies. For more info, visit <https://kenmcgrathauthor.tumblr.com/>*

# **Titan**

**By REBECCA DEVENDRA**

*The colonists of Titan have been a fierce and independent lot since breaking away from Earth—some with a grudge might even resort to murder to stay independent!*

Sakiya Midori knew she was acting against Connolly's orders, but the Cicadas were out and curiosity won the sleep cycle. With a skipping motion, Sakiya found herself content to float slowly in the dim with childlike pleasure. Near the electrolysis plant, the icy ground sloped downward until it formed a ravine, invisible in the photochemical smog were it not for her infrared goggles. Saturn's shadow could barely be discerned through the ochreous fog that shrouded the moon in perpetual twilight. To Earthborns, Titan's dense atmosphere was considered a dingy enclosure teeming with chaos, but it was the only life Sakiya knew.

Landing now with successive small bounces, thanks to her jump calculator, Sakiya lowered her gaze to the ground. Her infrared goggles adjusted. The power cell on her back hummed as it regulated the oxygen supply to her respirator. She breathed deep. Her recycled air tasted chemical and stale. The electrolysis plant loomed above her.

Her concentration was on the doors of the plant, specifically the shadowed and hulking figures moving nearby. Her mouth quirked up. The figures were bright white and seventeen feet long, with wide and bulbous eyes on either side of their triangular heads. Their towering forms jounced across the uneven ice towards her.

Cicadas.

"Connolly, come in. Three bugs. Over." Sakiya sighed at the responding static. "My team leader won't answer me." She retrieved two plastic rods from the holster on her belt. "What do you guys have to say, I wonder?"

She rapped the raised rods together, turning the bugs statuesque at the sound. The cicada in front raised a scythed fore-claw in the air, and tapped the ice in flurried reply. Sakiya's shoulders relaxed when she recognized the notes of greeting.

*We're just saying hello.* It was unusual to see the bugs so close to the plant. She and her team took shifts to herd them away from it. The cicadas were benign if unmolested, but their armor-like carapaces were strong enough to demolish human structures if they were panicked. Of

course, nothing compared to Emergence stories; Sakiya's grandparents told of the bugs burrowing up from under the floor of the colony's original mess hall.

*Why are you here?* She repeated the question a few times to make sure they understood. The answer she received surprised her: they were looking for help. With a carefully plotted jump, she alighted next to the largest bug in the group. She put her hand on its abdomen, a reassuring gesture. It started to walk, swaying with the uneven weight of its carapace. Sakiya spotted a small fissure along the back.

It would molt soon, leaving the armor behind in exchange for a white, fleshy body with wings. It was quite something, seeing such a creature give birth to itself. Sakiya walked patiently with the bugs until she realized they were headed toward the ravine. She stopped and peered ahead, her infra-red readouts adjusting to the darker spots of the landscape.

Nothing at first, so she adjusted her goggles. Then, she spied heat signatures, red and orange against the blue. There were two human bodies, lying supine at the bottom of the ravine.

Her stomach clenched.

The bugs wouldn't follow her. They knew better than to get stuck in a ravine. Sakiya pushed off of the ground, carefully calculating her landing points with her jump calculator readout on the right-hand side of her vision. She reached a large rock above the bodies with the aptitude typical of a Titan-born.

Sakiya dropped into a squat. Two people, immobile, were stuck in smush. The slush-mud at the bottom of the ravine was a mixture of tholin and ice, and thick patches of it acted like quicksand. She'd seen people get their boots stuck before, usually children. These were grown adults by their size.

*What kind of idiot walks right into this?*

She didn't recognize their uniforms. Whose team did they belong to? Frowning, she thumbed her wrist-dial to see if she could find the frequency of their ear-coms. After nothing but static, her shoulders slumped.

They were probably dead. A horrible way to go, and nothing but static was left in their wake.

But then, one of them raised an arm into the air. Sakiya's heart jagged. It was dim out, but she had fluorescent stripes running down the arms of her coveralls, lining the tips of her gloves, so it was possible she was visible. She raised her arm up in response, put out two fingers. This was the sign for channel two, an open frequency. *Please understand*, she pleaded within herself.

She saw the figure slowly turn the dial on its own wrist.

"Hello?" said a raspy voice in her ear, chopped with static. "H-lp. Please."

She kept using his name. It helped keep people calm when you used their names. "Okay, Simon, I know you're scared," Sakiya said. "But that doesn't have to mean panicked, all right?"

"I think Paul is dying," his voice shook.

"His oxygen is depleted, not out," Sakiya glanced at the supine figure in the smush. Maybe he was already dead. Her heart thundered against her ribs like a fist urgently knocking on a door, and still her hands were steady, still her movements deliberate. She unclipped a rescue pulley from her belt, basic climbing material from her last survey expedition. She had enough cord to make a Z-pulley, but if Simon struggled too much, he'd sink.

*One thing at a time.*

She anchored the cord to the ice and tossed Simon the slack. It floated sinuously down to him in the low gravity like a deep-sea eel. He looped

the cord through a 'biner on his belt, and Sakiya pulled. He was erect now, his feet submerged from the knees down. Sakiya tugged again, but he didn't budge.

“Simon,” she said, panting a bit, “you have your thermal underwear on, yes?”

There was a pause from him at first, and then, “Yes, it covers my feet. Do you think I need to lose my boots?”

“Yeah,” she said, glad he was catching on. “We can hurry you to the electrolysis plant nearby. You might get a little cryogenic burn, but it's better than this.”

A moan interrupted them over the com. Paul's body twitched below Simon, his arms flailing.

“Stop moving,” Sakiya ordered. “Simon, calm him down.”

Paul didn't seem to hear anything. His moan turned into a scream, and Sakiya's heartbeat skyrocketed. The idiot needed to calm down. Didn't he know his breathing exercises? She did them now, in and out, slow and deep breaths to preserve oxygen, and the tremor in her hands quelled. Paul lurched and grabbed onto Simon's leg. He was moving too much!

“Paul,” Simon said, “It's okay, we are going to get out. There's help.”

There was a belch. Sakiya's stomach went cold.

“Shit,” she said. “He's going to puke.”

Simon gripped the cord tightly, his body swaying as Paul tugged on his leg, and then a sick, gurgling noise crackled over the com. Paul's free hand went to his respirator, and he tugged at it, green sick bubbling out of the creases. His body convulsed, the respirator, now loose, slid aside to expose purple lips. He went rigid. A hissing noise issued from the detached respirator. Globules of vomit floated above his head. A few burst into smaller droplets against Simon's leg before they hardened in the cold and settled as newly fallen snow on the smush below.



Sakiya was panting. She wanted to vomit herself, so she closed her eyes and steadied her breathing until her heart rate normalized. She'd dealt with death before: she'd found bodies after a suit leak, or cryogenic freeze, or perfectly preserved after falling into a methane lake.

She'd never seen something this gruesome. *And stupid.*

"S-simon," she said, her voice shaking. "Take off your boots."

He did so. She pulled on the cord again, and a noise like a clogged pipe finally giving way sounded as Simon's feet rose above the smush. Simon used the cord to pull himself over to Sakiya, perched atop her rock. They sat in silence for a bit, breathing hard. Sakiya, hands trembling anew, retrieved her cord and guided Simon by the hand, using her jump-calculator to push off the right surfaces until they alighted above the ravine.

"Thank you," Simon said.

Sakiya looked at his feet. He needed to get inside, quickly. The cicadas were watching, silent and still. If she hadn't known better, they would have passed for ice sculptures.

Simon gasped, his posture hunching defensively when he noticed them.

"They won't hurt you," Sakiya said, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him along. She knew what was going on now and why Simon and Paul were bumbling idiots. "In fact, you're just in time to witness their emergence. Only happens once every twenty-nine Earth years. Gave the first colonists quite a shock." She pushed him ahead of her to give him some momentum. "Tell me, Simon. When did you arrive from Earth?"

When he didn't object, she knew she'd hit the mark.

Simon's feet were elevated, pink and a bit swollen, but his thermal underwear had warded off any permanent damage. Sakiya made him strip and dress in white coveralls in the walk-tube before entering the plant. Any trace of hydrocarbon dirt inside an oxygen-filled environment

was a fire hazard, and she didn't trust him to clean his outerwear thoroughly. He didn't object.

Sakiya withheld commenting on how nice and new Simon's EVA suit was. She'd been making do with handed-down, insulated full-body outerwear her whole life. She knew how to use her materials, however, so perhaps durability mattered more than novelty after all.

"Your surname is Midori?" Simon asked her. "Are you related to Alexandria Midori?"

Sakiya's eyebrows rose in surprise. "My late grandmother," she confirmed. "She figured out how to communicate with the cicadas. She taught me." Sakiya put a plastic tray down in front of him, loaded with an assortment of nutritious mushrooms and leafy, purple vegetables. Fascinated, Simon bent down to smell it.

"Wow," he breathed. "I didn't expect your hydroponic garden to be this advanced."

"Thought we'd be cannibalizing each other, did you?" Sakiya bit. "Figured we'd be a bunch of backwards troglodytes down here? Don't forget, before Earth abandoned us, the colony was sent the best scientists and explorers. We're survivors. I can't say that of *you*."

Simon took this thin-lipped, like he was bracing himself during a storm. His features did not witness to a life of stress: his hair was sun-kissed with yellow on brown, his skin soft. She couldn't decide if he was a child trying for an adventure, or perhaps someone more important. He'd come all the way from Earth as her grandparents had.

*Was my grandmother ever as clueless as Simon?* The thought plunged Sakiya into reflective silence.

"Sakiya," he said, eyes downcast, "Do you all really think Earth abandoned you?"

She cast him a cautious look. "Besides you, do you see any other Earthborn?"

“Right,” he said, tenting his hands together. “Sakiya, this is delicate, but Earth has been prevented from helping you all because of what your grandmother did.”

“You mean when she blew up the space station.”

Whatever he’d been expecting her to say, it wasn’t that. His eyes widened, and he dropped his hands to his lap. “Well. Yes. She’s regarded as a terrorist.”

Sakiya let out a hollow, humorless chuckle. “There were people on the station that helped her.”

“Yes, according to her. The only survivor,” he added.

Sakiya lifted her chin. “She saved this colony, and Earth from contamination. You know she and my grandfather led the survivors underground after the brood emergence? She’s a hero, no matter what propaganda you’ve been force-fed by corporatists that are pissed their hydrocarbon shipments ceased.”

“This is about more than money,” he said, frowning.

“Everything is about money on Earth.”

“So what’s it about on Titan?” Simon looked behind him as if to see the answer crouching there in corporeal form.

“Freedom.” Sakiya observed as Simon shifted his feet awkwardly. “That’s right. The convicts are out of their cages, Simon. Maybe Earth thought a prison colony was clever. Cheap labor. You people want Titan’s inhabitants enslaved to you,” Sakiya said. “So I don’t care what you all think. But my grandmother actually cared about Earth because she grew up there. Guess I inherited her soft-spot for helpless Earth dwellers.”

He frowned. If he objected to her political views, he decided against saying so. “Contamination.” He finally said. “What contamination did she save everyone from?”

She looked into his eyes, face serious.

“The wasps.”

Sakiya made contact with her team on the vid. The image of her Delta Team leader, Mason Connolly, appeared in front of her, his grizzled face permanently affixed with frown-lines.

“Midori,” he barked. “You’re calling in late. Cicadas acting up?”

“No, I’m in the plant. As you can see, it’s fine. But I found a visitor from Earth.”

One of Connolly’s eyebrows shot higher than the other. “Stay put, Midori. We’re coming to you.”

The screen went black, so abruptly that Sakiya’s mouth was still open, cut off right before she could continue. Why didn’t Connolly want the details? She felt eyes on her back and turned around to see Simon in the doorway. The blood was gone from his lips.

“Sakiya,” he said, voice cracking a bit. “I think those men are coming to kill me.”

She frowned and rose from her seat. “What?”

“Look, I don’t think you were supposed to know. I was surprised that you saved me,” he said, pacing the room now, hands behind his back. “But you obviously don’t mean me any harm; you’ve done so much for me already.”

“What are you talking about,” she snapped. “Spit it out.”

“I landed here with a four-person crew, but we met some resistance. There was a disagreement with some Titanian natives, and then we all scattered.” Scratching his head now. “Paul and I survived, but we got stuck.”

Sakiya’s breath caught in her throat. Connolly was certainly a formidable person, and he had absolutely no love for Earth. Sakiya

acknowledged that she shared this hatred of Earth...but she was no murderer. Was Connolly?

“Did you try to hail anyone on the ground before landing?”

“Yes,” he said. “We found an open channel but never got a reply. We announced ourselves several times and our landing coordinates.”

She pulled up a map on the vid. “Simon, show me where you landed.”

He walked over and shook his head. “We used an older map. This is too new.”

“Hang on,” she said. She pulled up a map from her grandmother’s time, and Simon’s face brightened.

“There,” he pointed. It was a flat spot near Kraken Mare, Titan’s largest methane sea. She bit her bottom lip. The area was in Team Delta’s territory. Connolly’s territory. He’d have known of the ship’s landing.

She looked into Simon’s eyes. She didn’t think he was lying. She didn’t think he could lie very well if he tried. She judged Simon to be honest and clumsy, not deceptive.

“What makes you think the man I was talking to was responsible?” She kept her voice soft, as if talking to an infant.

“His voice sounded familiar,” Simon said. “We picked up his orders to halt on our coms when we exited the ship. He said our ship was his now.” He ran both hands through his hair. “I don’t know. It could have been anyone I guess.”

She grabbed his shoulder. “Get suited up. I’ll get you out of here and hide you before they arrive.”

His eyes turned into saucers, but he hastened to obey. Sakiya was certain that Simon was an innocent. This was the problem with Connolly: always taking matters into his own hands. Team Leaders were supposed to make reports to the Board every seven sleep-cycles. Surely

the Board would want to know what Earth visitors had to say, at least? As she double-checked Simon's suit and gave him a new, fully charged respirator, their eyes met. She felt a swoop in her stomach.

It was prudent, she reasoned, to make absolutely sure that Connolly wasn't involved in Earthborn deaths. She was rationalizing her actions as the double doors of the plant parted for them, the walk tube lights bright in her vision.

Connolly was already outside, flanked by two other members of Team Delta. A parked rover was behind them.

*Shit.*

"Told you to stay put, Midori," Connolly's voice said over the com. "Where are you taking our guest?"

She didn't answer.

"What is *that*?" Simon said into the com. His eyes were wide with fear. Connolly turned around, and laughed.

"Ah. Cicada molting. Quite a sight for an Earthborn."

The metallic carapace was split open along the back, and the fleshy-white, newborn cicada was on the ground next to it, legs splayed across the ice and frail wings trembling. It would be several hours before its wings hardened, before it could fly to higher ground for the mating ritual. Sakiya felt a twinge of fear. Not of the cicada; it had no interest in them. But the wasps would be hunting now if the molting had begun. And they didn't discriminate between cicada and human. Meat was meat.

"Connolly," Sakiya said, voice level. "We need to get inside."

*I shouldn't have to say this. He knows better. Damn it, Connolly.*

"Sure," he replied. "Hand over your friend please."

Her stomach clenched. "Why?"

Mason Connolly. The man who blamed her for the faulty air filters on her shift and took it out of her rations. The same man who made her clean out waste bags for weeks when she repaired a single radio tower on the edge of their territory without his go-ahead. His authority was about dominion, not service. He made her blood boil about as quickly as it would if she'd been naked outside.

“Are you questioning orders, Midori?” he snapped at her. “Better decide whose side you're on. Wasps are coming.”

“Side?” Something flared inside Sakiya. “We're all human here, yes? We're all on the same side by default.”

Fluttering shadows passed over them, and Sakiya's teeth ground together. Too late. There was a humming noise.

A thud sounded behind her.

Simon let out a strangled scream. Sakiya grabbed his wrist and pulled him to her. A wasp had landed in front of the door to the electrolysis plant. The membranous wings stood erect on its segmented back, all six barbed legs planted firmly on the ice, its tail poised above it, stinger out. Its stinger whipped forward, and Sakiya pushed into Simon as hard as she could. They tumbled sideways, limbs tangled as the sharp tail plunged into the icy ground where she'd just been standing.

Connolly was going to get them all killed. Whatever was going on, he was willing to risk all of their lives for it. The wasp struggled to free its stinger from the ground, giving Sakiya time to push Simon toward the rover. She saw another wasp land by the freshly born cicada. Its body convulsed as the deftly-aimed stinger impaled it. She hoped Simon wasn't watching.

“Keep your heads!” Connolly yelled. The two figures flanking him split, one dashed toward the rover and reached it before Sakiya.

She knew him, when she saw his eyes behind his goggles. His name was Pillet.

Her breath caught in her throat when Pillet's boot met her chest. Winded, she fell into Simon, and they skidded along the ice on their bottoms. She felt a cold terror in her chest that had nothing to do with the ice.

She watched Connolly get into the rover with Pillet. "Look alive, Forde!" Connolly barked. He was addressing the figure standing near Sakiya and Simon. Forde was a quiet, stern woman, always on shifts opposite Sakiya.

*Is she on Connolly's side?*

Sakiya saw Forde's head turn to her, and then to the rover. And then, Forde raised a middle finger toward the rover. It would have been funny in another circumstance.

"Have it your way, Forde," Connolly said.

The wasp near the cicada wrapped its legs around the fleshy, inert bug and took to the air, disappearing into the dark fog. Simon whimpered.

The rover was trundling away. The wasp in front of the plant got its stinger free and was now advancing. Forde took two plastic rods from her belt and began to rap them above her head.

She was calling the cicadas for help, Sakiya realized. It was smart, as the metallic armor of the cicadas could ward off the wasps. But they would never arrive in time.

Sakiya, backing away from the scene on her bottom, rapped her head against something hard.

The discarded carapace.

"Forde!" she screamed into the com. "Come on!" Sakiya grabbed Simon by the front of his coveralls and hoisted him upward. "Climb in!" she ordered. She scrambled after him, her body pressing on top of his as he squeezed through the opening across the back of the metallic carapace. It was a tight fit, but Sakiya pushed him down flat on his belly



and landed on top of his back. Her arm found Forde above her, only halfway in.

“Come on!” Sakiya said desperately. “Squeeze in!” They all had to fit. They *had* to.

Simon rolled to his side underneath her. Sakiya shifted so that they were back to back, and Forde pressed herself flat on top of them. She was completely inside. All of them huddled in the hollowed-out carcass of the bug. Sakiya’s knees were screaming against the hardness of the veined walls. There was a concavity by her elbow that she discerned a fleshy leg once occupied.

A loud, thumping noise filled their ears, echoing in the small space. The wasp was trying to find the opening.

Could it?

Sakiya shivered.

And then the noise stopped. Sakiya strained her ears. The metallic *click click click* of cicada limbs on hard ice was discernible. She let herself relax, her shoulders slackening. She felt Simon’s body do the same in response to her. There was a humming noise—the sound of wasp wings—and then silence.

“I’m going to check,” Forde whispered.

Sakiya grimaced as Forde shifted painfully against her.

“All clear,” Forde said. And then she let out a dry, shaking laugh over the com. “There are three cicadas surrounding us. I could kiss their ugly faces.”

**T**hey decided against staying at the electrolysis plant, as Connolly might return.

“We can’t return to Team Delta’s headquarters,” Forde said. “Where’s that leave us?”

“Can we make it to my ship?” Simon asked. “I have security access, and I need to contact my mothership.”

“Mothership?” The surprise in Sakiya’s voice was evident.

“My crew and I were supposed to report upon landing. If they don’t hear from anyone in seventy-two hours, they will assume the worst and send down a tactical team.”

“A tactical team? Earth sent a military ship?”

“A ship with military personnel on it,” Simon said hastily. “This was a diplomatic mission.”

Here, he let out a nervous chuckle that sounded unhinged. “Earth wants to rebuild the space station. There’s a desire to open trade channels again, to recognize Titan as an independent government. We had plans to help you Titanians mine asteroids, pool resources. I came to make that proposal: you’ve been isolated from us since the original station was destroyed. We thought we’d be welcome.”

“But you found a slaughter instead,” Forde said. She cursed. “Connolly is an idiot. He’ll be arrested by your people or ours for what he did.”

“People here would arrest him?” Simon asked, looking genuinely surprised.

“There’s a Board made up of Team Leaders. Connolly is ours, but believe me, that’s about to change.” Forde replied. “They all get a vote at Board sessions. It’s how we deal with supply squabbles, or more serious things like murders.” Her eyes flicked up to meet his, under her goggles.

They retrieved a mechanical pallet from the old rover docking station in the plant, and all of them stood on it to travel at a steady pace across the ice. They were flanked by their cicada rescuers. It was slow-going, but the bugs looked formidable and offered the group a sense of security. Sakiya and Forde tapped directions to them on occasion, to keep formation.

“What’s going to happen to that cicada the wasp flew away with?” Simon asked.

“The stinger venom is a paralytic,” Forde answered. “They’ll lay eggs in it back at the nest.”

“You said the wasps were on the space station,” Simon said, slowly turning toward Sakiya. “During your grandmother’s time. Shit. No wonder she blew it up.”

Sakiya grimaced under her respirator. “I’m glad you understand now.”

They came in sight of Kraken Mare. Titan was tidally locked, which could make for interesting undulations in the liquid sea, but today it was still. The methane looked like a solid sheet of black ice. It would be a mistake to walk into it. Sakiya knew, however, that some early colonists had chosen that method as an acceptable means of suicide.

They spotted Simon’s ship. It was small, a shuttle. Sakiya would not have known to look for it if he hadn’t pointed it out. As a rule, she avoided Kraken Mare. A miscalculation on a jump-calculator could be fatal. Being near it made her nervous.

“Forde, did you know about the attack on the Earth ship?”

Forde turned her head to Sakiya. “I wasn’t part of the strike on the Earth ship. I knew about it, but Connolly said they were only going to salvage the ship, and that the Earthborns needed to be taught a lesson.”

“What?” Simon interjected. “Why?”

“Said you were coming to collect,” Forde answered with a shrug of her shoulders. “Earth slave-drivers, here to make us produce. Said we should establish dominance.”

Sakiya knew that this was a plausible thing for Team Delta to believe. She would have believed it herself. *Don’t trust the Earthborns. They built this colony off of prison slavery, and then they abandoned us in our time of need. If they return, you defend what you’ve claimed by right. They can’t take our moon.*

“Where do you think the bodies are?” Sakiya asked.

Forde let out a hollow chuckle. “Midori, this is Connolly you’re talking about. Leaps before he looks. Plus, you know his idea of a proper funeral.” She nodded toward Kraken Mare, and the two women shared a look of understanding.

The three of them walked to the ship, and Simon punched a security code into the keypad near the outer hatch. They opened the hatch, sealed it behind them, and let the automated system do cleanup procedures. The second door opened into the ship, and they all walked onto the bridge, letting their respirators and goggles hang off their necks. Sakiya took off her balaclava and shoved it into her chest pocket. Simon sank into the captain’s chair and closed his eyes before exhaling. He powered up his vid screen as Sakiya sat down next to him, her tired joints sinking into the seat.

“That’s weird,” he said, frowning. “I can’t get a signal? It was fine as we were landing!”

Sakiya and Forde’s eyes nailed together from across the bridge. Of course. Connolly had control of the communication towers in this sector. He’d have jammed them upon returning to Delta’s home base. *That’s why the bastard didn’t want me repairing radio towers.* Blood pounding in her ears, Sakiya turned the vid screen to face her.

“Connolly,” she barked. “Show yourself, coward.”

The screen flickered, and then Connolly’s face appeared. He had dark shadows under his eyes.

“Midori,” he said. “You’re on the wrong side of this.”

“I’m not the one that has to answer for anything,” she bit.

“You can’t trust people from Earth,” his voice was tight. He didn’t seem in control of himself. “I don’t care what your little boyfriend has convinced you of.”

Maybe perspective was everything. Simon thought her grandmother had been a terrorist until he saw the wasps. What was Connolly's misperception? Her opinions of their Earth-born ancestors came from people like him, she realized. Her grandparents had been unjustly drafted to Titan by a private prison corporation, put to work on the cold moon for little to nothing in return. A half-life.

"You're too young to understand," Connolly continued. "Earth doesn't do anything without demanding unjust remuneration."

Sakiya glanced at Simon, his brow furrowed, lips white. He wanted to recognize Titan as independent. He came here expecting Titanians to be civil and reasonable and open to hearing him out. If there were people like him on Earth, then there was hope of a future. More people. More help. Better supplies; no more recycled waste bags and respirators.

"I understand more than you think," Sakiya said. "For instance, I know that justice must be brought. Our parents were unjustly imprisoned, so I think I have an idea of what's real. So tell me, Connolly, what do you deserve for murder?"

She saw the lines around his jaw tighten.

"You have to know that you're finished," she continued. "When the Board finds out about this, you'll be turned over by most of Team Delta. They know what you are, and they won't risk themselves for you if murder is the charge."

She sat back, tenting her fingers. This was coming naturally to her, this calculation, the calm tone. Simon was agape, but his eyes were shining with respect. *Perhaps I am my grandmother's kin, after all.*

Had her grandmother always been this afraid?

Sakiya continued: "But your problems do not stop there. Earth has a tactical team in orbit above Titan. And they haven't heard from their friends. If they come down here, an organized military strike, what are you going to do? Kill them all? How messy. The Earth's military is nothing to mess with, Simon tells me."

Her eyes narrowed, in what she hoped was a dangerous look. Simon's expression behind the vid screen suggested that the Earth military might not be all that adept at engaging Titanians on their own low-gravity turf, but Sakiya decided that Connolly didn't need this insight.

"It wasn't supposed to go so wrong," Connolly said.

His tone was placating, she noticed. Good.

He was breaking down.

"So you ended up in a useless fight, and then covered up the bodies," Sakiya said. "I've figured that much out, thanks." She could feel Forde's eyes on her back. "And then you tried to kill me since I found your stragglers."

Connolly was quiet. Which way would he fall, she wondered? Would he go rogue, try to kill them all in this little ship before Earth's military got there? He was a man of great pride, after all.

Or would he fold? Decide that enough was enough?

*Please be option number two*, she thought to herself.

"If I open the channel," Connolly said, voice halting. *Yes!* Sakiya thought. *Yes, come to me, sucker. Give me the power.* "Will you tell the Board that I did so?"

"Certainly," Sakiya said, in an even tone, against the reply hunched in her throat. *You petty, power-hungry miscreant. I'll tell them everything.* In a clear voice, she continued: "Opening the channel to the mothership calls off Earth's military, and I'm sure the rest of Titan's inhabitants will be glad to know you did the right thing."

Something in his jaw jumped at that, but he only nodded curtly. "It's done."

The vid screen went black. As Sakiya lowered her head to the arm of the chair, she heard Simon making contact with his mothership.

Her heart was still galloping. Her body knew something her mind couldn't catch up with. Forde's hand was on her shoulder.

"That was good," she said. "You okay?"

Sakiya burst into a fit of nervous giggles, dangerously near tears. "Oh, no," she replied, wiping her eyes. "That was much too easy. He's going to kill us."

"What?" Simon's eyes darted about.

"Simon, where is your mothership landing?"

"I just gave them our coordinates. Why?"

"Call them back."

Silence. Forde walked over to Simon and glared at his screen. "Coms are cut off again." She swore and threw her goggles to the ground.

Sakiya activated the ship's outside cameras and recoiled from the image on the vid. Simon made a choking noise.

Wasps. At least twenty, maybe more.

The ship was surrounded. It was a trap, and Connolly had made them the bait for the Earth mothership.

A timer for two hours ran on the main vid. That was how long the Earth mothership's descent would take. Sakiya braced herself against the wall as the ship lurched. The hull groaned as a cacophony of thumps filled the bridge. A hail of wasp stingers.

"No breach yet," Forde reported. "Suit up. Only a matter of time."

Sakiya secured her respirator and set to studying the communications station. She started turning dials, flipping switches. Most systems had the same controls, just in different places.

"Running signal sweeps?" Forde asked. "In Delta territory?"

“I repaired a radio tower that sits on the border of Delta’s territory and Sigma’s. It’s far but maybe...”

“You a two-timer?” Forde’s eyebrows shot up. “Repairing equipment other teams can use?”

There was a *blip!* Sakiya’s neck snapped sideways to see the little red dot on the radar. Forde let out a jubilant whooping noise into the com. Sakiya’s heart accelerated with triumph. Now if she could ping a warning signal off of that tower and to the mothership...

*Thunk!* A small hill formed on the metallic floor. Sakiya’s blood ran cold as warning lights burned red. She had to focus on the message. Just focus and—

Simon yelled as the floor opened up under the main vid screen. Black, sharp limbs clawed through with clacking noises; the metal heaved as the wasp tried to get the bulk of its body through the hole. The thudding noises on the roof became more urgent, louder. Atmospheric alarms blared, small objects began to float, and Sakiya felt her stomach retreat to her spine in the low gravity.

The little red dot disappeared.

*No!*

“Move, Midori!” Forde barked the command as she rushed at the wasp with a fire extinguisher.

She swung at the wasp, sluggishly, but landed a blow. There was snap like ice cracking, and a segmented leg broke in half. Forde rolled sideways in midair to avoid the thrashing limbs of the bug, which looked more dangerous now that it was hurt. *A diplomatic shuttle with no weapons*, Sakiya realized. What chance did they have?

There was a fissure on the roof, the crack opening like the maw of a hungry beast. Simon was on his hands and knees, struggling with what looked like an emergency kit.

“What are you—?” Sakiya started to ask.



Her eyes widened. She elbowed Simon out of the way and undid the clasps. It was a welding kit. Maybe...

“Shit!” Forde screamed. A wasp’s head punched through a hole in the roof, front legs swinging as it squirmed through the opening. The lights flashed off and the emergency backup came on, bathing the horrific scene in blue.

Jaw clenched, Sakiya rummaged through the kit and her heart galloped when she saw it.

A handheld laser torch. She closed her eyes.

*Don’t think. Just act.*

She gripped the torch tightly with one hand and sprang from her spot right toward the wasp. Arm extended in front of her, she aimed for the wasp’s mandibles, the large eyes turning to her, the *click click click* of its talons against the metal hull. The torch ignited, and a red dot of light showed between the thing’s eyes, but nothing happened. The panic rose like bile in her throat; she couldn’t stop her momentum. And then a hole burned through the wasp’s head.

It didn’t even make a noise. The head dropped, and the legs floated upward as if tugged by a drunken puppeteer. Sakiya swallowed a squeal as her chest pressed right up against the thing’s torso, unable to change her trajectory. She flailed her arms against the segmented legs that clacked upon her. A hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back.

Simon. She wanted to cry. There was no time, but she wanted to.

She pushed off of his chest and aimed the torch at the wasp coming through the floor. Forde pushed away from it, and they all watched as the bug’s legs went limp. The laser had burned through its left eye. Sakiya moved the torch back and forth, not stopping until the head was sliced completely in half.

The thudding stopped. The three of them were motionless for a whole minute, taking in the silence. The dead wasps were like grotesque undersea growths on either side of them, limbs swaying.

“Maybe we should make ships out of cicada carapaces,” Simon whispered.

“We encase our rovers in them,” Forde said, almost testily. “Midori, your signal?”

Sakiya shook her head. Nervously, she ran her free hand over the rods on her belt.

“What now?” Simon asked.

“We die,” Forde snapped, “once the wasps regroup and inevitably overrun this ship. Even if we hold them off, the oxygen in our suits will run out eventually.”

Sakiya’s voice was sullen. “I’m sorry, Simon. Your people are landing in this trap.”

His eyes were grave behind his goggles, the realization changing his expression. “You never thought we were getting out of here.” He grabbed her hand, and Sakiya felt a tightness in her chest.

“For the record, I thought we’d have a chance,” Forde said. “So what are the options? If I’m going to die, it better be for something. Not gonna sit here pissing in my suit while these uglies try their best to catch us.”

Sakiya pulled the rods from her belt and stared at them.

“Is there an external communication system?”

“What?” Simon’s brow pinched.

“You know, something that can announce ‘halt, who goes there’ to the outside world when the ship is in a hangar bay.”

“I know what you mean,” Simon answered, perplexed. “What would it matter anyway? Going to broadcast a warning that you hope is loud enough outside? The mothership couldn’t hear it.”

“I don’t need the mothership to hear it,” Sakiya turned to Forde. “We’re going to call for help.”

The corners of Forde's eyes lifted.

"What the hell is going on?" Simon asked.

Sakiya rushed over the communication station and with Simon's help found the mic. She tapped it. *Thump thump*. Forde let out a cackle, her face trained to the outside feed. "The wasps heard that. Makes them jumpy. Can you make it louder?"

Simon turned the dial all the way up. "All yours. Going to sing a song?"

Forde took the rods from Sakiya.

"I'll take first shift."

Sakiya lowered herself into the captain's chair, arms tired from twenty minutes of tapping the call for help. She wished she could take off her goggles and rub her eyes. It had only been an hour. Simon wouldn't look away from the outside feed.

The symbol of a lotus flower was affixed to the shuttle's side.

"My grandmother told me once that she missed flowers at funerals," Sakiya said. "Me, I could never understand why anyone would grow something they couldn't eat."

Simon's eyes suggested a smile. "Thinking of our funerals, are you? Well, most beautiful things on Earth are useless, I guess."

"Like humans in general," Sakiya remarked.

"For someone who thinks her species is so useless, you're risking your life for it."

"Of course," she said. "Do you know what I'd give to see a flower? I'd take great pains to preserve it if I happened upon one."

"So I'm like a delicate daisy for your collection?" He mused. "You just saw me cast off on the side of the road and found me curious?"

“I’ve only seen pictures of daisies, Simon, but I have to say that you strike me as the more stubborn type. A cactus, or a thorn bush, planting itself in hostile territory and making do.”

“That prickly?”

“Well, no. I admit there’s no bite to you,” she said.

“Oh good, so there’s hope for me yet,” he said with eyes alight.

The lump in her throat softened. He made her want to laugh. She liked that.

“Sakiya, you saved my life more than once. This Earthborn is grateful.”

“I prefer other humans to wasps.”

She felt a cold pit of anger in her stomach. *Connolly chose the wasps.*

Simon sat up and put his hands on the vid screen.

“Look!” he exclaimed.

Sakiya squinted. In the distance, a line of metallic, lumbering figures advanced. She felt a sudden swoop of joy in her chest. “It’s working, Forde!”

Forde nodded and kept tapping, more vim in her task at the news. Simon looked at Sakiya.

“I suppose we can’t abandon the ship before the cicada army tramples it?”

“We can try,” Sakiya said. “But we’d expose ourselves to all those wasps...”

In response, Simon looked to the dead wasp hanging above them.

The thumping started again, loud above them. The vid showed that the wasps were huddling together, flying to the ship’s roof. Forde handed Sakiya the rods.

“Oh, hell!”

Simon had pulled the wasp carcass through the hole, and with a hand through the hole in its head, held it over him so that its limp legs almost ensconced him. “Is it big enough to cover all of us?”

Forde responded by taking out the laser torch, and she set to cutting off the stinger. *She thinks this could work*, Sakiya realized. “I don’t want that thing swinging around us,” Forde explained, ducking under the wasp’s torso behind Simon. “There, I’ll take up the rear. Get in the middle, Midori.”

Doing her breathing exercises, Sakiya clenched her gut against the urge to run. Forde was holding a segmented leg in each hand, bracing her back against the wasp’s underbelly.

*It can’t fall off of us if this is going to work.*

Sakiya crouched under the wasp and followed suit. The bug’s legs were as hard as rock and so cold that her fingers numbed despite her gloves. The wasp wasn’t exactly heavy in the low gravity, but the inertia of the mass was hard to shift.

Slowly, they stumbled outside.

Simon slipped on the ice, his left leg sliding in front of him like a live gymnast attempting a split. He let out a groan as Sakiya took a handful of his coveralls and pulled him close to her. Her knees rapped the ground, the bitter cold clawing at her kneecaps. The carcass was heavy on them, pressing them to the ground.

Several grotesque shadows passed over them in the dingy light. A wasp landed in front of them, limbs bouncing a bit, mandibles clicking. The bulbous eyes were black as Kraken Mare, as threatening and deep and unforgiving.

Saliva pooled in the back of Sakiya’s throat. She could feel Forde shaking with the effort to keep the carcass from careening over. What did it matter? The air was filled with the steady march of talons on ice as the cicada army approached.

*This was a clever idea, Simon, but it's too late. We'll be trampled if we hide, impaled if we run.*

“Oh no,” Simon whispered.

She put her hand on his shoulder, meaning it to be one last comforting moment of solidarity. But then she gave a start.

Over Simon's shoulder, she saw a single, solitary rover. It was encased in the bright metallic armor of discarded cicada carapaces.

In the brightest of fluorescent red, the symbol of Team Sigma shone on its door.

“Midori,” Forde's voice rattled over the com. “You damned glorious two-timer.”

Sakiya's eyes prickled wet with relief.

She felt like Prometheus, as he might have fared after, if only somebody had warded off the monsters vying to feed off his guts.

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*Rebecca DeVendra is a Latin teacher and oil painter living in New England. She writes Science Fiction and Fantasy for fun and enjoys being a mom.*



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# **The Handover of the Scepter of Greatest Regret**

**By HAL Y. ZHANG**

*The war and killing is finally over, and all that's left is the ceremony to commemorate the peace—except the alien ambassador has died just before showtime!*



“How’s everything looking?” I scrolled down the list on my mini display.

“Orchestra, check. Scepter, check. Holovideography, sound, lighting, all check. Guests are arriving now, and Her Majesty is greeting them.”

“Great. How are we doing on the key personnel? Where’s the Kevorkian ambassador?” It was the only non-blue entry on the personnel list.

Just then, one of the stagehands ran breathlessly towards us, nearly collapsing at my feet. “It’s not responding to my knocks! I think something’s wrong!”

As a seasoned event planner, I was unruffled by such last-minute histrionics. “Probably fell asleep. Kevorkians are notoriously hard to wake.” I marched toward its guest suite, an entourage of anxious underlings in tow.

The unmistakable scent of a Kevorkian corpse assaulted us as the door swung open to my override pass. The Kevorkian—what was left of it, anyways—was sunken in the middle of the bed, covered in green foam from its gills.

“Oh, skies above, it’s dead.”

“What do we do?”

“How could this have happened? We followed all the protocol perfectly. It was perfectly fine two hours ago!”

I massaged my temples, immediately feeling a pounding headache of epic proportions. “This is awful. The Kevorkians will think we killed it.”

“They’ll be gill-deep in conspiracy theories by nighttime and sending a fleet of warships after Solstice!”

“More like by noon. Warships still work on Solstice, you know, despite any taboos.”

Indeed, having the Kevorkian die on us when it was supposed to accept our Scepter of Greatest Regret in the largest Solstice Ceremony of the past century was highly unfortunate. Many in the Kevorkian press, particularly members from their Paranoia Party, had doubted for months that we would actually go through with the ceremony. This could have been sabotage, for all we knew.

“First of all, none of this goes beyond this circle.” I solemnly eyed each underling. “No friends, no family, no police. This is a matter of life and death for all of us. Any leaks and we’ll be eradicated by the Kevorkians in our sleep.” They all nodded fervently.

“You two, find out the proper method for preserving Kevorkian bodies and get on that immediately. You two, review the entire process of its arrival and do a thorough background check on all involved individuals. Make sure anyone remotely suspicious is blocked from having anything to do with the ceremony.” I pointed randomly at the stagehands, which scurried off like rats. “Rest of you, come with me.”

The Queen turned pale and stuttered. I had never seen her lose her calm like this. “Are—are you serious?”

“Most serious, Your Majesty, I’m afraid. What shall we do?”

She recovered from the shock and drew herself up. “We must avoid war with the Kevorkians at all costs. The ceremony will go off without a hitch, whatever it takes. You have full authority to use whatever resources necessary. Brief me when the preparations are in place. I will continue to greet the guests as if nothing is amiss.” And with that, Her Majesty swooped off regally to leave us to perish in this disaster.

“All right, we need to make the Scepter handover appear one-hundred percent real, because the Kevorkians will be picking this footage apart once we announce their ambassador has died.” I turned to my hirelings. Being the Royal Master of Ceremonies was largely a ceremonial role, by definition. I was mostly unequipped to deal with covering up sudden

deaths, but these fellas might have enough know-how. “I’ll take any and all ideas.”

A costume was the first thought, but Kevorkians were quite different in physiology and anatomy. We had no time to make a realistic getup, and it would not look or move correctly anyway. Someone wearing a white sheet with projected skin textures was similarly ruled out.

Some macabre suggestions were thrown. “Puppet? What if we tied some strings to it?”

“Kevorkian limbs are very soft. It would be hard to hoist it up and make it look natural.”

“Can we put an animatronic rig inside the corpse?” another piped up.

“That is a most disgusting idea,” I grimaced. “...Would it be possible?”

Most of them shook their heads. “There’s no way to get a fully actuated rig in time. Besides, we probably don’t want to damage the corpse any more than necessary. We’ll still have to ship it back to the Kevorkians and there’s no time for careful surgery.”

“Good point. How about holograms?”

One of the holovideography operators chewed her lips. “It’s possible, but tricky. We’d first need a fully detailed scan of its body.” I immediately dispatched one stagehand to go do just that. “We could add the hologram in post...”

“But then the audience here will know. I don’t trust them to not blab.”

“Sorry, of course. We’ll have to pre-render all the footage. The Queen will have to know exactly what to do or her hand will pass through the hologram. I’ll go check on the system here. Then there is the speech.”

Of course, the speech. “I’ll brief the Queen on what to do. Where’s Sound—” A few raised their hands. “Is the speech synthesizer all ready to go?” Synthesizers had been mandatory for such occasions ever since

Her Majesty lost her voice from an allergic reaction to the Most Special Broth of the Blexrillens and had to mime her speech.

“We’d have to find enough of his past speeches to feed into the phoneme-learning program,” one of them said, “but that should be fast. What should the text of the speech be?”

“Are there any prepared remarks in his room? Use that. If not, use the computer to synthesize a speech following his past speaking pattern. Edit and show me for final approval. Translated from Kevorkian, of course.” They nodded almost in unison and left. “And make it a very positive speech!” I yelled after them.

“What now?” There were not enough stimulants in the world for this. “Oh right, the footage. You, Holography, can you film me while I do all the steps of the ceremony?”

We proceeded to do exactly that. I entered the stage as the Kevorkian, then stood where it would have stood, took the Scepter of Greatest Regret from the aide standing in as the fake Queen, went to the podium and mimed speaking for a few seconds, and then took my exit. Technically, you weren’t supposed to touch the Scepter of Greatest Regret unless you were the Scepter-maker, the Queen herself, or being given the Scepter by the Queen, but Her Majesty had blessed me in these trying times.

“Got it,” said Holography #1. “I’ll dispatch someone to generate Kevorkian models convolved with your movements then map that onto the scanned ambassador sprite.” Thank goodness for technology.

Holography #2 conversed with some underlings then turned to me. “There might be a problem. Um, we can’t render the Scepter of Greatest Regret because it’s supposed to do the light show when Her Majesty hands it over. The hologram machine has a limited illumination range.”

Oh right, which idiot had an idea to inset the Scepter head with a Kevorkian crystal we looted from them so it could radiate a unique light pattern during the handover? That would be me.

“If we use the real Scepter of Greatest Regret, how will it stay in the hand of the ‘Kevorkian’?” I queried. “Magnets? Wires?”

After a rapid and fanciful discussion of advanced technologies beyond my knowledge, it was concluded that wires were the way to go.

“You, program the wires so they match with the holograms exactly and install them on the Scepter. Make sure no one can see the wires.” I spared a painful glance at my timepiece. “Forty minutes, everyone!”

“The hologram is ready for testing. In three...two...one...”

The Kevorkian came to life from an enormous hidden array of ultrafast lasers zapping molecules into plasma. It looked like a Kevorkian being electrocuted and sounded like one, too. No wonder holographic shows were dead.

“How is it from there?” I yelled at the underlings bumbling around in the audience.

“Too bright!” they chorused. “Too loud!”

“Okay...I’ll tell the conductor to loop the orchestral music extra loud throughout the ceremony. Can the volume of the mic be doubled so the speaker can be heard over the music?” I got the nod from Sound and went to the podium.

“Test?” I mumbled. A split second later, the entire building trembled from the amplified acoustic wave. The stagehands in the audience gave hesitant thumb-ups after pulling their fingers out from their ears.

“That’ll have to do. Now, is there any way to turn down the brightness?”

Holovideography #2 shrugged. “Unfortunately, these stage holograms are meant to be garish and eye-popping. I’ve ordered my assistant to transport more equipment, but traffic is practically blocked off for the ceremony and I don’t think she’ll make it.”

“Never mind that. Can’t we just attenuate the lasers with filters or something?”

I quickly regretted asking that question as Holography #2 launched into a long explanation of how plasma-based holography systems are inherently bright because of the ionization process blah blah and the colors are limited so it would be hard to imitate natural lighting or some such.

“Okay,” I interrupted his enthusiastic endorsement of more advanced display systems. “Let’s just make everything else as bright as possible, so it doesn’t look out of place. Can we turn on all the stage lights?”

I felt my hairs threaten to combust as everything around me became molten gold. At least there was no shortage of lights.

Time passed more and more quickly as we got closer to the deadline; I thought I might spontaneously implode from this chronological compression that rendered everything into one giant blur, but the universe did not have such a kind ending in mind for me. The speech draft arrived as we were testing the wire rig with the hologram on stage, and the poor stagehand had to scream words at me while I yelled back semi-coherent corrections over the crackling of the hologram and droning of the lasers. Some other hirelings returned with an updated guest list with suspicious personnel removed, which I had no time to examine; I sent them off with a nod and a nondenominational prayer. I also vaguely remember briefing the Queen on the exact place she must walk to for the handoff as the orchestra was rehearsing their extra loud background music. We had drawn dots on the stage, invisible to the audience and cameras, for her to align herself. She was unimpressed with our solution.

“And we’ll let you know through the earpiece when to step on the red dot and the blue dot, Your Majesty. And please remember to hold the Scepter at the third Genocidal Notch. The hologram will grab it at the Inscription of Regret, then I will let you know when to let go.” Just then,

the orchestra rehearsed their first measure—fifty Kevorkian drums being thoroughly pounded to death. I gave a thumbs-up to the conductor, saw the disgusted look on the Queen’s face, and sought to reassure her that we were not utterly incompetent. “Don’t worry, everything will appear completely natural in the transmissions, Your Majesty.”

“It had better,” she wrinkled her nose and went to the makeup room for touchups.

Two hands ran toward me. “The guests all check out,” they panted. “But...”

My least favorite word. “What?”

“There’s a new Kevorkian study showing that our solstice decorations symbolize the slaughter of Kevorkians in the First Genocide.”

“Are you serious?”

“Completely. Apparently the conquerors celebrated their first Solstice by posing with a heap of bloody Kevorkian corpses, hence the green and red.”

“Um.” My brain must have short-circuited then, for I was out of coherent words. I put my head in my hands for just a while until I could recover. What was wrong with our ancestors? And considering what I was doing, did I even have any right to judge?

Through my fingers, I peeked at the thoroughly festooned hall with green and red sprayed everywhere. Green and red chandelier. Green and red chairs. There was no way to remove even a tenth of the tinsel in time.

“Get me Holovideography.”

We had barely gotten backstage when the ear-splitting music began erupting from the orchestra pit to signal the start of the ceremony. It was a truly garish piece, if one could even call it that, devoid of tonality and consonance. We had commissioned the famed Kevorkian composer for traditional Kevorkian solstice pageant music, and it must

have decided to play a joke on us. Or maybe this *was* Kevorkian solstice pageant music. No wonder Kevorkians were so dour.

I cringed as each dissonant boom of the Kevorkian drums sent another wave of dignitaries to their knees. Some looked positively farcical, stumbling about while swiveling their heads in confusion at the decorations. No one could produce a reason why white would be offensive, so we used the ambassador lasers to project burning bright white on all of the decorations. And by the time the ceremony started, no one will be able to see anything except the stage.

The choir began to chant something straight out of Kevorkian hell. “*Cue lights,*” I spoke in my earpiece. All five thousand stage lights turned on with a huge flicker that was probably the power grid of the city buckling under the load. Heat blasted us like a furnace. I thought I might have heard guests cry out in eye-searing pain, but it was hard to hear anything over the orchestra. At least the sounds from the hologram machine fitted right in with the cacophony.

“Red dot, Your Majesty.”

We watched backstage through films of tears as Her Majesty regally walked into the blazing supernova under her layers of royal regalia as if nothing was unusual. This time, I could hear the applause even over the dirge.

The Queen gave her speech with her usual aplomb.

“Today is a day for truth and healing,” her amplified voice tore through our ear canals and whatever the building was made of. I brushed some dust off my shoulders that fell from the ceiling. May the building stay intact and Her Majesty not light on fire.

“Yes, my ancestors have committed horrific acts of war during the last centuries. Their powers and prejudice had gone unchecked, and for that, the Kevorkian people have suffered needlessly. For that, I apologize and beg for your forgiveness.” She looked at the hologram of the Kevorkian ambassador, which was a moment of prime irony.



“As we all know, words are hollow if not supported by action.” Like her grandfather, who did something pretty similar to this and then blasted their moon colony to pieces. “That is why I have a five-point plan to work with the Kevorkian people in the areas of education, culture, technology, science, and medicine. I am pledging three quintuple firecoins toward this effort.” I whistled in my head. That’s a lot of money.

“In this season of togetherness, we thank the Kevorkians for the depth of their courage and generosity. Let these lights illuminate the ugly truths of our past and burn away our propensity for destruction. Let the drums exorcise our demons as we march forward with Kevorkians as allies!” We all leapt and applauded as one. There was no one like Her Majesty, and there never will be.

Everything proceeded as planned, thanks to the extreme competence of the crew. The “Kevorkian” lumbered on stage and was handed the Scepter of Greatest Regret with great realism by Her Majesty. I think the crystal did its light show, although it was difficult to see much of anything, so in hindsight, we probably didn’t need to go to all that effort with the wires. It gurgled the acceptance speech, praising the magnanimity of our Queen—I hoped, I didn’t know any Kevorkian—while the translation was shown on screens. The animators did an impeccable job matching mouth movements to Kevorkian sounds. At the last round of applause and the ambassador leaving the stage, we all collapsed in our seats. It was over.

The crew and I nursed our throbbing heads as we watched the Kevorkian media reports over copious amounts of food and libation, courtesy of Her Majesty. Their responses seemed to be mostly positive, mixed with incredulity that the ceremony actually went off and amused mockery at the reports of some dignitaries passing out. I praised Holography and Sound for the video and sound mastering of the live holographic transmissions that made the ceremony seem mostly normal to those watching from home.

“And did you think it was mumbling more than usual? Its speech sounded a little off to me.” The talking head on the Kevorkian feed gurgled simultaneously with the synthesized live translation.

“Well, we only had ten minutes to render the speech, so I think we did a pretty good job!” one of the Sounds yelled at the screen.

“Probably drank a little too much,” the other Kevorkian shrugged.

We cheered and clinked our bottles. Sure, the Paranoia Party might drum up some conspiracy theories, but the mainstream Kevorkian media didn't suspect a thing. Somewhere in the back of our minds was the uncomfortable thought that we were celebrating the successful cover-up of the death of the ambassador to whom we had supposedly apologized for mass murder, but the alcohol drowned out all logic.

We had done it, against all odds. From there we descended into a sort of ecstatic drunken stupor until two stagehands wheeled in a giant tank with a very dead Kevorkian inside.

“So...what do you want us to do with this?”

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*Hal Y. Zhang likes to maximize the ludicrous. Read more at [halyzhang.com](http://halyzhang.com).*

# **Notes From the Nest**

Wow! Cool issue, huh? 2019 has been a wild and crazy year for Cirsova Publishing, and we've released more titles this year than ever before.

If you haven't already, be sure to pick up *Duel Visions*, the anthology of weird tales and the macabre from Misha Burnett and Louise Sorensen. And our *Illustrated Stark* books—what a fantastic edition, huh? Star Two did a great job on the art for those and the Summer Special. Maybe we'll have some more projects for them in the future!

Michael Tierney's *Wild Stars* is going to be huge. You'll definitely want to pick those up in October if you didn't back the crowdfunds.

We'd also like to give a special shout-out to James Streissand, who sent us a really nice piece of office art [a portrait of Remilia Scarlet from *Touhou 6: Embodiment of Scarlet Devil*]. He has a new fantasy novel coming out called *Eyes of the Forest*. Be sure to check it out, too! Get it! GET IT!

Really, that's it for right now. There's an internet if you need more Cirsova news. Sign up for our mailing list and follow us on our Wordpress.

*“Alex” P. Alexander, Ed.*



# **Eyes of the Forest**

**James  
Streissand**

**Out now on Amazon!**