

# CIRSOVA

Magazine of Thrilling Adventure and Daring Suspense  
Fall Special #1 2020

To Rest  
Among  
the Stars

by  
Su-Ra-U

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Matt Spencer  
Danny Nicholas  
Benjamin Cooper  
Trevor R. Denning

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# Cirsova

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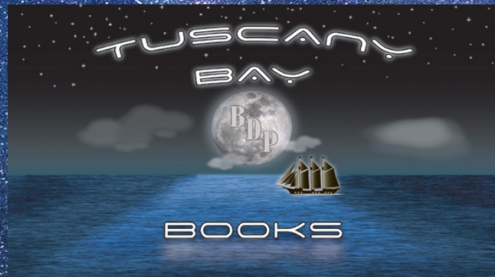
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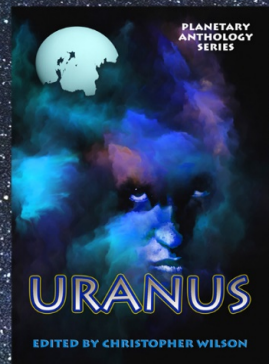
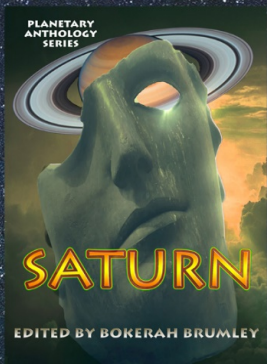
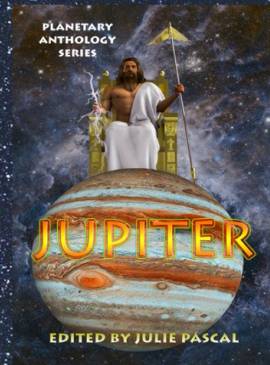
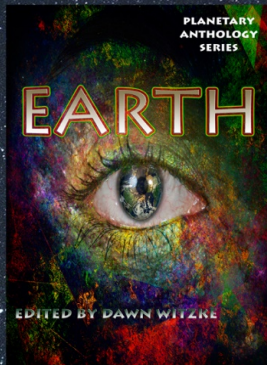
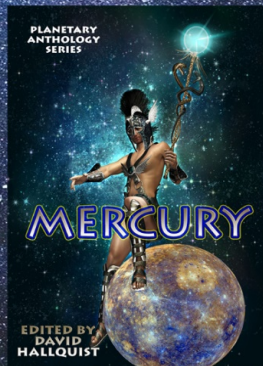
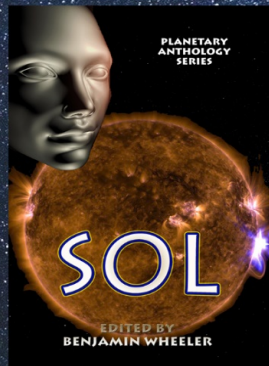
**Fall Special    No 1**

**2020    \$15.00 per copy**





# PLANETARY ANTHOLOGY SERIES





**MATTHEW PUNGITORE**

**FIENDILKEJELD**

**CASTLE**







# **Melkart the Castaway**

By MARK MELLON

*When a powerful triton destroys his ship, the Phoenician giant Melkart washes up on a foreign shore—and is rudely welcomed by a tyrant who would enslave him!*

The storm came on shortly before twilight, a sudden wall of black clouds flecked with lightning that barreled from the west out of a previously clear sky. Wine-dark seas grew choppy and turbulent. They were too far from any island to row for shelter.

“Stow the oars,” the captain ordered. “Quarter reef the sail.”

Sailors hastened to obey. Long oars were placed in the narrow hold. Men heaved on tackle lines to hoist the heavy sail, already rain-drenched. Powerful waves threw the galley high and then down again. The steering board couldn't engage the water. The ship was impossible to steer. The galley wallowed in a deep trough, beneath a towering wave aimed beam-on at the ship. The wave slammed down but at the last second changed direction. The galley struggled through, but the hold was swamped.

“Day watch, jettison the anchor and cargo. Night watch, bail out the hold.”

Hands grabbed tin buckets and bailed water from the hold through open hatches. The day watch took terracotta amphorae full of valuable olive oil and tossed them overboard. A very large, muscular man cut the line with a knife, seized the massive stone anchor and lifted it overhead.

A huge, shaggy head reared from the churning maelstrom, a hundred times bigger than the galley, fringed by phosphorescent green hair, thickly bearded. His jade eyes were alive with malevolent cunning and bronze teeth coated with sickly verdigris. A thick, corded neck and massive shoulders emerged, coated in gleaming, green scales.

“A triton. We're doomed!” a sailor screamed.

The big man kept his nerve. “Mot take you.”

With amazing strength, he threw the anchor. The heavy stone crashed off the triton's chest. He screamed in outrage and brought a gargantuan fist, hard and spiny as a crustacean claw, down on the galley's bow. The big man dove into the sea. The galley smashed into fragments. The ship collapsed around the sailors. They wailed piteously as they were dragged down below.

Another enormous wave hit. After that, there was no sign of human life, only lines and shattered planks that bobbed upon the turbulent waters. Satisfied, the triton put an enormous conch to his mouth. He blew a long, deep, bass note that soothed the angry sea to calm, still waters. A yellow ivory moon beamed down on the tranquil Middle Sea. To the east, a mountainous island's peaks and valleys were limned by the moonlight. With a great flip of his fluked tail and an enormous splash, the triton dove beneath the surface, headed for the sea's lowest depths, his customary home.

Already exhausted, the big man swam on, determined to endure until his strength at last gave out. He directed his strokes toward the distant island, his only chance at survival.

Dawn streaked the sky with rosy fingers. The big man lay unconscious on a narrow gravel beach at the foot of high, black cliffs. The early morning high tide lapped at his heels, but he remained motionless, as one already dead. Only his chest's steady rise and fall showed he still lived.

The cliffs were alive with gray and white sea birds. They wheeled over the crystal clear aquamarine bay to find prey for newly hatched chicks. Harsh, sharp bird cries mingled with the waves' susurrus. The man was alone on the beach, far from anyone who might help.

Puffs of black smoke wafted over the cliffs. A steady, rhythmic clank grew increasingly louder, like a phalanx of armored hoplites, only noisier, more grating. Gleaming like Phoebus Apollo, a bronze behemoth rounded a cliff. He stopped, turned his head with a smooth hiss of gears, and strode toward the prostrate man. Thrice a man's height, with an articulated head, torso, and limbs, the construct belched black smoke from an exhaust pipe embedded in his Corinthian helmet.

The colossus bent low and carefully inspected the man, the graven, bearded face impassive. He picked him up, not ungently. Cradled by the bronze automaton, the man still slumped unconscious. Despite his muscular bulk, he seemed a mere infant in its arms.

The colossus marched around the island, down loops and whorls that circumscribed countless bays and inlets, flanked by high, rugged, inaccessible cliffs, a natural fortress. He came to a narrow upward pass,

a winding staircase of jagged, irregular stones. Smoke steadily streamed as the colossus tirelessly climbed half a league up the rocky defile.

He emerged onto a level, green plain at the island's eastern apex. The wine-dark sea lay spread out everywhere, waves chased with gold by Phoebus Apollo's rising light. Brindle sheep and goats grazed on thick grass, tended by rude, skin-clad hinds. The plain swept gently upward to a low crest. A palace stood there, surrounded by a garden and dominated by a slender three-story tower, all built of gleaming white marble. The colossus strode toward the palace.

The guards posted outside the main gate wore scarlet cloaks and bronze helmets with transverse crests. One smiled.

"Looks like Talos found another helot."

"At ease, Neoptolemy," Polydorus said. "Stop leaning on your spear. Keep watch like a Spartan."

Talos walked to the main gate, laid the man down, turned, and impassively clanked away.

"By Ares, I'll never get used to that thing."

Polydorus scowled. "It'll take four to carry this helot. Rig a stretcher. Take him to Oletus. Report back."

"Yes, Polydorus."

The Spartans fashioned a stretcher from a shield, two spears, and two cloaks. Upon Polydorus's order, they heaved the big man onto the stretcher in one smooth, coordinated motion, picked him up to shoulder level, and marched briskly through the open gates into a broad square of smooth granite flagstones. The slave barracks were nearby, a two-story building behind a whitewashed stone wall fifteen cubits high.

Oletus the turnkey opened the iron gate. Heavy bronze keys hung from a chain around his neck. He wiped greasy hands on his filthy tunic.

"I wondered if the storm would bring anything."

Cleomenes panted. "Where do you want him?"

"Put him in that cell."

The Spartans carried the man to the open cell and unceremoniously dumped him.

“He weighs at least five talents.”

“Quiet, Neoptolemy. You and Eumaos drag him into the cell.”

The Spartans grabbed the man by the armpits and pulled him into the filthy cell, bare of comfort or amenities, reeking with captives’ sweat, imbued with despair by those doomed to a miserable fate. Eumaos slammed the gate shut. Oletus closed the massive lock. The Spartans formed up and silently marched back to the gates. Oletus sent a slave to fetch the Despot. The big man lay sprawled in the cell.

“Well, Oletus? I was teaching Demeter to play the reeds. Has Talos brought me anything interesting?”

Oletus bowed low. “Yes, Despot.”

The Despot went to the cell. Handsome, sharp-nosed, with a full head of iron-gray hair and a philosopher’s beard, he wore a soft, formless gown of purple silk brought from far Seres. A gold ring with a large, dark red stone glinted on his right index finger. Dark, lively eyes sparkled with intelligence and humor as he studied the captive.

“My, he’s big. He can turn the millstone and grind my grain. That way, I’ll free up two horses who can plow even more land. A neat economy, don’t you think, Oletus?”

“Yes, Despot.”

“See he’s fed when he comes to. I try to be considerate, even to slaves.”

“Yes, Despot.”

The Despot left. Oletus regarded the new helot and laughed.

“A fine time you’ll have. Turning a rotten millstone the rest of your life.”

He awoke to the delicious smell of porridge cooking in a great iron pot suspended by a tripod over a charcoal fire. A long line of helots waited patiently for their midday meal, clay bowls in their hands. A young woman in a ragged peplos that barely covered her thin frame brought a

large bowl filled with porridge to his cell and handed it to him through the bars.

He nodded thanks and eagerly ate with his hands. The girl was black-haired and almost pretty, her delicate features were marred by a scar on her left cheek. He stuck his hands through the bars.

“Give me water to wash my hands.”

She took an amphora, poured water over his hands, then added some to his bowl, which he gratefully drank.

“What’s your name, girl?”

“Daphne.”

“A pretty name. I am Melkart. What island is this?”

“Candia. The realm of the Despot Hermes Trismegestius.”

Melkart burped and shrugged. “Fancy Greek titles don’t mean much to me. I serve Toqeph, Lord of Byblos and Tyre. I sailed upon his galley, returning to Tyre when a storm hit us. I need to speak to your master. I must journey to Tyre.”

The girl frowned. “You’ll never see Tyre again. All who come to Candia may never leave. We must serve the Despot until we die. You’re a slave now.”

Melkart laughed. “We’ll see about that.”

“Hush. Oletus comes with Spartans. Don’t dare disobey them. The Despot will punish you. I must go.”

Daphne took the bowl and amphora and fled. Oletus tramped through the dusty yard, two armored Spartans with him. The fat man stood with a proprietary grin before the cell, thumbs hooked into his broad leather belt.

“Now you’re rested and fed, time to earn your keep. Follow us. We’ll show you where you’ll work.”

“Take me to your master. I am Melkart, a servant of Toqeph. My lord will pay well for my safe return.”

Oletus laughed, but the Spartans stayed grimly silent.

“Come on, Melkart. Just work like the others, and tonight you can have another bowl of porridge only with figs added and a bit of goat cheese. That sounds nice, doesn’t it?”

“Will you take me to your master?”

A Spartan raised his spear high. “Behave or get this.”

“Easy to spear you through bars,” the other one said.

Melkart silently considered. “All right. It’s only fair to earn my keep. Will you show me to your master if I work as you ask?”

Oletus fervently nodded. “I’m sure he’ll personally congratulate you on the fine job you’re doing. I’m glad you’re seeing sense. Now I’ll let you out.”

The iron gate creaked open. Melkart strode outside. He reached his arms high and stretched, a flex of rippling muscles. Melkart was a head taller than the Spartans, no small men. His hair and beard were curly, blue-black; his bronze shoulders each a cubit wide. He followed Oletus from the slave barracks, flanked by Spartans who closely watched him, alert for any false move.

Phoebus Apollo had not half-finished his journey when they passed through the garden, wooden trellises heavy with round, mauve grapes, red poppies in gay profusion, and everywhere bees’ industrious hum. A large, whitewashed, round building stood outside the garden, near a freshwater spring that merrily burbled.

“Here’s where you’ll work.”

Through a round door, they entered a circular space with a lofty ceiling, dusty with tiny flecks of grain and pollen that floated in sunbeams cast from narrow windows that ringed the room, dominated by an enormous wheel hewn from limestone. A wooden axle passed through the millstone’s central aperture that rotated on a fixed post. Shackles hung from the axle’s end.

“You see, you’ll replace the horses. A big, strong fellow like you should have no problem turning the mill. You can even use that skin to pad your shoulders.”

Melkart's open-handed slap broke Oletus's lower jaw and knocked him sprawling. The Spartans raised their spears, but Melkart had already run to the millstone. He grabbed the axle with powerful, big hands and snapped it off. Armed now with a club, he waved it at the Spartans.

"Use me for a draft animal like a blinded Canaanite? No, by Ishtar! Come at me now that I can strike back."

Oletus jumped up and ran outside, inarticulately baying for help. Shields high, spears poised, the Spartans advanced toward Melkart, plainly intending to outflank and distract him, then stab him from the side.

Melkart swung at the man on his left. The other Spartan saw his chance and lunged toward Melkart only to catch the axle's back end square in the face. Nose broken despite his helmet, blood streamed down his neck as he pitched unconscious to the ground.

"Miserable foreign bastard."

The Spartan threw his spear. Melkart knocked it away with the axle. The Spartan pulled his sword and went straight at Melkart. He brought the axle up in a long arc, under the shield and straight into the Spartan's cuirass. The blow's force lifted the Spartan up and hurled him back. He crashed against the stone wall and lay prone, any remaining fight completely knocked out of him. Melkart dropped the axle and picked up a spear.

"Thank your gods I let you live."

Melkart opened the door and strode out into the bright afternoon sun only to receive a faceful of purple powder that went deep up his nose and into his open mouth. The spear fell from his hands. Mighty legs lost strength and swayed like ships' masts in a storm. He slumped earthward into unconsciousness.

"It took a full bag of Djerban purple lotus powder to put him out."

Dressed in a spotless white tunic and much gold jewelry, including a radiate electrum crown, the Despot regarded Melkart. Oletus stood with him, broken jaw cradled in his hands, softly moaning. Agis, the Spartan commander, was also there, big, red-faced, and scowling. Agis went inside the mill house and returned, obviously angry.



“This slave beat two Spartans. I’ll kill him.”

He drew his sword and bent over Melkart.

“Hold, Agis. Only I decide who lives or dies here.”

Agis rose, sheathed his sword, and bowed. “Yes, Despot. Yet he must die. Spartan honor demands it.”

“And so he will. The Minotaur will dispose of him.”

Agis laughed, short, guttural, without mirth or warmth, but full of satisfaction.

“He’ll make short work of him.”

“I know. That’s why I plan to have dancers first. Add a cultural touch, you know.”

“Yes, Despot.”

“As if Spartans care about such things. Olethus, I’m tired of hearing you groan. Tell Iphicles the barber to set that jaw.”

“Yeth, Dethpot.”

The Despot prodded Melkart with a kidskin slipper. “Hopefully, he’ll put on a good show.”

Water was thrown in his face. Melkart came to in yet another cell. The gate looked out on fading late-afternoon light as Phoebus Apollo neared his place of rest. Music played in the arena, reed pipes, tambours, and castanets. He rose and went to the gate.

In the arena, slender, athletic young men and women identically clad in tight-fitting kilts gracefully capered and sauntered while wild, long-horned bulls stampeded among them. A woman leaped into a young man’s arms. He threw her backward and up. She spun through the air, landed on a charging bull’s back, then nimbly leaped off before the beast could throw her. Others performed the same stunt. There was only one serious mishap when a man misjudged his landing and was impaled on a bull’s horns with a hideous, shrieking death cry. This provoked laughter from overhead.

“Give each dancer an Athenian obol,” the Despot cried. “Clean the mess and prepare the next performance. I like to stay amused.”

Dancers quickly filed out from the amphitheatre; the bulls were herded away by hinds; menials swept up dung and blood and guts while others scattered fresh sand. A gong sounded a deep basso note. The iron-barred gate swung open.

“Get out, barbarian.”

Spartans stood on the opposite gate. One stabbed a spear at him, but Melkart neatly dodged it. Melkart stuck his left thumb between his first two curled fingers so only the tip showed. The Spartans angrily returned the gesture. He laughed and stepped outside. The amphitheatre was small, only thirty cubits wide and long, but built of fine, gray-veined, Parian marble and adorned with statues and triumphal columns. The tiers of seats were empty.

“There you are.”

Melkart looked up. High above on a porphyry dais, cushioned by pillows and guarded by Spartans, the Despot sat on an upholstered curule chair and sipped chilled wine from a red and black Etruscan krater. Very young women in scanty peploses attended him. He raised his krater in a toast.

“I’ll enjoy watching you die, slave. I don’t like troublemakers. This will be a good example to other helots. Agis will enjoy this even more.”

Melkart gave the Despot the same obscene gesture again. The Despot scowled.

“What a rude slave. You deserve your fate. Send in the Minotaur.”

Helots pulled on ropes. Double arched wooden doors swung open. A horrible animal reek wafted from the dark interior, like a thousand long-neglected stockyards. A hairy, two-legged beast strode from the black shadows, naked yet unashamed, six cubits high with a heavily muscled human body, but a bull’s head and tail. The Despot applauded.

“Bravo. I love this part.”

The Minotaur gave a surly toss of his ebon snout and bellowed a deafening blast of pain, anger, and naked hunger. Small, red eyes

blinked, unaccustomed to harsh sunlight. Blurry vision fixed on Melkart. White smoke puffed from flared nostrils. He'd found his prey.

Melkart scanned the amphitheatre. Stones were mixed in with the sand, some good sized. The Minotaur lowered his head so his deadly horns pointed directly toward Melkart. He pawed the ground with a horny foot, working himself up to charge. Melkart calmly went from spot to spot, picking up rocks as he did.

"What are you doing, slave? That doesn't look fair," the Despot cried.

The Minotaur charged, headed for Melkart with amazing speed. Melkart ducked away from the full frontal assault. As he did, he threw a stone with unerring aim. The rock hit the Minotaur's left ear. He screamed with pain.

Furious and hungry, the Minotaur reared up, muscular arms thrown wide to catch Melkart and rip him in two. Melkart threw a second stone that hit the Minotaur with awful force in the snout. Blood streamed down onto the Minotaur's chest.

The Minotaur screamed again but was finally close enough to grab Melkart by the waist. He lifted Melkart high in a boa constrictor grip. The Minotaur steadily applied pressure with a ghastly embrace that would soon snap even Melkart's sturdy spine.

"Now he's got him. All he did was make him angry."

Red-faced, teeth clenched, Melkart raised his last rock high. With all his remaining strength, he brought the stone down hard. The sharp-edged flint slammed into the Minotaur's left eye, crushed, and completely gouged it out.

The Minotaur's last wail was loudest of all. Insane from pain, he dropped Melkart and fell to his knees. Although he gasped for breath, Melkart leaped instantly on the Minotaur. He locked his arms around the beast's long, curved horns and twisted the mammoth head.

The Minotaur fought back hard. He tried to buck away, to turn his head away from his tormentor, but Melkart grimly hung on. Slowly, steadily, he applied increasing force.

There was a loud snap like the crack of a large felled tree. The Minotaur gasped and lay still, neck broken, slain by Melkart. The Despot leaped to his feet and threw his krater at Melkart.

“Hekate take you. I went to great trouble and expense to acquire a Minotaur. Agis. Have your men spear him down.”

Long spears rained down into the amphitheatre, yet Melkart was already on the move. He zigzagged across the sand, hopped the barrier wall, ran up the opposite bank of empty seats, and leaped out of the amphitheatre, neatly escaping while spears impotently struck the stone walls.

“Who is this Melkart? Is he a daimon of some sort?”

“He’s a threat. He killed the Minotaur. Let me take horses and ride him down. He’ll cause trouble.”

The Despot laughed. “What can one man do? He’ll starve to death alone or Talos will find him. You and your men escort me to the palace.”

Agis scowled but nodded. “Yes, lord.”

As twilight gathered, Melkart sought refuge in Candia’s steep mountains. The spring air was thick with wild herbs’ heavy scent, sage, rosemary, and mint. Even high in the mountains, the sea’s sharp salt tang was omnipresent. His stomach rumbled from hunger. Melkart drank from a cold stream that rushed down steep granite banks and continued to climb. Close to a high peak in near total darkness, Melkart spotted a narrow cave, a fissure in the craggy stone face. He threw in rocks and, when no animals protested, cautiously crawled inside.

The cave was wider inside with a relatively smooth floor. The air was musty but dry. Rain fell outside. A slight drizzle steadily intensified into a downpour. Grateful for shelter, Melkart wrapped himself in his lion skin and slept.

Everyone on Candia slept that night, from Melkart, to the Despot on his scented circular bed, warmed and encircled by young women, to helots in their barracks, snatching what rest they could in squalid cells before their miserable lives resumed, even domestic and wild animals, all save the few Spartans who stood guard and the unstoppable Talos,

who forged surefooted through the rain, his way lit by red fires that burned in his eye sockets.

Sea gulls' cries woke Melkart. A small, weak patch of early morning sunlight gently illuminated the cave. It went back twenty cubits, and the arched ceiling was high enough to fully stand.

"Aaaaahhhhhh."

A goat's distinctive cry. A large, shaggy goat with gracefully curved horns and a thick, black fleece. An old woman milked the goat into a clay bowl. She wore a black tunic and shawl.

"Ready to eat now, hero?"

"I'm always ready to eat, mother."

She handed him the bowl, warm from the fresh squeezed milk. A thick piece of bread and a goat cheese chunk floated in the milk. Melkart greedily ate with a wooden spoon.

"Thank you for feeding me."

She shrugged dismissively. "A man your size must eat."

"Are you a helot?"

The old woman laughed. "I'm no slave. I'm Amalthea. I lived here on Candia long before Hermes arrived on his galley laden with plunder."

Melkart laughed also. "I don't like him either, Amalthea. Why do you live in this cave?"

Amalthea gave him a suspicious look. "Why shouldn't I? You noticed yourself, it's dry. This cave was promised to me for the care I gave Kassios as a child."

"May I have some more food, please, mother?"

Amalthea handed Melkart more bread, which he ate. He stretched out on his lion skin, head cradled in his hands.

"Tell me more of Hermes. Is he a mage?"

She contemptuously spat. "The worst. Everything gained by cheating and theft, even a ring stolen from Daedalus he used to bind a triton. He

made a slave of a divine spirit, Hippios's own son."

Melkart nodded. "I saw him in a storm. He smashed our ship into driftwood."

"Hermes has the triton summon storms to wreck passing ships so he can salvage their cargoes and enslave survivors."

"So the helots who work his land and serve in the palace were shipwrecked like me?"

Amalthea shuffled to a wooden bin and pulled out hay for the goat. "Young women are his special playthings."

Melkart stood up, a serious look on his face. "By the gods, this Hermes blasphemes greatly. I had no love for him before, but now I pray Mot takes him to her dark realm. Bad enough to enslave free men and women, to reduce them to chattels, but to do the same to a god? Why isn't he stricken dead for his hubris?"

She chuckled. "Hippios hates him, that's certain. That's why he stays on Candia. He dare not set sail again. He's chained here the same as his slaves."

"He shall be punished for his crimes. The helots must be set free."

Amalthea studied Melkart closely, her eyes small black prunes embedded in infinite wrinkled folds. "And you'll do it, eh, hero?"

Melkart folded his arms and nodded. "I am Melkart. I won't stand by when wrong is done. This Hermes will die for his sins. I swear it by Baal, El, and Ishtar."

"There's much to overcome, Melkart. Talos, indestructible with the strength of ten. Then there's his Spartan guard, twenty strong, all sworn on their warriors' honor to die in his defense."

"We'll see how indestructible Talos is. Anything made by man can be destroyed too. And as for the Spartans, a fig for them. I'll shear their long hair like they were sheep."

Amalthea laughed and reached up to punch Melkart on the shoulder. "You might do at that. Perhaps the gods sent you. Let me give you something."

She shuffled into the dark interior, where she rooted around for some time. Amalthea returned with a composite bow, formed from identically curved ram's horns, and a quiver filled with bronze tipped arrows. She also brought a long, hempen rope and a sharp dagger.

"These were Kassios's toys when he was small. You might be big enough to handle them. See if you can string the bow."

Melkart took the hempen bowstring and slipped a loop through the bow's lower limb. He braced his feet wide, gripped the upper limb in his right hand, and pulled down while he brought the string up with his left. Veins bulged in Melkart's neck, and he frowned at having to make so much effort, but he still readily strung the bow. The ancient crone beamed.

"You're a hero, Melkart. Just don't get killed. I'd hate to mourn you."

Melkart laughed. "Have no fear, Amalthea. I'll go carefully."

She handed him a leather bag. "Twice-baked bread. It should last several days."

Melkart took the bag and hugged Amalthea. "Thank you, mother. You've been good to me."

Tears tracked down her withered cheeks. "You remind me of Kassios. As if you were his son. Come back if you're hungry."

Dawn streaked the sky with her rosy fingers, herald of Phoebus Apollo's imminent ascent. His galloping horses' wild, spiky manes yellowed the horizon. Seas lightened from indigo to turquoise to aquamarine, while gray dolphins sported and arced in the pellucid waters. Boreas blew a cool breeze from the north that lifted up dark-winged pelicans as they soared in search of early morning prey. The air was alive with sea tang, charged ions mingled with wild spices' heady scent.

Amidst this stunningly beautiful scene, Talos stolidly plodded on, indifferent to the paradise around him, intent only upon his rounds. In addition to his usual duties, a continuous circuit around Candia to repel any invader or capture helots trying to escape, the Despot had ordered him to find and kill a runaway slave. Governor set to full gear, the titanic bronze hoplite marched up and down Candia's steep, rocky slopes. His

head steadily traversed from left to right and back as he scanned the rocks for any human sign.

The black smoke's steady trail could be seen half a league away. Atop a high crag, Melkart crouched behind a rock, bow in hand, quiver slung from his back. Enormous bronze joints clanked steadily louder. Talos strode into view. He marched down the narrow defile below. Sunlight glinted off his burnished frame. Melkart pulled an arrow from his quiver and nocked it to the bow. Talos reached the defile's middle. Melkart jumped up, pulled back the arrow, aimed, and shot.

The arrow bounced harmlessly off Talos, but it got his attention as Melkart intended. The colossus swiveled his head up, toward to the peak where Melkart stood. He waved his arms to make sure Talos couldn't miss him.

"Here I am, Talos. Come get me."

Talos clambered up the almost sheer rock face with inhuman speed, much faster than Melkart had thought possible. Melkart turned and leaped from the crag. Talos reached the steep crest moments later. The brazen colossus looked left and right, but the crest was empty, with a sharp, precipitate drop to another defile below.

"Over here, Talos."

Melkart stood on the opposite ridge a hundred cubits away. A hempen rope was strung between the two crests, used by Melkart to cross the defile hand over hand. Steam puffed as Talos hurried toward the rope, but Melkart swiftly cut it before he reached it. Melkart nocked an arrow to the bow, pulled it back, aimed, and shot. The arrow sailed smoothly into the joint between Talos's neck and head. The colossus snatched the arrow away. Melkart laughed.

Talos scaled down the steep rock face with the same inhuman speed as he'd ascended, only in reverse, its back to Melkart. The big Phoenician waited patiently. The stiff breeze ruffled his blue-black hair.

When Talos reached the bottom, Melkart jumped with feline speed to a great pile of boulders at the crest's edge. He put both hands to a stout wooden lever and pulled it down with one convulsive heave. Thousands of talents of rock rolled down on Talos, an overwhelming avalanche. Talos pushed a boulder aside with one hand and deftly dodged another,



but a heavy, rolling stone knocked his legs out from under him. Boulders rained down in an irresistible deluge, smashed into his bronze carapace until Talos was finally buried under stone.

Melkart put the strung bow over his shoulder and nimbly scaled down the defile. He cautiously approached Talos, apparently destroyed. Only his head showed amid the rubble, obscured by dust but immobile. Melkart scrambled up the stones until he faced Talos.

A faint puff of smoke belched from Talos's battered helmet. The exposed head turned toward Melkart. Stones rumbled beneath Melkart's feet, as if Candia was in an earthquake's grip. An enormous bronze hand jutted forth from the stones as a powerful arm tried to pull free from their weight.

Melkart snatched up a heavy rock. He fell to his knees before Talos's head and bashed away repeatedly with feverish intensity. A forearm broke loose; the hand reached toward Melkart. He brought up the stone one last time and smashed it down hard as he could. The brazen image caved in, utterly destroyed.

Talos groaned, a human cry of pain and despair. White smoke hissed from his face's ruptured seams. The arm stopped, still outstretched to grab Melkart, but no longer a threat. The brazen colossus had finally died.

Melkart ate goat milk, figs, cheese, and bread. A small fire brightly lit the cave. Amalthea poured more milk into his bowl.

"So you destroyed Talos. Good work, hero."

Melkart tipped up the bowl to drink the last milk. "Now I need to kill those Spartans. It's a shame I have no armor. There's enough bronze on Talos to outfit a phalanx, but there's no way to work it."

Amalthea thought for a moment. "I may have something. Let me look again."

She retreated to the cave's interior to rummage again. When she returned, Amalthea dragged a heavy iron chisel and hammer behind her, borne down by their weight.

“These belonged to Haphaistion. The cave’s full of children’s relics. See if you can lift them.”

Melkart wrapped massive hands around the tools and hefted them. “I can build a full panoply with these. I’ll make mincemeat of those Spartans.”

“Don’t be cocksure, hero. Return with your shield, not on it.”

“Yes, mother. I’ll be careful. Now may I have more bread?”

Amalthea laughed and cut another slice for Melkart. “Always hungry, you.”

The Despot grew concerned when Talos disappeared. He had Agis double the guards, ordered Oletus to lock up the helots, and sent crows to scour Candia and report back to him. The crows cawed that Talos was gone, lost to their sharp-eyed view. Vexed and perplexed, the Despot worked witcheries in his tall marble tower to dree his fate. Irritated by his hubris, the gods obscured his prophecies so the wyrd was lost to him.

The Despot reclined upon upholstered silk cushions in his pleasure chamber, surrounded by nude women, serenaded by a cythera expertly played by a tall, dark, Athenian hetaira, a full krater of unwatered wine in hand, and out of his mind with worry. Agis sat beside him on a hard camp chair, grim, unsmiling, drinking plain water.

“Let me kill Melkart. I’ll only need ten men. We can run him down quick. We’re all hunters.”

Hermes puffed a long ivory pipe, lit by a taper held by a naked Persian girl. He coughed out black smoke.

“No. I need you here, protecting me. You’ve seen what he’s done. He killed the Minotaur. Now Talos has disappeared.”

Agis sneered. “A dumb animal and an even dumber machine. He’s still no match for Spartans. Let him come.”

“That’s the spirit I want to hear. Now I can feel confident.”

Hermes slurped down more wine. He snapped his fingers. The hetaira strummed a lively tune on her cythera. The other women formed a line. They danced and sang along with the music. Hermes smiled and tried to

put on a brave face, even waved his hands in time to the song. Yet Agis knew a coward when he saw one. None too secretly, he despised Hermes as just more non-Spartan trash.

Melkart began work when Phoebus Apollo's horses broke the horizon. He cut bronze sheets from Talos's exposed arm with the hammer and chisel, long ones for cuirass pieces, shorter ones for greaves and armbands, and a circular sheet for the helmet. The bronze was of high quality, treated with arsenic for extra hardness. Melkart took the knife and cut a thick wooden post he embedded in the earth. He hammered the circular bronze sheet down onto the post and around the edges until a helmet's rough outline was formed. Over a small, smokeless, hot fire built from dry wood, Melkart annealed the bronze. He worked the metal thrice more until he had a serviceable helmet, albeit roughly made.

It was late. Melkart drank water, ate a loaf of twice-baked bread, and set to making greaves. He hammered bronze strips over branches cut to his calves' girth, annealed them over the fire, and repeated the process twice more. He only stopped when darkness neared. Melkart feasted on two hares killed with the bow and slept. Upon the morrow, he finished the greaves. The armbands' manufacture consumed the rest of the day. Melkart killed a small deer, roasted and ate the hindquarters whole, and saved the rest for Amalthea to cook in a stew, hanging it from a tree.

The third day, he carried the deer half to Amalthea's cave, ate porridge, kissed and thanked her, and returned to work. He hewed a large tree trunk to his torso's proportions and hammered the bronze sheets onto the sculpted trunk until they curved into shape. They were annealed in a roaring bonfire, hammered into shape again, and annealed once more. Melkart ate two loaves of twice-baked bread and slept upon his lion skin.

The cuirass pieces were annealed and hammered twice more the next day, then set aside to cool. Melkart cut a spear head from a bronze sheet, honed it on a smooth flint, and lashed it with hemp to a stout oaken rod. Melkart punched holes in the armor's edges with the knife tip and fashioned bindings for his armor from twisted lengths of hemp. He smoothed off rough metal edges with the chisel.

At day's end, he donned the panoply, greaves first, then the arm guards, with the cuirass last, difficult to tie up alone. Melkart put the lion

skin's head atop his own and slipped the bronze helmet over it. The fit was awkward, more like a bowl over his head than a proper helmet, but he shrugged and laced it tight.

Melkart shifted around, raised his spear high as if to throw it, and broke into a quick trot. The panoply was crudely made, to say the least, but he could move fairly easily, and it would provide protection against armored Spartans. He unlaced the helmet, undid the armor, and drank water from a goatskin.

He packed the panoply into the lion skin, bound the paws together, slipped the spear shaft through the knot, and hefted the burden. Melkart set off, munching on twice-baked bread with his free hand. Artemis's bright beams guided Melkart over treacherous, lofty mountains and crags, a luminous, silver crescent in a soft black sky swathed in the Milky Way's luxuriant, lustrous embrace. Patiently, tirelessly, he marched up one crest and down another. Melkart swiftly traversed Candia's rugged bulk, headed toward the plain at the eastern tip, where the Despot's palace stood, along with the Spartans and helots.

In a shallow ravine near the plain, Melkart halted. Dawn would soon streak the sky with her rosy fingers. Melkart untied the lion skin and stretched out upon it, spear by his side. He was so close he heard the Spartan guard shout orders as they changed watch for the night.

"Tomorrow then," he whispered.

He slept, peaceful as an infant in his cradle.

Polydorus fought not to yawn as the dawn streaked the sky with rosy fingers. A stiff wind from the wine-dark sea ruffled his helmet's transverse crest. He pulled his scarlet cloak tight so it wouldn't billow. Neoptolemy grinned.

"Cold, Polydorus?"

"No, and at ease, Neoptolemy. You talk too-"

Polydorus choked as red-black blood poured from his mouth. He clawed futilely at the arrow shaft shot through his neck. Polydorus hit the ground in convulsions.

"Sound the alarm," Cleomenes shouted.

Yet Melkart was already upon them. Fast as fleet-footed Achilles, he dashed from the nearby grove where he'd hidden, lion skin flying behind him. The Spartans raised their shields and spears high, but Melkart smashed into their formation with a wild bull's overwhelming fury.

Eumaos stabbed at Melkart with his spear, but only scratched his cuirass. Melkart shoved his spear into Eumaos's open, bellowing mouth. Blood gushed, and Eumaos fell as well. The remaining three Spartans closed together and charged.

Melkart snatched up Eumaos's shield and slammed it into the lead Spartan. The blow knocked him flat. Melkart neatly jabbed his spear into his throat, then swiftly pulled it to parry the Spartans' thrusts. The other two tried to flank him. Melkart cracked one man on the head with the shield and slashed sideways with his spear at the other. Both men dropped, one with a smashed skull, the other mortally wounded in the left thigh.

Melkart slipped a Spartan sword into his belt. He ran into the courtyard to the slave barracks. Jaw swathed in bandages, Oletus stood before the gate, nervously fingering his keys.

"You! Get away from me!"

Melkart pulled the sword and stabbed Oletus deep in the stomach. He shrieked and fell. Loud, masculine shouts echoed throughout the palace. Spartans gathered on the portico. Melkart kicked the lifeless turnkey aside and threw the gate open.

"Hear me, captives. You're slaves no more. I am Melkart, come to free you. Grab any kind of weapon and fight the Spartans with me."

Assembled in the yard to begin the day's labors, helots stared openmouthed at Melkart as if he were some strange, otherworldly apparition, completely beyond their ken. A rough bass voice shouted commands. Agis.

"Spartans. Form ranks. Advance."

There was a steady tramp as the fifteen remaining Spartans double-timed in a V formation toward Melkart, Agis in the lead.

Daphne ran to Melkart, marred face taut with concern.

“Melkart, flee. We’re cowards, not fit to save. Flee while you can.”

Melkart shook his head. “Urge them to fight.”

He set down the shield and sword and unshouldered his bow. Melkart quickly shot two arrows. Each found its mark. Two Spartans dropped from the ranks.

“Close.”

Melkart had just enough time to drop the bow and snatch up the shield and spear. The Spartans attacked. They slammed their shields against his, thrust spears at him from multiple angles. Melkart fought with his back to the barracks’ wall. Taller than any Spartan, he used his height and reach to stab men in the rear ranks with his spear. Three more Spartans fell dying. Agis hacked and slashed at him, but Melkart deftly parried his blows with the sturdy Spartan shield.

Agis hissed in exasperation. “Swarm the tree.”

The remaining Spartans clumped together, shields held tightly. They pressed against Melkart from all sides, a tactic that left him no room to maneuver as even his terrific strength was inevitably, inexorably worn down and exhausted. Agis raised his sword high to deliver a killing blow with a grim smile.

“Save Melkart! Kill the Spartans!”

Daphne’s clarion voice cut through the tumult. Helots, men and women alike, charged from the gate armed with stools, ladles, rakes, and hoes. Desperate now that a chance for freedom seemed real, they set upon the Spartans, smote them from behind with their makeshift weapons.

Melkart took advantage of the distraction. He held his spear before him and shoved hard as he could into the massed warriors. The shaft rammed the Spartans away from him. They flew in all directions and were instantly set upon by helots who savagely clubbed at them. Agis thrust his sword at Melkart, but Melkart deflected the blow with his spear and drove the head deep into Agis’s exposed armpit.

Melkart recovered, shield up, spear high, ready to kill the next foe, but there was no need. In their frenzy, the helots had slain the remaining Spartans, battered them to death in their armor, an ignominious fate for

brave warriors, murdered by slaves instead of in honorable battle. Daphne ran to Melkart, face smeared with blood, eyes bright, teeth bared in a smile.

“They’re dead. We’re free. Thanks to you, Melkart.”

“Do you really think you’ve won? Stupid helot.”

The Despot’s drunken voice rang out. He stood on his tower’s topmost balcony in a yellow gown. Purple wine slopped from an overfull krater as he lurched about with a loose grin.

“Do you think I care about the Spartans? I hated Agis. Always giving me orders. They were just bait to draw you here, whatever your name is. I can always get new Spartans. And new helots too. But first, I’ll be rid of you.”

Hermes held his right hand high. The ruby ring pulsed and throbbed, enlarged until it became a refulgent, beating, venous heart. The wine-dark sea ominously roared as nearby waters were roiled from below.

The triton emerged, festooned with seaweed. He grabbed a mountain peak with scaly hands and pulled himself level with the plain. The whole island of Candia shuddered from his embrace. Seawater streamed down from the triton in cascades, flooding the plain. Huge eyes full of anger and resentment, he looked to the Despot to know his will, slave to the ring that he was.

The mage pointed toward Melkart with a slack leer of triumph. The triton raised a gargantuan fist, teeth bared in a savage grimace. Melkart coolly picked up his bow, nocked an arrow, aimed, and fired. The arrow shot toward the tower in a long arc. The arrowhead sliced through Hermes’s right index finger just below the ring, severed it neatly as a surgeon’s keen blade.

Demented with pain, Hermes stared bug-eyed at his missing finger, now a blood-spurting stump, and screamed an inarticulate wail of misery and loss. The triton howled with laughter, a loud, guttural roar like an oncoming tidal wave. He brought his crab-claw hand down, but on the tower instead of Melkart.

“No! I’m your master!”

The tower shattered from the triton's blow. Stones smashed the Despot into bloody pulp as they fell downward. Nothing was left but dust and smoke.

The triton smiled at Melkart, a deity's silent thanks. He leaped from Candia's slopes in a magnificent swan dive, pierced the wine-dark sea with a titanic upheaval of water, and disappeared from mortal sight forever.

Phoebus Apollo was now truly embarked on his course, high above the horizon. Aside from a few bulbous purple clouds in the east, the sky was a clear, light blue. A fresh wind blew across the plain, heady with the scent of mountain herbs. The helots cheered and embraced one another. Daphne took one of Melkart's big hands between her small ones.

"Surely the gods sent you to save us."

Melkart shrugged. "I can only do the will of the gods. I am Melkart. Now please see about getting me something to eat, girl. Killing Spartans is hard work."

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*Mark Mellon is a novelist who supports his family by working as an attorney. He has four novels and over seventy short stories published. Short fiction has recently appeared in Coffin Bell and Swords And Sorcery. A novella, Escape From Byzantium, won the 2010 IP Silver Prize for SF/Fantasy. More information is available at: [www.mellonwritesagain.com](http://www.mellonwritesagain.com).*



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# **Its Own Reward**

By ROB FRANCIS

*A pair of bounty hunters happen upon a large promissory note on their latest mark...enough to retire! But will the money prove more trouble than it's worth!?*

The circling caws announced the massacre long before Leos and Agris arrived at the sorry remnants of the caravan. Whatever had attacked it had been thorough: all that was left was shattered wood, torn fabric, and bloodied, broken bodies.

Leos regarded the carnage silently while Agris rooted around in the debris. If the gods had meant it as a reminder of the transience of life and the inevitability of death, it was a bit on the nose.

“Our man in there, 'Gris?”

The big man lifted his head and gave an odd twitch, which could have meant yes, no, or anything in between. He fought to control his spasming facial muscles and tried again.

“Black h-hair, cleft chin, not so tall?”

“Sounds like Longthorn.”

“Very pale, no ears?”

“Are the ears nearby, by any chance?”

“Ah. Yes, here... here they are.”

Leos ducked into the carcass of the caravan to examine the corpse lying beneath the smashed axle. It matched the description Lady Scree had given them, as far as he could tell. And there was the green leather jerkin the man had been so proud of, now stained an unflattering russet. Leos opened the front and felt around inside. The pockets had been torn open by looters, but a crumpled piece of paper remained. No-one in the badlands would have thought a scrap of paper important.

Leos stood. The wax seal on the paper was broken, but he was sure it must be the letter Lady Scree had sent them to retrieve. He wondered what was so important about it that was worth sending them hundreds of leagues in pursuit.

Agris lifted the note from Leos's fingers.

“Oh, it's... open, is it? Let's have a look, then.”

Leos stared at Agris's chopping-block of a face for a long moment. “You can read?”

“Yep.”

“Since when?”

“Since I learned. When I was s-small.”

Leos doubted the man-mountain standing before him had ever been small. But small *and* literate? The world seemed suddenly out of kilter.

“And you never thought to mention it until now?”

“It never came up. There was never anything *to* read, ’til now.”

“Right.” Leos scowled at the paper and the sharp black marks that covered it. “What’s it say then, O Learned One?”

Agris screwed up his eyes and silently regarded the note for a long time. Overhead, the desert caws continued circling. The wind soughed impatiently.

“Still with us, ’Gris?”

Agris scrubbed his forehead with a meaty fist. “Aye, aye. It says ‘promissory note’.”

“‘Promissory note’, eh? I wonder what that is.”

“Then underneath,” Agris continued slowly, “it says ‘The Bank of Tanagra agrees to pay the bearer the sum—the s-sum—of five hundred silver flints, on account of the Lady Preponderance Scree, of White Ford.’”

Leos watched the caws drifting in the blue sky and fought to stay calm. “Five hundred flints?”

“There’s a five and two circles after it. I’m pretty sure that makes five hundred.”

“‘Pay the bearer’? Not ‘pay Tag Longthorn’?”

“‘The bearer,’ it says.”

Leos let out a long breath. “How much we getting paid for this job, Agris?”

The big man shifted his gaze to Longthorn's agonised face, as if the answer was written there. "I reckon my contract says twenty flints each."

"Five hundred is a *lot* more than twenty."

"It is."

"A lot more than *forty*."

Agris considered, his face twitching in the sunlight. "It is."

"It would be enough, in fact, to pay off the bailiffs and set us up with a bit of land to farm, crops to sow, livestock to pasture. *Security*, could be. Safety, even. I might make it to thirty without finding a knife in my ribs or a noose round my neck."

"You *might*. Until Lady Scree sends assassins to kill us. She'll find out what happened. Best to bring it back to her and take the honest forty. There'll be other chances to make money."

"Aye. More dangerous criminals to hunt down for a pittance."

"It's what we do."

Leos spat into the dust. "I can't do it for much longer, 'Gris. I'm knackered. You're older than me: you must be more exhausted than I am."

Agris shrugged. "Easier to sleep when you're not being hunted, though."

"Come on Agris, we can do this! A quick stop at Tanagra to get the cash and then we're away south, into the frontier and looking for some prime farming land. No-one will follow us there. And if they did, we could deal with 'em. We've done it before." He plucked the letter from Agris's fleshy fingers and stashed it in his jacket, next to his contract of employment. "One of us can make out we're Longthorn, to add to the trick. Then Longthorn just vanishes, right? The real man will be just bones in a few days, the caws will see to that. Lady Scree will never know what happened. We'll leave, never come back. She'll think we're dead."

"I'm not a th-thief, Leos."

"No, you're a bloody killer, like me, and that's worse!"

“Now, wait a minute.” Agris drew himself up to his full height, casting Leos in shadow. “There’s a difference. And if we’re going to start throwing insults around, you’re a rat-faced, turd-shovelling—”

“And you’re a privy-licking...”

“...weasel-loving—”

“Cheese-stinking—.”

“I *love* to see two boys abusing each other.”

Leos turned to find himself staring at the business end of a piccola crossbow. The quarrel was only a hand’s width long, but sharp and powerful enough to seriously inconvenience anyone it hit. Even Agris.

The crossbow’s bearer nodded in greeting, and despite their face being shadowed by the cowl of a long sand-coloured cloak, the figure beneath it was unmistakable.

“Sable.”

Leos had fought alongside her during the closing stages of the Cold Coast wars, must be three years ago now. Taller even than Agris but more agile than warriors half her size, she was formidable in a scrap. More than his equal, and probably better than Agris too. They weren’t friends, but then they weren’t enemies either. Or if they were, no-one had bothered to tell him.

Sable raised a second crossbow, this one pointed at Agris. The big man giggled, which unnerved Leos more than the bolt aimed at his eye.

“Two crossbows, Sable? Overkill, isn’t it?”

Sable smiled in the shadows of her hood.

“Leos. Agris. No need to be alarmed. I have your payment for services rendered. Lady Scree wants me to take the letter from here. It’s not that she doesn’t trust you, but... well, you know.”

“She wants to save us the effort?”

“You got it.”

The crossbows didn’t waver. Leos dug in his jacket and pulled out the crumpled paper.

“So, how are we going to do this?”

Sable crouched and placed one of the crossbows on the ground, then swept her cloak aside. A row of curved knives flashed on her belt, and her fingers danced amongst them before teasing out a small leather pouch, which she threw to Leos’s feet.

“Money’s in there. Not quite full payment, as you’ve only had to do half the job, but close enough.”

Leos picked up the pouch and teased it open. Silver flints winked at him in the sunlight. Agris cupped his hands, and Leos poured the coins out.

“Now, pass the letter over.”

Leos flicked the note across to Sable, who effortlessly snatched it from the air. She frowned at the broken seal.

“It’s open.”

Leos shrugged. “It was like that when we found it.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder and towards the wreckage of the caravan. “In there.”

Sable narrowed her eyes. “Can you read, Leos?”

“Me? No. Never had much chance at formal education, tragically. Story of my life.”

Sable looked at Agris, who was still counting the coins, mumbling the tally to himself slowly and carefully. She shook her head.

“Fine.”

“What do you think it says?” said Leos. “Must be pretty important, right, to send all of us after it?”

“None of our business.”

Leos thought there might have been the tiniest hint of doubt in her voice.

“How much you getting paid for this job, Sable?”

She hesitated.

“Thirty flints!” said Agris proudly. “See, Leos. Not bad. I mean, it’s not as much as five hun—”

“Yes, indeed, Agris!” Leos slapped his companion’s shoulder, numbing his fingers in the process. “Well. That seems acceptable, in the circumstances.”

“Good.” The cloak flapped, the letter disappeared, and Sable was holding two crossbows once again. She backed away. When she was far enough she raised a hand in farewell, before turning and sprinting across the dry ground, puffs of dust rising in her wake.

“I like Sable,” said Agris. “Very professional.”

“I suppose so. She could have just killed us and kept the money, after all.”

“Do you think Sable can read, Leos?”

“I hope not, ’Gris.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because if she takes a look at the contract of employment that I gave her instead of Longthorn’s note, she’ll be back pretty bloody quick.”

Leos watched Sable fade into the distance before pulling the promissory note out again to study it. “Still feeling unshakeably loyal to Lady Scree, ’Gris? It’s not all that far to Tanagra, you know.”

“Tanagra.” Agris scratched at one of the larger scars on his head thoughtfully. “Isn’t that where your brother lives? Rylan? I remember, you borrowed... borrowed some money from him that time.”

“Right, yeah. That’s right.” Leos pulled on Agris’s arm to get him moving. “He’s quite busy these days, though, I think, probably no need to bother him.”

“No? Shame, I like Rylan. I’m sure he’d be pleased to see you.”

“Yeah,” muttered Leos. “Yeah, maybe. Come on, Agris.”

The caws descended as they left.



Leos's own mother wouldn't have recognised him. Not that she would've recognised him before, of course, what with her having disappeared when he was just a boy, but still. He was pretty unrecognisable by anyone's standards.

It had been hard parting with ten flints for a single set of clothes, but he certainly looked the part. Purple undershirt with a frilled collar, heavy green tunic and trousers, indigo shoes with bronze fastenings. Even a floppy black hat and gloves that made his hands sweat in the blazing sun. He didn't know how the rich could bear it. His crotch was awash as he and Agris approached the imposing stone façade of the Bank of Tanagra.

"Right," Leos panted. "You wait here, *bodyguard*."

Agris winked and pressed a finger against one nostril in what he probably thought was a subtle cue of acknowledgement but looked more like he was trying to snap his nose right off. There had been no point in trying to disguise Agris. It was hard to get clothes to fit—it was hard enough to find a *tent* that could comfortably accommodate Agris—but also his size and formidable collection of scars meant that dressing him up as a gentleman would be about as convincing as putting a hat on a dog. No, this was a job for Leos alone.

Leos passed Agris the key to their room at the Deviant Axe. "If I don't come out within the hour, head back to the inn. If something's happened, I'll get word to you there. And if needed, there's always Rylan. He lives by the canals, near Coldwater Dock. House with a green door."

Agris nodded. "Right, right. Be... be careful."

Leos tipped his hat and entered the building.

The heavy double doors opened onto a vast hall lit by windows high up. Around twenty tables were arranged in rows, each with an oil lamp burning atop it. Bank tellers sat at the tables, some writing in ledgers, others talking to customers. Leos noted the guards standing around the walls; at least thirty of them. Thirty chances for this all to go wrong.

Leos removed his hat, hoping his newly-darkened hair wasn't leaking dye all over his scalp, as a tall man in a black tunic and hose approached. The man looked him up and down, and—once satisfied with whatever he thought Leos was—smiled.

“May we help you, sir?”

“We? Oh, the Bank. Yes. Yes, please. I have a, um, missionary note to cash. For five hundred flints. That’s a five and two circles.”

The man raised a thin eyebrow. “Indeed. This way, please.”

He led Leos to a table where a small woman was scribbling something onto a piece of paper, pausing to thoughtfully flick beads on an abacus every few moments. The man rapped his knuckles lightly on the tabletop. “Knock knock.”

The woman held up her hand for silence until she had finished writing, then moved the paper to one side before looking up at Leos and applying a smile.

“Hello, sir, I’m Lyzia. How can I help?”

“Sir would like to make a withdrawal,” interjected Leos’s chaperone, before nodding and drifting away.

“Erm. Yes, a withdrawal. I have a note.” Leos tugged the battered paper from his pocket and passed it over.

Lyzia studied it for a moment.

“Fine.” She pulled another sheet of paper from a pile on the desk and began to write again.

“Name?”

Leos smiled. “Tag Longthorn.”

“With an ‘e’?”

“With any what?”

The woman sighed. “Longthorn with an ‘e’ at the end?”

“Oh. No. I don’t think there’s an ‘e’.”

“Address?”

“I’m not from Tanagra.”

Lyzia grimaced. “Anyone making a withdrawal of this size must give a local address they can be found at for the next twenty-four hours. Just in

case we need to contact them about anything.”

“Right, yes, of course.” What was the name of the inn on the edge of town, the one they’d considered before the Deviant Axe? Ah yes. “I’m staying at the All Our Souls inn. Just by the East Gate there.” He had a real sweat on now and hoped it wasn’t too obvious. If they got the money, they’d have to get out of town fast as rats down a privy. He didn’t want to be *contacted*.

“I note the seal is broken.”

“Yes. Had a bit of trouble with bandits in the badlands. Had to spend some time hiding under a caravan, and it got a bit... crumpled.”

“I see.” She made some more marks on the paper.

“When were you issued with the promissory note?”

Leos thought back to his meeting with Lady Scree, and what she’d said about Longthorn. “It would have been about two weeks ago.”

“Fine.” Lyzia tapped the stylus on the table for a moment while she stared at the ceiling. Then she shrugged and turned the paper around, so that all the marks were upside-down. She pointed to a line at the bottom and handed Leos the quill. “Sign here.”

“Yes. Of course.” Leos knew this bit. He scraped a large black X on the paper and handed it back.

Lyzia looked at the paper again for what felt like a long time, then stood up. “Wait here.” She walked to a side door, which a guard hurried to open for her.

Leos looked around as surreptitiously as he could manage. No-one seemed to be paying him any attention. He realised he was wringing the brim of his hat beneath the table and forced himself to relax a little.

Outside, Agris sneezed. Either that or someone had fired a miniature cannon outside the building. A familiar voice floated in through the windows. “Sorry... sorry about that miss, it’ll wipe right off, allow me...”

Leos winced and returned to ruining his hat.

Finally, Lyzia returned. A guard accompanied her, a sack held in both hands. He dumped it on the desk, the clatter drawing stares from around

the bank.

“Five hundred flints.” Lyzia sat down again. “I assume you have engaged guards to escort you? Or would you like some assistance from ourselves, for a small charge?”

“That’s fine. I have my bodyguard outside. I’m not sure how engaged he is, but no-one will give us any trouble.”

Leos wedged his hat back on and hauled the bag into his arms, sagging delightedly under its weight. He struggled towards the door, trying to strike a pace somewhere between brisk and nonchalant.

“Take care, Mr. Longthorn,” said the tall man as he passed. Leos nodded and kept his eyes on the open doors. He could see Agris outside, grinning at the sight of the sack.

When he finally handed the money into Agris’s waiting arms, it was all Leos could do not to break into a run. He turned back to the bank as the big man rumbled off, swinging the sack effortlessly.

The tall man stood in the doorway, smiling. He gave Leos a little wave.

The Deviant Axe was in the coarser part of town. It was a solid building with thick stone walls for its ground storey and timber floors above. Leos thought the stone was probably to prevent anyone setting fire to the place, perhaps disgruntled customers (of which he assumed there must be an army), or a pest control agent keen to halve the rat population of the city. He was pleased they wouldn’t be staying now that they had the money in hand.

The bar was quiet as they entered. Leos took care to hold the sack of flints under his armpit as casually as possible, while Agris clumped across the room to the stairs, drawing uneasy glances from the handful of silent drinkers. Despite his many faults, Agris could always be relied upon as a distraction.

They arrived at their room, and Leos fished the key from his pocket. The strands of hair he’d placed between the door and its frame earlier that day were still there: no-one had been snooping around. He held the door open for Agris and then slipped in. The room looked the same as it had when they’d left it that morning. One large straw mattress that could

accommodate four or five people (or Agris), a layer of dried rushes and rat shit on the floor, and two almost-done candles standing in tarnished holders. A leaded window looked out on the street. And that was it.

Still. Plenty of space to count the money. But that pleasure could wait. Right now, Leos wanted nothing more than to get out of his expensive, sweat-soaked outfit.

“Afternoon, shitsacks.”

Leos fumbled the bag and dropped it on the mattress, coins spilling across the dirty sheets. He turned.

Sable stepped from behind the door, kicking it closed as she moved, her little crossbows aimed at the pair of them.

Agris grinned. “Hello again, Sable!” His forehead creased. “Are you staying here, too?”

“By the gods!” Leos began to scoop the flints back into the sack. “What’s going on, Sable?”

Her eyes flashed. “I think we all know the answer to that. Got big plans for Lady Scree’s money, Leos?”

Leos slipped the last few coins in the bag and tightened the drawstring. “How did you know?”

“I *can* read, Leos. A bit. I’m not stupid. Once I realised you’d swapped the letters, it was just a case of following you. You’re pretty easy to track.”

“Ah. Well.” He hugged the money tight to his chest. “You’d have done the same in our shoes. Five hundred flints is a lot of coin, right? We’re getting on, and Lady Scree doesn’t pay all that well. Look how she cheated us out of our contracts. With your help.”

Sable’s eyes had glazed. She swallowed. “Five hundred?”

“Yeah. How many years of service would it take to earn that? How many men hunted, how many women silenced in the night?”

Agris held his hands out, palms up. “You could have some, Sable, if you’d like. Three-way split. Leos and I are after a f-farm. To grow sheep.”

Leos sighed. “Something like that. But he’s right, Sable. We could—”

Footfall sounded on the stairs below—booted feet, and several pairs. Leos dropped the bag on the mattress and dashed to the door to lock it. Sable stepped back, crossbows still aimed at them both, while Agris slid his scimitar from its scabbard.

The door handle jiggled.

“Tag Longthorn, you are under arrest for the crimes of tax evasion and fraud, committed in the city of Tanagra last year. We’ve been waiting for you, you little runt! Open the door.”

“Tax evasion? Fraud?” Leos looked at Agris, whose mortified expression mirrored his own. “We’re killers, not con men!” He shook his head. Just his luck to impersonate someone who was wanted by the authorities—and for such pathetic crimes.

He dashed across the room to the window and peered out. Sure enough, two city-liveried guards stood in the street, one holding a large crossbow and the other a billhook. “Damn.”

“Why do they think you’re Tag Longthorn?” hissed Sable.

Leos shook his head. “It’s a long story. But somehow I don’t think the truth will make them any happier. Or less violent.”

The door shuddered as if to emphasise his point.

“There are two in the street, Agris. One bow, one blade.”

Agris nodded and stepped to the window. In one smooth movement he swept the scimitar through it, exploding the pane of glass and lead strips outwards. The big man danced back as a bolt spat into the room and lodged in a ceiling beam. Then he winked at Leos and hopped through the gaping frame.

The door burst inwards as Leos hauled up the sack of money. Two guards rushed in—a young boy and an older, bearded man—with swords drawn. Sable fired both crossbows, the two bolts striking the older guard in the chest and punching through his leather breastplate so that he stumbled, sprawling across the mattress with a groan.

The younger man made for Leos, who realised with cold certainty that he wasn't going to be able to react fast enough to stop the boy's blade carving into his gut. But Sable crashed into the lad and they spun, grappling and hissing curses. Leos dashed to the window as Sable shoved the boy away and whipped out two of her curved daggers.

Leos peered out at the street below. Agris stood looking up, scimitar streaked with blood. The two guards were lying still on the ground. The big man waved at Leos.

"You coming?"

Leos hurled the sack of flints as best he could but groaned in dismay as the coarse fabric caught on a shard of glass sticking from the window's twisted frame. It hung for a moment, then ripped open, spilling the silver coins into the street. He turned back to Sable, where she still wrangled with the last guard.

The lad was a lot handier with a blade than Leos would have supposed. Sable was bloodied, one sleeve of her tunic soaked, the arm held awkwardly. She was fending off the guard's lunges with relative ease but unable to move in to strike. Leos pulled one of his own knives from his belt and aimed.

The blade struck the boy under the shoulder of his sword arm. Off-balance, he fell sideways, his weapon lowered. He crashed to the floor with a yelp.

It was enough. In moments, Sable was launching herself through the window. Leos hesitated but shouts from the bar below convinced him that the window was indeed the only option. He grabbed his expensive floppy hat and swiftly followed.

He landed with a shuddering smack but was on his feet again quickly, the world reeling. Across the street, Agris held an unmoving Sable in his arms, concern on his face. Blood pattered from her dangling hand. Leos looked around at the constellation of silver coins scattered across the street. Already urchins were dodging out of nearby alleys to grab them and run off. He cursed.

"Gris, get Sable to Coldwater Dock. I'll be along shortly." He knelt in the dirt and hurriedly began scooping as many flints as he could into his hat.

Leos caught up with Agris just as he was rapping his boot against Rylan's door, Sable still limp in his arms. Even from a distance, he could see how pale she was, her skin waxy and bloodless. Something dangled from her arm; Leos guessed it was Agris's belt, tied above the wound to try to stem the bleeding.

He slipped behind a tree and sucked in air. His finery was plastered to him now, and the black dye from his hair ran down his nose to patter on the ground. His hands trembled as they held the hat and its bounty of coins—smaller than he would have liked, but better than nothing. He just hoped those urchins made the most of his money. Someone deserved to benefit from his misfortune.

The docks were quiet in the late afternoon, the day's business nearly done. Leos poked his head from behind the trunk to watch the green door, stomach acid burning his throat. Rylan lived in a small single-storey wooden terrace, not far from the apothecary where he trained to be a herbalist and healer. It was a far cry from the sheep farm they grew up on. But then, Ry had always been the wiser of the two.

The door opened.

Leos hadn't seen Rylan for two years, but his big brother looked just the same. A little tired maybe, face a touch thinner than before. The familiar sight made Leos's eyes burn. He hadn't realised just how much he'd missed Ry until now.

Rylan looked up at Agris, and his eyes widened. "Agris? What are you doing here? And who's that? She looks pretty far gone." Leos's heart tightened as he saw concern flood Rylan's face. "Is Leos with you? By the gods—he's not dead, is he?"

That was good enough for Leos. He strode from behind the tree and up to the house. "Rylan!"

"Leos? You're alive!"

"Yeah." He stopped just behind Agris, suddenly awkward. "Hello, Ry. I... don't have your money."

Rylan eyed him up and down.



“I hope you didn’t spend it all on clothes.”

“Of course not. Look, Ry, I’m sorry I took the money, but the bailiffs were after us. You can’t stop the bailiffs.”

“Never mind about all that,” said Rylan. He motioned to Agris. “Bring her in. I’ll see what I can do.”

Rylan’s house was small, just a living room facing the street and a bedroom at the back. A large table dominated the living room, cluttered with clay pots and glass jars. Several books lay open, their pages covered with inked images of herbs. A pestle and mortar held some dried, half-milled leaves.

Rylan began to clear it all away, hurriedly placing everything on shelves around the wall, or near the small fireplace in the corner.

“You’re still an apprentice herbalist then, Ry?”

He nodded while his hands swept the table clean. “Until the new year. Then I’ll be able to set up on my own. That money you took would really have been useful about now.”

“Right. Yeah.” Leos squeezed his hat tighter.

Agris placed Sable on the tabletop, and Rylan leaned over to inspect her arm. He pulled a sharp knife from his belt and deftly slit the sleeve of her tunic to expose the limb. It was covered in dried blood, though the belt Agris had tied near the shoulder had restricted the bleeding a little. A large gash stretched across her bicep, the cut muscle shining wetly within.

Rylan sucked at his teeth. “Well. I’ll clean and sew it. I can make a poultice that will hopefully stop any infection. A tincture of iron and wine to help with the blood loss.” He touched the wound gingerly. “I can’t guarantee that she’ll be able to use the arm as well as before. But I don’t think she’ll die.” He put a pot of water on the fire to boil before threading a curved needle.

Agris, relieved of his burden and with little else to occupy him, sat on the floor and rested his head against the wall. Within moments he was asleep, his oddly gentle snoring filling the room.

Rylan started to bathe the wound. “You want to tell me what this is all about?”

“Money, Ry. As always. An opportunity we took that maybe we shouldn’t have. And as always, it didn’t work out.”

His big brother nodded at Sable. “This your work?”

“No. Not directly. But I’m not entirely blameless. Sable’s an acquaintance who got caught up in it all.”

“After money again, eh? Still owe the bailiffs?” Rylan started to stitch the flesh with quick, sure movements.

“No. Well. Yes, we do. But that’s not what this was about. I was hoping to set us up with a farm, some livestock. Like the old days.”

Rylan looked pained. “You’ll never get the farm back, Leos. Those days are gone. It can’t be helped, but that’s how it is.”

Leos shrugged. “I know, Ry. But still.”

“Are people looking for you?”

“Yeah. The local constabulary. They think I’m someone else, but they’ll have my description and will keep looking. And Agris is pretty distinctive.”

Rylan glanced over at the big man. “Indeed. He still has his troubles?”

“Still can’t get the words out so well. Still can’t control his muscles sometimes. I doubt it’ll ever go away. He says he’s been like that since he was a kid.”

Rylan paused to clean the wound again, then resumed his needlework. “And what should I do with this lady? Sable, was it?”

“Agris and I will leave tonight, before dawn. Get out while we can. I’ll ditch these clothes, wash my hair. Maybe Agris can slap on a wig or something. Either way, we’d better go.”

He looked down at the hat, his fingers feeling the hardness of the coins within. He opened it up to reveal his bounty. Sucked in a breath, then blew it out again slowly.

“Look, Ry. This is for you. I’m not sure exactly how much is there, but I reckon about two hundred flints.” He guessed that was about what he’d managed to scrape up before he ran from the Axe. “I want you to have it.”

“You only stole a hundred from me, Leos.”

“*Borrowed*. Yeah. Well. You can have your hundred back, and give the rest to Sable. She didn’t deserve what happened to her. And if she can’t work for a while, maybe she’ll need it.”

The stitching finished, Rylan began wrapping the bicep with a roll of thin, clean cloth.

“Let me just look up the recipe for the tincture.” He flipped open a book.

“You too, Ry?”

“Me too, what?”

“You can read now?”

“Oh. Yeah. Had to learn as part of my apprenticeship. To understand the ingredients, measures, mixtures, and all that. It’s not too hard.”

Leos scowled. “So it seems. Even ’Gris can do it.”

Rylan nodded thoughtfully. “The man’s full of surprises.”

“Full of something.”

“Where will you go?”

“South. Further into the frontier. There must be money to be made there. A fortune to find.”

“Maybe. Look, when I’m done here, I’ll go get you a few things. You’ll need new clothes, for a start. Cheap ones.”

Agris cleared his throat. Leos wondered if he’d been awake and listening the whole time.

“If—if you’re going out, can you do me a favour?” He pulled a purse from somewhere in his jerkin. “I’ve a small investment I want to make.”

The sun was rising as they made their way from the South Gate. Leos had been wary of trouble, but for once the gods had smiled on them; the guards were bored and sleepy and had hardly batted an eyelid as they strolled through. Their new cheap clothes and hats helped. Agris might stand out a bit, but Leos didn't look much like Tag Longthorn anymore. He wondered how the real Longthorn was doing, and if his bones had been pecked clean yet.

Agris dug in his pack for something as he walked.

"You think Sable will come after us, Leos?"

"Rylan's going to talk to her. I said to tell her if she wanted to freelance, like us, she'd be welcome to follow us out here. If she wants a reckoning, well. We'll cross that river when we have to. 'Cause we'll probably get pretty wet."

Agris finally located what he was looking for and pulled it from his pack with a satisfied grunt. It was a small book made of thick white pages between covers of thin, lacquered wood.

"What you got there, 'Gris?"

"This," said Agris, "is-is the *Little Book of 101 Prayers for All Gods*. Rylan picked it up for me. I thought we could read it together. It's printed. Like, stamped with special metal letters. It's a new thing."

"Hmm. Reading didn't work out too well for us last time, did it? We didn't gain much at all really, and nearly ended up in gaol. Or dead. Not sure it's really worth the effort."

"Come on, Leos. Reading is its own reward. You'll... see. Besides, you made your peace with Rylan."

"Yeah. I suppose." Leos did feel better now that he'd paid his brother back. He walked just the tiniest bit lighter than before.

"And it n-never, never hurts to curry favour with the gods."

Leos wasn't sure about that; he thought maybe it was better not to draw their attention at all. But he kept his silence.

By the roadside stood an old tar tree, its black trunk as wide as Agris. Something white fluttered against it in the cool morning breeze. They

stopped. There was a sheet of paper nailed to it, on which was a drawing of a man's face with heavily inked hair and beard, tiny eyes set above a broad nose. Words had been printed above and below the drawing.

"Who's this turd?"

Agris peered at the paper for a long time, lips working silently.

"Brokeneck Ashby," he pronounced after a good long while. "Wanted for murder. T-Two hundred flints dead, three alive. Last seen in Water Haven."

"Thoughts?" said Leos.

"I ain't got much on at the moment, Leos. How about you?"

Leos sighed. "No pressing engagements. It's a long walk to Water Haven, though."

Agris waved the book of prayers. "This'll help pass the time."

"Great."

They walked while the sun rose.

"Someone should write a book about my life. Or about us."

"A tragedy, then."

"All the things we've done, you know? Places we've been, felons we've... caught. I reckon people'd be interested in that."

"Not even I'm interested in that, Agris."

"It could be called: *The Heroic Adventures of Agris and His Friend Leos.*"

"Sounds gripping."

"We'll need a few more tales to put in it first, though."

"As long as it ends with us getting rich."

Farther along the road, a small man with a grey beard was nailing another sheet of paper to a tree, whistling tunelessly. He didn't look up as Leos and Agris approached.

“This’ll be another wanted poster for Brokeneck,” said Leos. “Keep going.”

“Morning!” said Agris cheerfully. The man looked up, the half-smile on his face dying when he saw Agris looming over him.

“By the bloody gods!” The hammer and nails dropped to the dust, and then the man was off, sprinting as fast as he could back towards Tanagra.

“Odd reaction,” said Agris, staring after him.

“Thought you’d be used to it by now, ‘Gris.”

They looked at the poster.

Leos didn’t need to be able to read to recognise his own face, albeit with thick black hair instead of light brown. He was a bit disappointed that they’d joined his eyebrows together, but otherwise it was a pretty good likeness. But it was the face next to his that the poster artist had really excelled himself on. They’d maybe got a bit carried away with the scars and what looked to be a pair of fangs, but otherwise it was the closest Agris would ever get to a portrait.

Agris jabbed a finger at himself. “Who’s this turd?”

“That’s you. It’s *us*, ‘Gris. What does it say?”

“Says... ‘Wanted: Tag Longthorn, for the crimes of tax evasion, fraud, and murder. Preferably dead. Four hundred flints.’”

“Damn. If I killed myself, I’d be set for life.”

Agris continued: “‘Also... also wanted, giant accomplice. Three hundred flints. Must be dead.’ See, told you reading was useful, Leos. Now we know.”

“Yeah.” They both looked at the man, still running, his small figure dwindling now in the distance.

“Think we can catch him, ‘Gris?”

“Nope.”

“Right.”

Leos ripped the poster from the tree and stashed it in his pocket. “Let’s get moving, then. And let’s hope Sable doesn’t see any of these when she’s back on her feet.”

They left the road, jogging over the arid ground.

“You know, Leos—we’re worth seven hundred flints, the two of us.”

“Yeah.” It did feel kinda good, now that Leos thought about it. Not that it would help him sleep at night. Far from it.

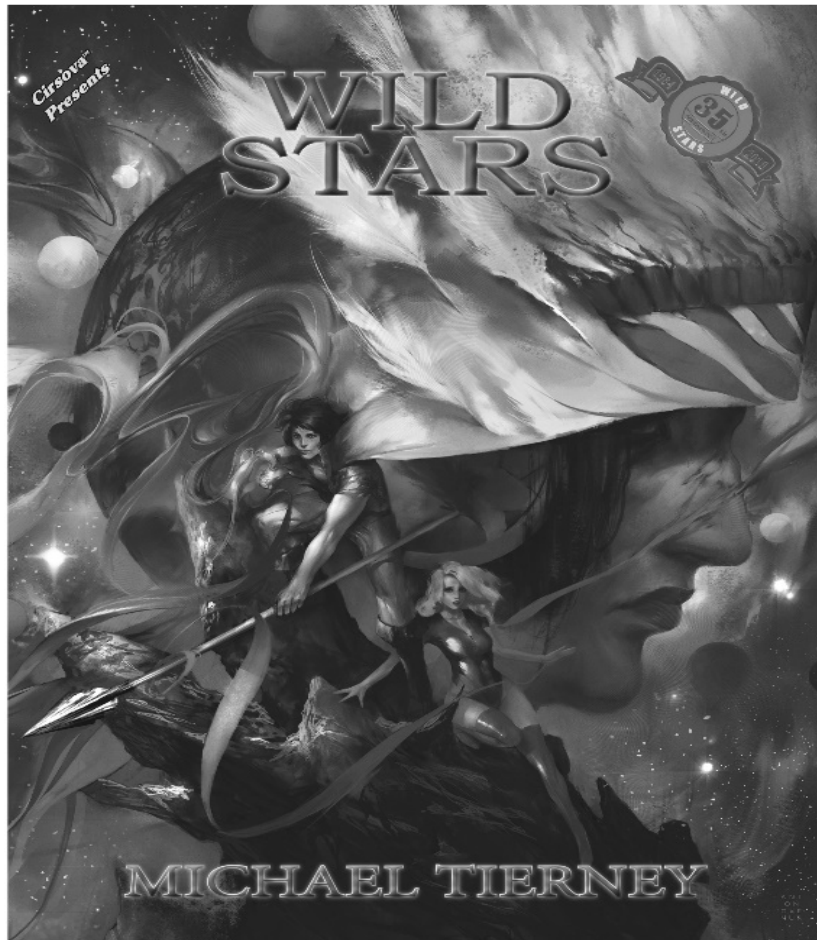
There was a rustle as Agris flipped a few pages of the *Little Book*, determined to read even while running. “Right,” he said, between breaths. “Prayer one... Blessed are the Clouds. Yea, though they float on high... You listening, Leos?”

“Of course, ’Gris. You carry on. I’ll still be able to hear from up ahead.”

Leos ran faster.

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*Rob Francis is a writer of fantasy and horror based in London. If you enjoy ‘Its Own Reward’, other Leos and Agris stories can be found in Metaphorosis, Swords & Sorcery Magazine and 9Tales From Elsewhere. Rob lurks on Twitter @RAFurbaneco.*



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# **The White Giant's Map**

By RICHARD RUBIN

*A fierce battle has annihilated the allies Fletcher has made on the alien world he now calls home! But a dying foe offers him a boon—a map to fabulous treasure!*

As the dust and bloody mist cleared on the hillside known as Banshee's Crest, Burke Fletcher smiled with grim satisfaction and withdrew his longsword from the chest of the defeated Rigelian warlord. The huge white-furred foe had fought well, but not well enough to withstand the battle-hardened, Earth-born mercenary. Fletcher wiped his blade clean of gore on his adversary's gray tunic and sheathed the weapon in its scabbard. Crafted of the finest Rigelian steel, the longsword had been acquired a year earlier on a particularly lucrative payday for Fletcher. That had been a good day; this was not.

Taking a moment to survey the battlefield, Fletcher was shocked to discover that he was the last living fighter as far as he could see. All of his blue-skinned comrades lay dead on the field, along with the hundreds of the savage Whites they had battled. For a moment he stood stunned, choking down a sob. This morning he had fought alongside his squadron of a hundred trained, professional fighters, aligned with the host of Provincial Governor Quine's forces. Now all of them—the friends and companions he had laughed with, drunk with, and fought side-by-side with—were dead. Every last one.

Ten years ago, Fletcher had served as a lieutenant in the Earth Space Navy. He had been on a solo long-range survey mission when his scout craft encountered a solar storm, and he crash-landed on Rigel IV. His comm unit was destroyed. Still, for a few months afterward, he had held out some hope that an Earth space vessel might show up to rescue him from this barbarous world. But, finally, he came to realize that those hopes were foolish. He accepted the fact that he would never see his homeworld again. He resolved to make his way, as best he could, in this weird, war-torn world. He had thrown in his lot with an itinerant mercenary band, a group of blue-skinned humanoids. Fletcher had been an amateur fencer in college, and he'd always been athletic. He quickly impressed the mercenaries with his fighting skills and courage, and they, in turn, taught him the language and customs of Rigel IV. For what it was worth, this savage planet was now his home.

Fletcher presently fought to control his emotions. His friends were dead, but there was still Llana, his Rigelian bride, whom he loved. She was over a day's ride away, awaiting his return from battle. He surveyed the lifeless battlefield for a mount. The Rigelians employed sestaur, two-legged domesticated reptiles the size of an Earth pony, much the

same way that nineteenth-century Earthmen used their four-legged counterparts. Fletcher saw a few confused sestaur's wandering about the battlefield, searching in vain for their riders. Fletcher noted one that still wore a saddle and harness. The creature looked uninjured, strong, and fast. Fletcher was about to go to it when he felt a tug at his sleeve. With a shock, he saw that it was the Rigelian chieftain, now sitting up. The fellow wasn't dead, notwithstanding a sword thrust through the heart that would have certainly slain any Earthman.

Fletcher's hand instinctively reached for his sword, but the White Giant held his palm up in a halting gesture and cleared his throat as if about to speak. Fletcher drew the sword, blade at the ready, but did not strike. His curiosity piqued, he decided to hear the fellow out.

The Rigelian chieftain reached shakily into his clothing and withdrew a folded piece of crystalline paper. His hand trembled as he proffered the sheet to Fletcher. In a soft, croaking voice, the White said, "I am Garth. I have sworn to give this treasure to any foe able to defeat me in fair combat. Follow this map, outworlder. It leads to great, unimaginable wealth. That will be your reward for slaying Garth, who was a great warlord."

Fletcher took a hard, probing look at the heavily muscled, white-furred warrior. The thing ranged about eight feet high, typical of the race the Rigelians called the White Giants. It was an ugly creature, possessing a piglike snout and beady black eyes, unlike the features of the Rigelian Blues, whom Fletcher found to be far more Earthlike in appearance and size. This White Giant, certainly near death, might be deceiving him, but Fletcher had no way of knowing. He had never encountered a White before, except on a battlefield.

As Fletcher weighed what he had heard, the Rigelian took a deep, gasping breath and fell limp, blood trickling from its mouth. Fletcher reached out and picked up the crystalline paper still clenched in Garth's hand. Unfolding it, he saw a crudely drawn map with indications of mountains, roads, trees, and a circle drawn about one particular spot.

Fletcher refolded the map and secured it in the pocket of his breeches, thinking that he'd give the matter further thought later. He then approached the sestaur he had picked out earlier. The beast was a bit skittish, so Fletcher stroked its leathery neck to calm it down. After a few

minutes, the creature purred softly, indicating its acceptance of its new master. Fletcher took a few more moments to explore the contents of the sestaur's saddlebags, finding a few coins and a half-full canteen of water. He placed the coins in his pocket and slung the canteen over his shoulder. Fletcher had lost his alloy deflector shield in battle, but he located a shield left on the ground nearby, retrieved it, and tied it to the sestaur's saddle.

Just as Fletcher mounted the steed, he heard it: the unmistakable sound of White Giant war drums approaching. The squadron of Whites that he and his comrades had confronted might have been wiped out—at great cost—but now there was another enemy army approaching. He had to get out of here, and quickly.

He spotted a vantage point on the crest and rode over to it. Shielding his eyes from the twin suns in the red-tinted sky, Fletcher surveyed the narrow pass below, which ran between two rocky cliff walls. He made out a sizable horde of White Giants approaching, raising a thick cloud of dust in their wake. At least three plasma-ray cannons were being pulled by sestaur's bringing up the rear. The horde would head this way to check on the outcome of the battle, and he couldn't ride out without being exposed to fire.

Fletcher removed the canteen and took a swig of water. He wondered if he would ever see his beloved Llana again. She was a young, fledgling alchemist, part of a professional class of Rigelians who practiced an amalgamation of magical and scientific wizardry resembling nothing encountered on Earth. Llana's apprenticeship had been prematurely terminated when her mother was killed in a blood feud with a rival alchemist named Carla. Llana went into hiding while continuing to refine her skills. But Llana, and whatever aid she could render him, was now far away. He was on his own.

Fletcher appraised the situation. If he remained where he was, he'd be trapped by the approaching army, but the only path leading away from the battlefield would take him past the horde. That couldn't be helped, but if he executed his escape carefully along the edge of the northern cliff wall, he'd be able to maximize the distance between himself and the enemy force, while limiting the time he was exposed.

Keeping tight control of the reins, he directed the sestaur down toward the pass. As he reached the bottom, the ground around him shook with the thunder of hooves. His senses reeled with the sound and fury of the approaching army. He could even smell their rank, unwashed odor! He tried to calm his fear as he studied the terrain. If he moved out alongside the cliff wall, there would be a thirty-yard gap between himself and the White Giant army, and—if he was very lucky—they might not notice a single rider. He positioned the deflector shield on his left arm; the shield was not large, but it would provide partial protection for his body. Then he rode forth cautiously.

As he passed alongside the cliff wall, the White Giants rode in the opposite direction toward the lifeless battlefield. He had just reached the halfway point to safety when he heard the horrible bellow of an enemy outcry. He'd been spotted! Fletcher crouched down, kicked the hide of the sestaur, and charged it forward. He heard the blast of a plasma-ray cannon discharge, felt the heat go past him, but it went wide, blowing apart a nearby tree.

He drove the sestaur even harder. He was beyond the cliff wall and almost out of the targeting range of the enemy gunners when his mount let out a wail of pain and buckled beneath him. The poor beast had taken a full plasma burst in its leathery hindquarters. It dropped to the ground, but Fletcher was able to roll to the side, narrowly escaping being crushed by the carcass of the collapsing animal. He leapt to his feet and ran, holding the shield up. He felt the jolt of a plasma burst strike the alloy shield, but the dissipated heat intensity was bearable, and he kept running until he felt sure that the Whites had lost sight and interest in him. The White army surely had more pressing matters to attend to than chasing down a lone warrior who was intent on leaving the fight.

Breathing heavily, Fletcher took a sip of water and considered his options now that he didn't have a sestaur. The nearest village or settlement was many days away on foot. Perhaps he could find some game to slay to sustain himself, but that was unlikely given that the opposing armies had fought nearby and foraged or scared off much of the local wildlife in the days leading up to the battle. He could well die of thirst or starvation if he attempted to walk until he reached a farm or town.

He removed the White warlord's map from his pocket and studied it again. He was only about six miles away from the place marked with a circle. It might be dangerous, but he would take his luck as he found it. He didn't have much choice.

Several hours later, Fletcher made out a large deteriorating wood-and-stone structure in a clearing before him. The weather-worn symbol of a twisted basilisk adorned its roof. A cold chill coursed down his spine. He had encountered such places before. This was the ruins of a Temple of Dewi, one of the dark gods worshiped by a cult of evildoers. The temple stood exactly where the circle had been drawn on Garth's map.

Fletcher briefly considered turning away, but where would he go? Traveling on foot, he was unlikely to get very far. Besides, Fletcher had always been one to gamble on his own luck and resources, and he was curious about the "treasure" Garth had spoken of.

Fletcher cautiously advanced to the dark wooden door and, testing the bronze handle, found it unlocked. He drew his sword, carefully pushed open the door, and looked inside. His blood froze.

The temple had been converted to a conjuror's lair, illuminated by several lanterns, but Fletcher didn't see anyone. At the center of the room was a workbench supporting various weird devices and instruments. Shelves loaded with bottles and jars filled the walls. Near where Fletcher stood was a stone altar, ground flat and large enough to hold a man, with what appeared to be recently spilled blood on its surface. Gold coins and gemstones were casually strewn about, like so much dust, on various shelves and tables.

The door to an inner room swung open, and the slim figure of a Blue Rigelian woman entered. She wore a black robe and had long silver hair adorned by a golden headband. At first glance, she seemed a beauty of early middle age, yet something in her pale green eyes reflected a dark and ancient wisdom. She wore a short sword at her hip and clung to a long, narrow wooden pole in her right hand. Fletcher recognized it as the staff of an alchemist. His wife owned something similar, although she had not yet achieved mastery of its use.

Fletcher thought to flee, but the woman lifted the staff, struck it twice on the floor, and aimed its high end at Fletcher while calling out a word

that no ordinary mortal could pronounce. The mercenary froze in place, unable to move a muscle.

The woman smiled and said, "Please don't go. I may have need of you." She struck the staff on the floor once more.

Fletcher's body went completely limp. His sword released from his hand, clattering to the floor. Then he collapsed, losing consciousness as he struck the ground.

When he awoke, Fletcher found himself lying flat on his back upon the temple's altar. He didn't feel any bonds, but he was unable to sit up, move his arms or legs, or accomplish anything more than turn his head to and fro. He looked to his right and saw, for the first time, another altar upon which rested a large, heavily muscled white-furred Rigelian, dressed in light armor. It wasn't Garth, but there was a resemblance.

The woman bent over Fletcher's helpless form. "Ah, you have awakened," she said. "Welcome, outworlder, to Dewi's sacred temple. I am Carla, the High Alchemist who presides in this consecrated place. You are about to make a minor sacrifice—that of your life and your soul. You may not be of this world, but you look to be strong and vital. Your soul will do as well as any for my purpose."

She brandished her staff over his face. "I found Garth's map in your pocket—one of his little ways of getting a message to me. It would seem that my clumsy brother has gotten himself killed once again. In exchange for your death on the altar, the god Dewi will resurrect Garth into that fine, strong body you see over there. Long ago, my brother was born a Blue, like myself, but he has since asked that I resurrect him into the bodies of large, powerful White Giants; he believes that this will make him stronger. Yet this is the third time the fool has managed to get himself slain in some battle."

She motioned toward the body on the nearby slab. "As a dutiful sister, I must return him to life once more." She paused. "You understand, don't you?"

Fletcher struggled to control his terror. He was in the hands of Carla, the very same evil alchemist who had destroyed Llana's mother. Fletcher's muscles strained against the psychic bonds that bound him



from the neck down. But the mercenary couldn't fight his way free by means of brute force; that way was hopeless.

With great effort, he sought to calm his mind. This evil alchemist intended to take his soul and kill him, but he was not without resources. Carla's magical grip on him was powerful, but he knew that it wasn't absolute. Although Fletcher's young alchemist wife had not taught him any science-magic, she had taught him a few tricks by which a mortal could defend himself against the powers of such arts.

Silently, craftily, Fletcher shielded his mind to the world outside himself and called up a powerful memory: the last time he made love to Llana. He could feel the raw force of Carla's spell upon him. But as he closed his eyes and focused on the image of his wife's naked, swaying body, he could feel the power of Carla's hold pull back, a little at first, then more and more. He opened his eyes and saw the frustration grow on Carla's face, then confusion, as her grip on him was failing for reasons she could not possibly understand.

Then he felt it—her mental bonds on him grew slack, and he was free! Fletcher came out of his mental shell and, like a panther, sprang against his foe.

Rising up, he smashed his fist into Carla's jaw. As she staggered back, Fletcher leapt off the altar and seized her staff out of her hand. Carla regained her balance as her hand went to the hilt of her short sword.

Fletcher squatted down and used the staff to sweep Carla's legs out from under her, sending her crashing to the ground. Then he hurled the staff across the room, far beyond the reach of the alchemist, and seized his longsword from the floor. As he gripped the familiar weapon, Fletcher felt a surge of confidence. Meanwhile, the alchemist leapt back to her feet in one fluid motion and drew her short sword.

The two engaged at sword points, but it was an uneven duel. Carla fought gamely, but her skills lay in science-magic, not the fighting arts, and she was little match for the battle-hardened mercenary she faced. She parried his first two slashing sword blows, but with the next strike of his blade, Fletcher sent her short sword spinning from her hand. Fletcher didn't hesitate—he knew that he was fighting for his life, and perhaps his soul, if this woman was permitted to carry out her evil ritual. He plunged his sword deep into her heart.

Fletcher pulled his sword back, leaving a gaping, bloody wound. But Carla didn't die at once. Instead, she hung tenaciously on to life, clutching her chest and reciting a horrible, bone-chilling incantation. As Fletcher stood transfixed, she hurled herself onto the altar and called out one final, terrible syllable. Then her body burst into a bright flame.

A black cloud formed just behind the altar, materializing into a wraith in the shape of a huge, fanged, savage beast. The cloud creature began to laugh with cruel, inhuman mirth. Fletcher's mind reeled as he sought to grasp what was happening. Then he realized what this was: a manifestation of the evil god Dewi, unleashed by Carla's incantation.

He heard a wail of anguish from his right. "You have slain my sister! She—not you—has been the sacrifice to return me from death!" The White Giant warrior arose from the slab and brandished a formidable-looking broadsword. "You will die for this, outworlder!" the creature screamed as it advanced upon him, sword upraised.

Fletcher assumed a fighting stance, sword poised at an angle across his chest. Rushing in close, the resuscitated White Giant slashed his broadsword in a savage arc from his massive shoulders, seeking out Fletcher's throat for a quick, decapitating blow. Fletcher danced back a step and warded off the strike with his sword, but was nearly knocked to the floor by the resounding impact. The White Giant drew back his weapon and struck again. Fletcher caught the impact of the blow on his blade once more and staggered back, barely remaining on his feet. The huge White warrior was unhumanly powerful. As they fought, the smoky projection of Dewi continued to laugh and cackle with fiendish glee.

The creature thrust his blade up, then swept it down toward Fletcher's chest, but the mercenary deflected it with the right edge of his longsword. His opponent delivered a crashing blow with his sword, which Fletcher met full-on with his blade, sending a pulsating wave of pain up his arm. He reeled back several steps and raised his sword in a defensive stance, trying to gain a moment to clear his head. The White warrior lunged forward again, but this time Fletcher anticipated the blow by just a moment and struck first, thrusting the point of his sword directly at the creature's heart. His adversary met this with a defensive parry, but the force of Fletcher's blow sent the creature staggering back on its heels. The White Giant stumbled over some object on the floor—Carla's short sword! Taking advantage of his opponent's momentary

vulnerability, Fletcher executed a backhanded slash, which cleanly severed the creature's head from its shoulders, sending it bouncing grotesquely across the room.

Garth's headless body crashed into the altar where Carla's remains still burned brightly; the collision sent fiery embers and sparks in all directions. The entire room burst into flames.

The sounds emerging from Dewi's smoky manifestation transformed from laughter to a savage howl as flames licked at the unworldly wraith. As Fletcher gazed at the madness around him, he saw the fire advancing toward a cluster of jars and bottles, undoubtedly potions Carla used to concoct her dark wizardry.

Fletcher didn't know what would happen when the fire took hold of those sinister contents, but he knew that he didn't want to be there when it happened. Holding his breath against the expanding smoke, he snatched up a handful of gems and gold coins from a nearby shelf and dashed out through the door of Dewi's ancient temple.

After he had barely escaped to a few yards away, a violent explosion lifted him off his feet and threw him face down on the ground. Recovering, he rolled onto his back and saw the temple collapsing in smoke and flames. The ground began to shake all around and beneath him. Then the black, smoky manifestation of Dewi released one final howl of rage and hatred as it rose from the fiery wreckage and corkscrewed upward, disappearing into the sky.

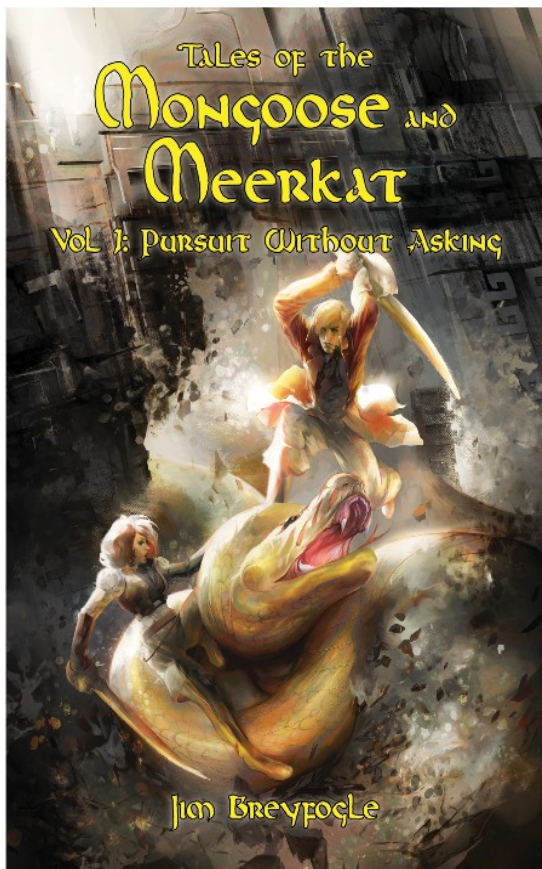
Fletcher shakily rose to his feet. It was over.

Shortly afterwards, Fletcher located Carla's sestaur stall a short distance away from where the temple had stood. Within it was an ancient-looking sestaur and a saddle. As he prepared the mount, Fletcher reflected on all that had taken place since Governor Quine had hired him and his comrades to fight against the White Giant horde. Fletcher pulled out the handful of coins and gems from his pocket and stared at them. It had been a meager payday considering all he had lost and suffered, but at least he was alive, which was more than could be said of his comrades-in-arms. If he didn't push this old sestaur too hard, it would get him back to Llana. He mounted the beast and began his long journey home.

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*Science fiction stories written by Richard Rubin appear in Broadwords and Blasters magazine, The Weird and Whatnot magazine, Theme of Absence web-zine, the Aurora Wolf journal of science fiction, and Eastern Iowa Review. Richard is an Associate Member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. His website is [www.richardlrubin.com](http://www.richardlrubin.com).*

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# **The Chamber of Worms**

By MATTHEW X. GOMEZ

*Heinrick and Viona have been hired by a noble to retrieve a family heirloom from an abandoned manor house—but there's more to this job than meets the eye!*

Heinrik stared up at the decrepit manor house. The windows were cracked and empty like sightless eyes, the eaves sagged under the weight of years of neglect, and large branches of ivy had grown thick over the sides. Wilderness claimed the surrounding land, the fields long being overtaken by weeds and brush, with the occasional tree stretching skyward. Thick vegetation covered and choked the road, forcing the big man and his partner, Viona, to abandon their carriage two miles back. They were two days' travel from the nearest settlement. To finalize matters, a faint mist fell, soaking everything. All in all, an excellent argument for staying in the city. But no. Here they were, out in the woods.

To be fair, they were there on a commission. A young noble recently come into his inheritance had approached Viona about exploring the ancient family estate, a long abandoned property rumored to be the hiding place of a treasured family heirloom, an antique sword. While the sword was valuable because of the ruby set in the pommel of its gilded hilt, it was worth even more as a status symbol for the aristocrat, a Lord Beryl.

Heinrik adjusted his pince-nez with two sausage-thick fingers. "So that's it then?" he grumbled.

Viona nodded, adjusting her parasol. "Exactly where the client said it would be."

"Best be on it then." Heinrik shouldered his travelling trunk. He stepped gingerly on each stair leading to the main door, testing each before placing his full weight down on it. Though the wood sagged and groaned, each stair held under his weight. He placed the trunk down and reached into his pockets, fishing for a moment before producing a copper key gone green with age.

The key fit in the manor door, but the lock protested, long disuse making it difficult to work. "Come on then," he muttered.

"Do you need help?" Viona asked, peering around his arm as he struggled with the lock.

"I think I can open a door—ah, there we go." The lock finally turned with a rusty squeal, but the door didn't move when he pushed against it.

Viona raised an eyebrow at him.

“Wood’s warped,” Heinrich said. He took two steps back and leveled a massive shoulder at the door. It opened with a crack like thunder, leading to a massive foyer. The marble floor was mostly intact, though a few cracks with weeds showed here and there, and birds had evidently roosted inside given the evidence on the floor. Two massive staircases circled up to the upper floor, and shadowy doorways led deeper into the estate.

“What do you think?” Viona asked.

Heinrich sniffed the air. “Doesn’t smell too rank. Not like some of these places do. Floor could do with a bit of scrubbing, but looks to be in good shape.” He checked the door he had barged through. “Door is still on its hinges, which is always a good sign. We’re safe to stay here for a bit.” He shrugged the pack off his back but kept his sword, a massive two-hander with the hilt extending over his right shoulder, in place. He fetched the trunk from where he left it on the front step.

When he returned to the foyer, Viona held an alchemical light and was checking the floors and walls under its pale violet light.

“Well?”

Viona shook her head. “Nothing yet, but then I’m not surprised.” She moved further toward the right staircase. The light in her hand bent and flowed toward one of the doorways. “That’s promising. What do you think is through here?”

She backed up so Heinrich could go first. He dropped his hand to his belt and pulled free a short-handled hatchet. He pushed open the door and stepped down to a stone-floored kitchen. He turned and raised an eyebrow at Viona.

“What about that?” she asked, pointing to a trapdoor. A locked, heavy chain passed through the handles. The light from her lantern streamed toward the door, passing through the cracks between the boards. Heinrich hefted the heavy chain, ran his hand over the wood and knocked on it twice.

“Expecting an answer?”



“Checking to see how thick it was.”

“And?”

“And we were only given the key to the door. I don’t remember his lordship mentioning a locked trap door, do you?”

Viona shook her head. “No, but he also said no one in his family had been here in several generations.”

Heinrik frowned, deep furrows appearing over his icy blue eyes. “I think we should check the rest of the house before we attempt that.”

“Worried there might be goblins in the attic?” Viona asked with a small smirk.

Heinrik shuddered. “Don’t even joke about that. Horrid, foul creatures. All teeth and bad manners.”

They took their time surveying the rest of the house. The wind whipped through the windows where the glass was either broken or missing, and Viona pulled her long trailing coat tighter. A bed with a rotting mattress sat in what they assumed to be the main bedroom. Frayed and moldering tapestries hung on the walls. A wardrobe, tipped on its side, the wood split, but otherwise empty, sat in a room with the walls decorated with a pastoral scene, the paint faded and peeling.

By the time they were finished, the shadows had grown long and the air colder, and with an unspoken agreement, they agreed to approach the trap door the next day. Heinrik found a broom in the kitchen and cleared a space in the foyer while Viona arranged a number of alchemical devices by the doors designed to warn them should any intruders try to come upon them unaware. They shared a cold meal of bread, sausage, and cheese before turning in for the night, each in their separate bedroll.

They both woke to the sound of something scratching along the doors, of heavy footsteps moving by the door on the steps. Heinrik stood up, bared his giant blade and waited, ears straining, as Viona cocked her crossbow and aimed it at the sound. After a while, they heard the steps retreat, but they both slept fitfully for the rest of the night.

The following day, Heinrich went outside and checked the door and the windows. Deep depressions marked where the beast, evidently a four-footed monster, had stalked around the mansion, the tracks already filling with ground water. Deep furrows in the wood marked where the beast had clawed at the door and the shuttered windows. Heinrich tried to gauge how large the claws must have been to have left such marks.

“Well?” Viona asked when he reentered the mansion. She had set a small fire in the kitchen hearth and was stirring porridge in a small cast iron pot. In a separate kettle, water steamed, coming to a boil.

“A lion, probably.”

“This far north?”

Heinrich shrugged. “Claw marks make it look likely, though I suppose it could have been something else. Maybe it escaped some noble’s estate.”

Viona spooned porridge into two bowls, adding a bit of honey to both. She passed one to Heinrich, then, after the water had boiled, poured two cups of tea.

“So, trap door?” Heinrich asked.

“Trap door.”

Heinrich opened the trunk, removed his chain shirt from it, and draped it over his shoulders. In addition to the axe on his belt and the massive sword on his back, he grabbed a crowbar. Viona, for her part, draped a bandoleer of assorted alchemical vials across her chest, and secured a belt of crossbow bolts to her waist.

Heinrich approached the chain, slid the crowbar into place, and heaved. The metal bent and twisted, but held firm.

“Hold on a moment. You’ll want to step back.” Viona removed a vial from her bandoleer and poured a bright green liquid from it over the metal links. Where the alchemical concoction struck, smoke rose, and the metal hissed. After a moment, it stopped, the metal now looking pitted and worn. Heinrich reapplied the crowbar, and the chain snapped, one metal link flying off to collide with a wall.

“You could have done that in the first place,” he grumbled.

“Yes, but if you could just do it in the first place then it would have been a waste, wouldn’t it?” She placed the stopper over the vial, still half full with acid.

Heinrik grunted in reply, then used the crowbar to lever open the doors. A musty smell wafted up from the depths, and they exchanged a look.

“So. Down there,” Heinrik said.

“It would appear so.”

Heinrik removed his pince-nez and squinted into the darkness. Viona fixed her alchemical lantern, pouring a small amount of liquid into its reservoir.

“Ready?”

Heinrik drew his hand axe and nodded in assent. A wooden ladder led down into the depths, and he carefully made his way down, testing each rung as he went lest it suddenly break under his weight. He reached the floor, but it felt unsteady under his feet.

“Careful when you reach the bottom. The floor’s uneven,” he said.

Viona made her way down, and they saw in the violet light the cause. Bones, small and large, animal and human, littered the floor. They stood in a small chamber, a passageway leading deeper under the estate, the floor gently sloping down.

“Too much to hope for some vintage bottles of wine, maybe an unopened barrel of whisky, I suppose,” Heinrik said.

Viona knelt down, picked up one of the bones, and ran her finger along the length. “These have been gnawed on.”

“Of course they have. Guess we should go through there.” He pointed with his axe.

“That is what we are being paid for.”

Heinrik shook his head. “There have to be easier ways to make a living.”

“But think of all the adventure you’d miss out on,” Viona replied. She handed Heinrich the lantern and readied her crossbow.

Heinrich ducked under the arch, the hilt of his great sword scraping the masonry. He stopped in the next chamber, and Viona tried peering around his bulk to see what his concern was.

“There’s a pit in the floor.” He stepped to one side, showing a hole in the ground. A ramp circled down into the darkness around it, but the lantern’s light failed to illuminate the bottom. There were no other exits from the room. The air felt close and musty. Heinrich raised the lantern higher. Whorls in a deep blackish-red and vibrant green decorated the walls. Heinrich stared at the patterns, trying to make sense of them until he felt a headache coming on.

“Tell me you can read that,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“No. Maybe. It seems familiar, but whatever it is, it’s bad.”

“You don’t say.”

“No, I mean, that’s blood.”

“The red?”

“No. Yes. Both.”

Heinrich frowned. “What bleeds that color green?”

They both stared down into the depths of the pit.

Heinrich sighed. “We’re going to go down there and find out, aren’t we?”

Viona smiled up at him. “Oh come on, where’s your sense of adventure?”

Heinrich rolled his neck around on his shoulders. “Let’s get to it then.”

He reached into his pack and produced an eyed iron spike. He hammered it into the wall with the flattened back end of his axe, then tied a rope through it, securing it. Viona ran the rope through three loops on her belt, then passed it to Heinrich, who repeated the procedure on his own belt, then tied the end off. He stepped onto the ramp, testing his weight on it. The surface was slick under his boots, so he used one hand on the rope to keep his balance and still keep his axe at the ready. He

hoped there was more rope than hole because he wasn't sure how he'd get back up without it.

As they descended, the light from Viona's lantern played across the walls of the pit, highlighting carved images of men and women interacting with what looked like masses of worms twice the size of people. Heinrich stopped his descent long enough to point one out to Viona.

"These aren't real, right?"

"Well, the green blood had to come from somewhere, didn't it?" she replied.

"You aren't making me feel like this is any less of a bad idea, you know that?"

"Come on, with all that blood, they're probably dead. And if that didn't kill them, they're probably dead from starvation. You saw the door. How long do you think they've been trapped down here?"

Heinrich sighed and continued the descent, finally reaching the bottom of the pit after a few minutes. The rope was nearly played out at this point, but he'd be able to tie it on again for the ascent. Viona had stowed her crossbow for the descent, but now she readied it.

Moisture collected on the floor, and the walls were slick with a greenish slime. Instead of worked stone, it looked as if something had bored a tunnel through the rock.

A single tunnel led deeper into the earth, and the environs were silent except for the distant drip of water. Heinrich walked partially hunched over to navigate the tunnel, lantern stretched out before him. After some distance, the tunnel widened suddenly into a chamber. A raised dais led up to an altar and two carved statues arching up toward each other.

The altar had been shaped to resemble the mass of worms they'd seen depicted on the walls coming down, the stone raised and bumpy, the details exactly carved. The sword they'd been hired to acquire rested across the altar. Save for a few empty wall sconces, the chamber was otherwise empty, and there were no other exits.

"So that's it then?" Heinrich asked. "Seems almost a bit of a letdown."

“Heinrik, wait,” Viona said, but her warning came too late. He had hooked the lantern to his belt and stepped onto the dais, his hand closing over the scabbard. The sound of cracking rock echoed in the chamber, and the arching statues began to glow a sickly green.

“Heinrik,” Viona said again, taking a step closer.

“Don’t come closer,” Heinrik barked. The worms of the altar twisted and squirmed into life, slithering over Heinrik’s arm. He struck downward with his axe, and bright green blood sprang up, but more of the wriggling tendrils overlapped his arm. Meanwhile, the green light of the arches grew brighter, bolder, and something like a doorway appeared between them. As Viona watched, something appeared on the other side of the portal and started pushing against it, a bulge of verdant light trying to invade her world from someplace else.

Heinrik tried to pull his arm free, his limb burning as the worms did something to his flesh. He gritted his teeth and struck with the axe again and again, wondering if it would be better if he hacked off his arm instead.

Viona removed a vial from her belt and threw it at the base of the now-writhing mass the altar had become. The vial shattered, and a wave of frost exploded outward, flash-freezing the worms. Using the back end of the axe like a hammer, Heinrik managed to smash the worms apart, freeing his arm. Multiple small wounds bled freely down his forearm where the worms had burrowed into his skin, and he scraped their frozen forms off with the blade of the axe. The frost didn’t last long, however, and soon the whole mass of worms, now leaving a trail of bright green blood, roiled over the floor to Heinrik. The form in the portal pushed harder, growing larger, and Viona saw what looked like human faces distorted against the flimsy barrier between her world and whatever dwelled on the other side. Large tubular bodies thrust against the barrier, mouths opened impossibly wide, destroying any illusion that—whatever they were on the other side—they could be even remotely human.

“Viona,” Heinrik said, whipping the axe back and forth as the worms rolled toward him, “could use a bit of help here.”

Viona frowned and nodded, her fingers moving along the bandoleer before she selected a vial. “Cover your eyes!” she yelled before tossing the vial underhand at the mass, then covering own her eyes and ears. A

boom like thunder shook the chamber, accompanied by a brilliant flash of light. Heinrich blinked his eyes, his ears still ringing, to see the mass of worms on fire. A hideous screeching filled the chamber as the worms burned and withered, crumbling to ash as they did so.

“Heinrik, the portal!” Viona yelled.

Part of the monstrous figure had pushed through the portal: a deformed human-esque head, sickly yellow eyes slitted, ears flared, the lobes pressed flat against the hairless head. Heinrich dropped his axe and charged at the portal, drawing his massive sword as he closed the distance. The head snapped at him. Rows of pointed teeth dripped a black, viscous fluid that hissed as it struck the stone floor. Heinrich brought the sword around, but it bounced off the thick, rubbery hide of the great man-worm without doing it any noticeable harm. The head turned to him again, mouth snapping. He kept his guard up, fending off the attacks with the edge of his blade, but unable to make an attack in turn.

“The portal, Heinrich!” Viona yelled. She removed the bolt she had loaded in the crossbow and replaced it with one that was a special design of her own. Instead of aiming at the horror attacking Heinrich, she aimed at the portal. She depressed the trigger, and the bolt flew true, just as Heinrich lowered his shoulder and barreled into the opposite arch. A muffled thump resounded where the bolt hit, and then a sudden explosion as the bolt blasted apart the arch. Where Heinrich bashed the other side, the delicate structure broke at the base then toppled the rest of the way over to the ground, breaking apart as it fell to the floor.

A shockwave rolled through the chamber, knocking Heinrich and Viona flat, and filling the air with a choking, blinding cloud of dust.

When the air cleared, a black stain on the floor marked where the altar of worms had been. The severed portion of the man-worm flopped on the ground. Its mouth was open but no sound came forth as it writhed in its death throes. There was no sign of the portal. Heinrich walked over, grabbed his sword in both hands, and drove the point down and through the monster. He grabbed his arm and fell to one knee as the monster dissolved into green-black slime, wisps of smoke trailing up from the sludge.

“Are you all right?” Viona asked, righting the lantern. Now that the portal no longer gave off its otherworldly light, the darkness in the cavern bore down on them. She tried not to think about how much rock and dirt weighed over them and how little it might take for it to come crashing down on top of them.

Heinrik shook his head. He pulled up his sleeve and showed her his arm. The skin around the wounds was turning the same sickly green as the worms’ blood, the color creeping along his arm as the poison spread. “That’s not good is it?”

“No, it’s not good at all, you stupid, stupid man.” She dug in her pack, producing stoppered vials labeled in her neat, precise script. She pulled out a small bowl and a notebook. She held the book close to the light and flipped through it, her nose scrunched up, the tip of her tongue poking between her lips.

“Viona, I—”

“Shut it. I’m working here.” She ran her finger down her notes and nodded. She selected several vials and poured them into the bowl, mixing powders and oils together. Smoke began to drift up, and Heinrik smelled sulfur.

“You want me to drink that?” he asked.

“No.” She took a flat wooden spoon and scooped up some of the mixture. “Hold still.”

“Hold still, wh—Aaarrgh!” he screamed, his fist clenching, the veins standing out stark on his forearm. The skin hissed and sizzled, and Heinrik’s eyes rolled up until only the whites showed. She slapped him, hard. He blinked and stared at her, his breath coming in short sharp gasps through his nose as he ground his teeth together.

“Stay with me, Heinrik,” she whispered, holding his hand down as her cure worked at his arm, eating the poison, the vapors drifting up from the wounds. “Don’t breathe that in. I’m not sure what it would do to you. Probably nothing good.”

Heinrik nodded and leaned away from his smoking arm. After a moment, it stopped. He flexed his arm, and while it no longer burned



from poison, it was pockmarked and felt weak. Even the task of opening and closing his fist felt like immense effort.

Viona took his chin in her hand lifted his head up until his eyes met hers. “It will get better.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then we’ll get you a new one,” she replied with a smile.

He nodded. Viona packed her supplies, and he struggled to his feet. He walked over to where the altar had been, sifted through the ash with his boot until his foot struck metal. Leaning down, he retrieved the sword they had come for. He peered at it, noting the filigreed worms detailed on the hilt.

“Do you think our employer knew about this?” he asked.

Viona shrugged. “Maybe. Hard to tell.”

Heinrik shoved the sword through his belt with his good hand. “Getting back up that well isn’t going to be fun.”

“Your arm?”

He tried to make a fist, but his hand spasmed against his leg. He shook his head. Viona wrinkled her nose, before cleaning a space in the middle of the chamber, pushing the bones around until she had a clear space to work. She assembled her alchemical stove, thumbed through her workbook, the pages yellowed and stained from a variety of chemicals. It was a smaller companion to the one she kept in her workshop at home, this one containing what she considered the most important instructions to have on hand. Heinrik set the lantern closer to her so she would have light to work by.

She picked up a few of the bones from the floor and dropped them into her crucible, along with the contents from a few different bottles from her pack. Meanwhile Heinrik wrapped the sword in an oilskin and secured it to his pack with his one working arm. A rank smell emanated from the cauldron, its stench filling the air. Heinrik wrapped a cloth around the bottom half of his face, but Viona acted like she couldn’t smell anything wrong—maybe after so many years working with alchemical concoctions she very well couldn’t.

“Come here,” she said, after rummaging in her pack for a brush.

“What are you doing?”

“Making it easier to get up the well.” She removed the crucible from the stove and stared into the bubbling morass for a bit before dabbing the brush into the concoction.

“How?”

“Get your feet over here.”

Wrinkling his brow, Heinrich did as he was told, and she brushed the mixture across the bottom of his boots. “This should let you walk up the ramp now without too much difficulty.”

Heinrich raised an eyebrow at her but pushed to his feet. It was an effort to unstick each boot, but it did give the extra traction he needed to ascend the well with the aid of the rope, even if he was hampered with only having one hand free. Viona applied the sticky substance to her own shoes before following after Heinrich up the well. It made for slow going, but they were able to make progress.

Heinrich collapsed at the top in a heap, breathing hard. Viona too, was tired, as she slumped against a wall, her eyes half-closed. They caught a glimpse of a clear night sky through the holes in the manse’s ceiling, and with a silent agreement they set camp for the evening.

Viona blinked her eyes awake. Heinrich’s bedroll lay empty. The big man stood by one of the windows, peering out through a crack in the shutters.

“Everything all right?” she asked.

He raised a finger to his lips, shook his head, and pointed at her and then the stairs.

She grabbed her crossbow, her bandoleer, and her quiver, hoping the wood wasn’t so rotten it wouldn’t bear her weight. She left the upper hallway and crept into a long-unused bedroom, the main decoration being the cobwebs draped in the corners and covering the ceiling.

Viona stayed low and made her way to the window. Out in the space before the manse, a group of six people stood armed and armored, three of them with bows. Before them stood a seventh, hand cocked on one hip, a rich ermine cloak draped behind him, a heavy gold chain set with a tourmaline stone draped around his neck. Viona recognized him as their employer, Lord Beryl.

“What’s he doing here?” she whispered. She considered her options, then loaded a special bolt into her crossbow, one with a hollow inset she could slide a vial into.

“Ahh, Heinrik, was it?” Lord Beryl called out. “Were you able to recover the blade?”

“Lord Beryl. My understanding was that we were to deliver it to your estate in the city.”

“Yes, well, plans have a way of changing, don’t they? Where’s your partner?”

“Didn’t make it,” Heinrik lied. “Peril of the profession. You understand.”

“So it was true? The altar was there?”

“I don’t remember saying anything about an altar,” Heinrik replied. “And if you did know something of what was down there, well, you maybe should have mentioned it beforehand. Saved us all a bit of trouble. My partner might still be alive.”

Viona could see Lord Beryl roll his eyes even from her distant vantage point. “Yes, well, that is a terrible shame. Even so, I am here now, so hand me my sword.”

“I don’t think so.”

Lordy Beryl blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Contract said to hand it over at your estate. How do I know your plan isn’t to have your bully boys here slit my throat after I hand the sword over? My guess is they’re family retainers, yeah? How many of them have been in a fight outside the practice yard? I’ll tell you what, if you’re serious about paying me, you toss the coin over here, and I’ll toss the sword to you. Agreed?”

Beryl grinned, a terrible wide expression devoid of anything like warmth. “No. Boys. Go and retrieve my property.”

The guards looked to Lord Beryl and then at each other. One of them, a red-haired man with a close-cropped beard, drew his sword and advanced on the manse. There was a flash of steel through the air and he dropped to the ground with a scream of pain, Henrik’s axe buried high on his shoulder.

“One,” Henrik said. Viona heard him push the door closed behind her. The rest of the guards rushed at the house, weapons drawn. She sighted along her crossbow and depressed the trigger. It impacted on the ground a foot ahead of the lead guard—the vial broke open, and the contents bursting into flame when it came in contact with air. The resulting fireball knocked the guards flat and caught the clothes of two of them on fire. Viona rolled away from the window and, keeping low, made her way through the upstairs to another window.

Glancing through the cracked glass, she saw Beryl withdraw to the edge of the woods, comfortably outside the range of her weapon. Two of the guards lay unmoving on the ground, their bodies charred and still smoldering. The one with Henrik’s axe in him still struggled on the ground, his cries piercing the air, but growing weaker. That left three more, and she could hear them battering on the door below her. She heard the crack of wood, heard the shout of triumph as they gained entrance. She reloaded the crossbow, wondering where Henrik was, wondering if he still had any fight left in him. Steps thundered up the stairs, followed by the sounds of wood giving way, cursing, and shouts of pain.

Peering around the corner, she saw one of the guards with his leg trapped in the broken stair, his sword having fallen outside his reach. He locked eyes with her and snarled. He drew a throwing knife from a wrist bracer and pulled back to throw but stopped and stared down at his chest, where a quarrel sprouted, the feathers at the end brushing his chin. He opened his mouth, but blood, not words, poured forth.

Viona headed down the stairs after pausing to reload her crossbow, testing each rotten board lest she fall into the same predicament as the man she shot. She heard a hideous wet thump and turned the corner into the kitchen to see Henrik on top of one of the guards, his large fist

twisted in the man's hair. A dark red smear stained the stone, and Heinrich gave the guard's head a final slam before standing up. He smiled at her, then his eyes went wide, and he opened his mouth to protest, but it came too late. Viona felt an arm snake around her neck and pull tight, felt the kiss of cold steel on her neck.

"Drop the crossbow," the man ordered, and she obeyed. "Good. Maybe we can all walk away from this."

"Where's the blade Lord Beryl wants?" the man spat, his breath hot against Viona's skin, the rough stubble of his beard scratching her cheek.

Heinrich stood up exhausted. His hair was matted, and his eyes had a haunted look. His clothes were stained with blood, and in one hand he still held a tuft of the guard's hair. He tapped the hilt of the blade from the profane chapel.

"Let her go," Heinrich said with a quiet rasp.

"The sword, big man, and then we can talk. You toss the blade here, and you don't have to watch her bleed."

Heinrich shook his head. "You made a mistake."

The man laughed and pressed the blade against her skin. She felt a sting, then felt blood run down her neck from the cut he gave her.

The man gasped, looking down to where Viona had, unnoticed, stuck him with a thin, poisoned pin she'd kept hidden in the sleeve of her coat. He tried to cut her, but his arm wouldn't respond. She pushed away from him, and he stumbled, blinking eyes no longer able to see, mouth opening and closing like a landed fish as lungs ceased to bring air in.

"Are you all right?" Heinrich asked, and Viona nodded.

"You?"

Heinrich tried to smile, but it came across as forced, the pain evident in his eyes. "Nothing a hot bath and a steak dinner wouldn't help cure."

Slow applause filled the small space. They turned to see Beryl standing in the doorway.

“Thought you would have run,” Viona said. She stared at her crossbow, but Beryl advanced and kicked it away as he drew the long, curved blade he carried.

“My dear, why would you think that? I simply bided my time, recognized that the opportunity would come for me to act. You both are tired and hurt. And now you will give me the sword, and we will part ways.”

“You tried to kill us,” Heinrich stated.

Beryl shrugged. “Indeed. And you are still alive. Tired, but alive. Which, while inconvenient to me, I am willing to excuse. But only if you give me the sword. Otherwise, I will take it from your corpse.”

Heinrich drew the sword. The light glinted off the edge of the blade. It was an archaic design, all straight lines with no real edge on to it. “No.”

Beryl raised an eyebrow. “No? You mean to fight me for it?” He laughed. “Very well.”

“Heinrich—” Viona said, noticing he held the blade in his weakened hand.

“Stay back, Viona. If I die...”

“Heinrich.”

She stepped back, giving the two fighters space. Beryl advanced, his blade a whirring blur in the air. Heinrich relaxed his body, blade in a high guard position, head cocked to one side, eyes focused on some point in front of him. Viona patted down her body, searching for something she could use to aid him, but nothing would be quick enough and safe enough to use in the confined space.

Beryl attacked, a high cut that turned out to be a feint when Heinrich raised his own blade to meet it. A bright red line appeared on the back of Heinrich’s wrist where the glove failed to meet the sleeve of his coat. Then Beryl retreated a few steps before striking again. This time, a cut appeared on Heinrich’s cheek.

“I’ll take you apart a piece at a time if I must. Then we’ll see how much fight is in your partner, eh?” Beryl said, sparing a glance at Viona.

Heinrik attacked, falling into Beryl's trap. Beryl knocked the thrust aside and slipped past Heinrik, slashing at the back of his leg. The big man fell to one knee with a gasp of pain.

"Nothing more than a brute," Beryl sneered. "No sense of style." He spun his blade, blood flicking off. "I don't know about you, but I'm rather bored now." He advanced in, striking left, right, and then down from above at Heinrik's head. His triumphant smile disappeared, however, when Heinrik grabbed the blade in one hand. His good hand.

He tried to pull his sword free, but Heinrik smiled up at him and yanked hard, driving the blade of his sword deep into Beryl. With a feral cry, he surged to his feet and pushed forward. He drove the blade all the way through Beryl and pinned him to the wooden wall.

Black blood bubbled from Beryl's mouth as he stared down at his ancestral blade.

Viona ran over to Heinrik, who was once again down on one knee.

"Heinrik."

The big man blinked and shook his head. His wounds stung, his arm was like a dead weight strapped to his torso, and he felt like he could sleep for a week. He turned his head to look at Lord Beryl, still alive for the moment though busy with the messy process of dying.

"We really need to pick these contracts better," he said.

"Think we should take the sword?"

Heinrik shook his head. "Leave it."

Viona gently lay Heinrik's head on the floor and walked over to Beryl.

Beryl's hands struggled fruitlessly against the impaling blade, trying to pull it free from his body. He opened his mouth to protest when Viona stripped the rings from his fingers, the gold chain from around his neck.

"Help... me," Beryl groaned.

Heinrik rolled to his feet and, limping, gathered their trunk. With effort, he got it to his shoulder, though he staggered under its weight. Viona recovered her crossbow and joined him. Once outside, she fetched a small clay pot from her back. She hurled it through the front door, and

they trudged off, tired but alive, as flames consumed the structure behind them.

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*Matthew X. Gomez can be found at [mxgomez.wordpress.com](http://mxgomez.wordpress.com) as well as on twitter @mxgomez78. His work has appeared in PULP MODERN, STORYHACK, SWITCHBLADE, ECONOCLASH REVIEW and in the anthologies MIDNIGHT ABYSS and ALTERED STATES II. He was one of the two co-conspirators behind BROADSWORDS & BLASTERS, a new pulp rag that ran from 2017 to 2020.*





# **After the House of the Laughing God**

By MICHAEL RAY

***A gig to “rescue” a young magic user proves exceptionally fruitful for a merc who is up to his eyes in gambling debts! But will his success pay dividends or bring death?!***

The old thief was going to die here, and we both knew it. The girl we'd come for stared at the dark pool of blood spreading across the wooden floor beneath my partner.

"Gratz," I said, "if you die, you're only going to give more power to this mediocre dark goddess, Kema-tian, and her death cult." I pressed his hands against the slice across his belly. "We don't need that. Get up. Let's go."

"Tobin, I'm not leaving this tower," he said and coughed pink spittle into his gray-green beard.

I glanced at the cultists lying around us on the floor in bloody heaps.

It was not supposed to go this way. Too many bodies.

"Take the child back to the duchess's man," Gratz struggled to say. "They'll pay off your gaming debts. Use my half to make your way home, boy."

"Gratz, don't..."

He patted my arm. "I'll be sleeping on the other side tonight with Dieb. The Lord of Thieves will preserve me from these leeches."

"I believe he will, my friend."

"Go on, get out of here," he said. "Remember, the rope is on the second landing down."

I touched his face, put a copper in his hand for the trip across, and looked at the girl.

The duchess had said the girl's name was Anllela. Her red-brown hair was short and ragged, as if cut with a knife. A locked iron collar encircled her neck. She'd knelt down and was drawing her fingertips through the blood on the floor.

*That's not unsettling at all,* my sword, Petang, whispered in my head.

"Let's go, child," I said.

She started as if woken from a dream. Her eyes were unfocused and wild at first, but she gathered herself and gave me a hard look.

In truth, she was not quite a child, but not quite a woman either. I expect she could kill me with a knife, but not with her bare hands.

“Do you have a lock pick?” she said.

“What?”

“A lock pick,” she repeated slowly.

I pulled my favorite brass one from my sleeve and handed it to her.

After a little struggle, the collar came free from her neck. She pocketed my tool and smiled at me. I pretended not to care.

“Anllela, right?”

She nodded.

I stepped past the dead cultists and moved towards the door. “Let’s get going. The duchess is waiting.”

Her smile faded. “Yes. The duchess,” she muttered and stood.

I glanced back at Gratz. His eyes were closed. I’d told him not to come, that this was too dangerous. I suppose he died how he wanted to, but that didn’t make it any easier.

This moldering stone tower jutted out of a dank oasis about ten days into the deadlands. There were several floors below us, made of timbers that’d seen much better days.

I started down the stone stair that circled the inside of the tower and motioned for Anllela to follow. She squinted at me skeptically but started down anyway.

At the first landing down, I stepped over another dead acolyte and took a torch from its sconce. When Anllela caught up, I set fire to the bottom of a wall hanging. The writhing bone-white figures covering it seemed to dance in the rising smoke.

The girl nodded to me and squatted by the body. She pressed her hands against the cultist’s bloody wounds, considering me. “I will follow you. For now,” she said.

We took the spiraling stairs down to the next landing. Voices and footsteps echoed up from below and shouts about the fire came from

outside on the far side of the tower. I pulled Gratz's coil of rope from behind the landing's gruesome wall hanging and dropped it out the open window.

"Anllela," I said and sat on the window sill. "If you'll hold on to me, around my neck, we'll get out of here a lot quicker." I held out my arm to encourage her.

"Don't try anything," she said.

"Not a chance," I said, glancing at her bloody hands.

She wrapped her arms around me, and I scaled down the wall.

People in wine-dark robes covered with those writhing symbols stumbled from tents and shacks that surrounded the tower and began moving towards the smoke and fire.

We slipped across the flow of people and moved into the decaying foliage that surrounded the oasis's dark pool. It smelled of rot, but at least there were no people to interfere as we moved towards the deadlands.

*Serpents. Tentacles. In the water,* Petang whispered in my head.

"Well, I guess this couldn't be easy," I said, drawing the blade from its cracked leather scabbard. It felt quick and confident in my hand.

I moved between the girl and the water as we circled its sloping banks. Once we skirted the pool, we would be able to slip off into the deadlands. Less than a day away, the riding iguanas were waiting. I hoped.

Something roiled the pool's surface and Anllela wisely edged away.

The sky glowed behind us. It seemed that the fire had finally taken hold of those old timbers in the tower. Shouts and screams and muffled commands filled the air. We kept moving.

Just as I started to believe that we were going to make it, immense serpents slithered up from the water and raced towards us. I slashed Petang at dripping teeth and snapping jaws, while the sword sang his luck song.

"Anllela, wait for me just beyond the pool," I snapped and turned to the fight. We should have retreated and fought the cultists instead of these

monsters, but we were almost free of the oasis and we needed to be away before the goddess stirred.

Petang and I severed three heads in quick succession, and the remaining serpents pulled back, slithering down to the water's edge. I turned to move on, but something slimy and strong wrapped around my calf. It latched on with barbed claws, snatched me off my feet, and dragged me towards the ink-black water.

We struggled and rolled, and I tried not to scream. Further along the bank, Anllela stood by the water's edge, watching me. Frantic, I chopped at the foul-smelling appendage, and Petang's luck song grew louder. Seeing a chance to join in, the serpents writhed back up the bank.

I hacked like a madman. The tentacle finally came apart in a spray of blood and chunks of flesh, but the severed end still clung to my leg with its fishhook claws. Something too big for the pool thrashed across its surface, and the onrushing serpents drew back, eyeing me. I crawled up the bank and waved for Anllela to go on. She smiled and turned away.

The thwarted serpents hissed and eyed me from the shallows. More barbed tentacles flailed after us from the water but did not have the reach. The remains of the severed limb dug deeper into my flesh, but the girl and I were able to escape the oasis and move out into the parched deadlands. The fire-reddened sky and the shouts of cultists both grew faint in our wake.

By the time we reached the first boulder field, the second moon had risen, and its pale blue light illuminated the gruesome stump still coiled around my leg. The drops and smears of our blood looked like onyx-black gems on the dusty ground. I sat on a flat rock and tried to unhook the oozing monstrosity from my calf, barely managing to stifle my screams.

Anllela squatted beside me and surveyed my leg. "This is going to have to come off," she said.

"My leg?" I cried.

"No. Just this thing. For now. Find something to bite down on," she said. I clutched a leather strap of my pack and clamped it between my teeth.

I'm sure I passed out. I remember her working the barbs out of my leg, but the next thing I recall was her tying off strips of my shirt around the wounds. She was smeared up to the elbows with what must have been my blood.

Moments later, she handed me my own wineskin. "Drink this. All of it. Now."

*Do what she says*, Petang whispered in my head.

While I drained the upturned skin, she wrenched my calf as if I owed her money, and my leg burned as if being roasted over a bonfire. It was more than I could bear. I'm sure I passed out again.

When I woke, the pale blue second moon was now low in the sky. My blood was gone from Anllela's arms and my leg was nearly healed. If she could do that, it was no wonder that the duchess, the goddess, and who knows else wanted to possess her.

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't speak of it again," she said and turned away.

*Blood Magic*, Petang whispered in my head.

We walked through the night and into the morning, speaking little and chewing on strips of dried meat from my belt pouch. Before midday I glimpsed my iguana sunning itself on a massive rocky shelf in the distance.

"You rode from Ka-dal on that lizard?" Anllela asked.

"Best thing for crossing the deadlands. It likes the heat and can go for days without food or water."

She nodded and seemed almost impressed.

The iguana lurched to its feet as we approached but looked disappointed when it recognized me. Gratz's iguana lumbered into view from beyond the rock shelf. Gratz. I tried to put aside thoughts of the old thief. He wasn't a good man, but he was a good friend.

"You've got a new rider," I said to his iguana and pointed to Anllela.

The iguana and the girl both gave me the same incredulous look.

"It will all work out," I reassured them.

After I showed the girl how to mount the lizard's saddle and how to use the reins to signal what she wanted it to do, we got moving.

"Back in the tower," I said, after a few minutes.

"Yes," she said.

"You didn't look happy when I mentioned the duchess."

"She had me brought to Ka-dal."

"From where?"

"Far Ha-dal. Up the Sun-Aran River. Beyond the jungle."

"I've seen it." Far Ha-dal was a beautiful city. Clean and orderly. Ruled by its masters with iron fists and iron collars. They trade in people there.

"Are you her slave?" I asked.

"Not really. But she hopes to control me, and others like me."

"They always do," I said. "I could let you escape. I owe you that at least, for the..."

"No. Take me to her and get your reward. I will decide what to do after."

"You don't sound like a child," I said.

"Everyone underestimates a child. Especially a girl," she said.

We rode for a while in silence.

"The old thief that died. He was your friend?" Anllela said.

"His name was Gratz. Yes, we'd been together for a few months."

"He was old to be out in the deadlands fighting cultists."

"He was, but he told me that he wanted to keep working. Who was I to tell him different?"

"Doing what he wanted to do," she said.



“Indeed.”

We rode on quietly but, usually, I can only take silence for so long.

“Everyone seems to want you, Anllela, but what is it that you want?”

She stared into the distance. “No one ever asks that question.” She thought on it for a moment. “To go home, to Far-Hadal, perhaps,” she said.

“*That* desire is one that I understand.”

“You are also far from home?” she asked.

“About as far as you can get. Truthfully, I don’t even know if it’s there anymore.”

“Two orphans in deadlands,” she said, and we nodded to each other.

There wasn’t much to say, even for me, after that. I thought about my grandfather’s lands and let the iguana make our way.

Two days deeper into the deadlands, three buzzards circled overhead in the late afternoon sky. When the blood-red sun touched the horizon, they descended. As they got closer, I realized that they weren’t just carrion birds waiting for us to die but were instead enormous blue-black vultures carrying riders.

“So how did Kema-tian’s people get you across the deadlands, if not by iguana?” I asked Anllela.

“We flew,” she said and looked up.

The gigantic black birds spiraled down in great, slow circles and landed awkwardly about a hundred paces in front of us, raising a dust storm with their gargantuan wings.

Two men and a woman slipped from their harnesses and walked towards us out of the dusty cloud. They wore wine-dark tunics that blended into the dying light, but the writhing, glowing figures of the cultists were painted on their clothes. The stocky men carried swords and shields competently and walked before a dark, broad-shouldered

woman who was taller than I am. Her long hair shone red-black, and on her face were those shifting bone-white runes.

*There's your goddess,* Petang whispered in my head.

The iguanas balked at approaching the monstrous birds, or perhaps it was the goddess they feared. Either way, they both settled onto their bellies, making it clear they planned to sit this one out.

"I'll handle this," I said with more confidence than I felt as we slid from our saddles. "Just be ready to patch me up. There will most likely be blood."

"Certainly," Anllela said, cutting her eyes at me.

We all moved forward. With about twenty paces between us, everyone stopped, as if by some unspoken agreement.

"Tobin of Rumah Sing, give us the girl, and you may go in peace," Kema-tian said in a booming voice that definitely sounded like a goddess. She knew the name of the place where my grandfather had ruled long ago, on the far edge of the autarchy. My home. It was none of her concern.

"There's a bit of a problem with that," I said. "The duchess is expecting us."

"I'm sure she has been disappointed before and will be again. I do not want to kill you tonight," the goddess said. "You could worship me, Tobin, and perhaps find your way home."

I definitely did not like her reaching into my mind. Knowing someone's desires lets you control them. One mediocre god in my head was enough.

*Thanks,* Petang whispered.

They took a few more steps forward, and her swordsmen spread apart to surround us, just in case killing me did become necessary.

"Another problem," I said and gambled on moving towards the one on the left. "She bought up my markers at every gaming house in Ka-dal. She's promised to make it all disappear if I deliver the girl."

Anllela's raised eyebrow suggested that I was exactly the kind of person she thought I was. She followed me to the left.

"Give me the girl and live as you should," the goddess said. "Or fight for her and die."

When I didn't respond, the negotiations appeared to be at an end, and Kema-tian began murmuring something that made my arm hair stand on end.

Her men moved without warning. The nearest one rushed me, while his opposite number sprang at Anllela. I blocked the first swings, and Anllela rolled away from her attacker, scrambling beside me.

Petang's song grew steadily louder as I parried swings and thrusts, pivoting myself between both swordsmen and the girl.

At the same time, Kema-tian's chanting also grew louder and more unsettling. The sky darkened.

*Now or never*, Petang whispered in my head.

I cannot recall the series of blows that we struck. Both men lay on the ground, unconscious but not yet dead, preventing them from giving their goddess even more power.

The waning gibbous first moon already shone silver-white in the sky just above the horizon, and Kema-tian's eyes glowed with its light as I approached her. She was beautiful. And terrible. Her chanting stopped, and my teeth ached. The goddess swelled in size above me. Her mouth gaped, revealing jungle cat fangs, and shadowy batwings unfolded behind her. I hesitated.

*Worse than I expected*, Petang whispered in my head.

"Give yourself to me," Kema-tian rumbled. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

The girl. Don't lose the girl. I managed to look away and search for Anllela. She crouched beside one of the bleeding, unconscious guardsmen. She seemed a small lost figure in the dying light. I could not leave her to this monster.

“I could have made something of you, Tobin of Rumah Sing,” the goddess roared in a voice of sudden thunder. “But you have chosen poorly.”

“I usually do,” I said, and charged.

Petang must have deflected the brunt of whatever force the goddess slammed into us because I am still alive, but I tumbled backwards, spinning like a discarded bone and crashing to the rocky ground a dozen paces beyond Anllela. I had no breath and could not move. The stars swam.

Kema-tian loomed over Anllela, wings spread, arms held wide and welcoming. “You are mine again, child,” she said. “This time, I will join your power to my own and grow greater.”

The goddess’s moonglow illuminated Anllela, revealing that she was drenched in the guardsman’s blood, dripping with it.

Kema-tian bent down towards the girl, reaching for her. Anllela leapt from her crouch and thrust her fists into the goddess’s torso. Heat, like a roaring bonfire, blasted me, and I ducked my face into my arm.

I have heard the dying screams of more animals and people than I can ever forget. I have heard the screams of an army crushed by sorcery and the cries of women and children as their village burned to a charred-black ruin. None of that compared to the deafening wail of Kema-tian when Anllela ripped open the goddess’s chest, tore out her still-beating heart, and thrust it up to the shining first moon.

*I’ll be damned*, Petang whispered in my head.

“You already are,” I said.

Petang laughed in my head.

A few moments later, Anllela helped me up. Every trace of blood was gone from her. We leaned against each other as we walked back to our mounts.

“You are not some lost girl,” I said.

“I may be older than I look,” she said. “But we won’t speak of that again, either.”

The best part of traveling the deadlands is leaving them. And that last league, that last hour, is the best of all. First, the striped-gold spires of Ka-dal come into view, and then the mud-brown, meandering line of the Sun-Gai River is revealed. Beyond the river, you can see pale green farmland with planted crops, followed by groves of fruit trees. Beyond them the shadow-green of the jungle looms above it all, straddling the river's Sun-Aran tributary. The land on the other side of the Sun-Gai had not been touched by whatever power scoured this side. When you see the city and all that living-green around it, you know you're not going to die out here in the deadlands. At least not this time.

"I'd feel foolish taking you to the duchess's man after what I've seen," I said to Anllela as we approached the gated bridge that spanned the Sun-Gai.

"Take their money. Get your debts paid, Tobin. As I said, I'll decide on my path from here. We will see each other again."

Six nights later, I had only a few coppers left in my pocket and a substantial new debt to the House of Men-gejek, the Laughing God. After the deadlands and Anllela, I'd been certain that my luck would change at their gaming tables. I'd been wrong.

So, I plotted an escape from what I owed the Laughing God. The best options appeared to be either slipping out through the kitchens or going upstairs and dropping off a second-floor balcony.

A heavy hand gripped the shoulder of my sword arm.

"Pinda Na wants to see you," rumbled the mountainous man attached to the hand. He drew me upstairs.

There were too many people in the small anteroom. A round old man sat on a low settee that was covered in fabric spun from more gold than I'd ever held. He would be Pinda Na, the Tokah of this House of Men-gejek.

A toady, a gofer, and a spidery man stood behind him, all trying to look imperious, but failing. Bulging lummoxes stood to either side of the Tokah. They had the sneers of men who would take off your fingers and

enjoy it. The most beautiful woman I'd seen that day lounged in the corner on a blood-red pillow smoking something from a hookah that smelled of cloves and poppies. The pillow's color reminded me of Anllela.

"Thank you for the summons, Tokah of Men-gejek," I said, observing the forms.

"Thank you for the attendance, my child," Pinda Na said.

The woman smirked from the corner.

"Luck has not been your friend these last few days," the Tokah continued.

"Our relationship has been strained, at best," I said.

The room felt like a fight, and I scanned it again. The big men to either side had fists like sledges, and they probably carried clubs as well. The spidery man would have whatever weapons his race conceals. The other two advisors would just cower. The woman would have any number of sharp things, but she seemed disinterested in a fight. There was not much room for me to swing a sword in here, so I reviewed the locations of my knives. Sorcery would be the random element to contend with here.

*Settle down. Stop looking to fight. Listen to him, before you get yourself killed, Petang whispered in my head. I have no interest in belonging to any of these people.*

"A man can repay his debts in something other than coin," Pinda Na said.

I relaxed a little. This might be the sort of offer that had been my way of life since the day I pulled Petang from that Virangian's body.

"What does the Tokah of Men-gejek require of this servant," I asked and bowed my head.

"Listen, my child," the Tokah began.

The woman smirked again.

"A messenger has come," he continued, "asking after your debts and offering to pay them off and more if you can acquire something for them.

If you succeed, Men-gejek will take this payment and consider you our friend again.”

“What does the Laughing God require as my offering?”

The Tokah looked over his shoulder at the spidery man, who shuffled forward.

“It is a who, in fact, rather than a what,” the grotesque man wheezed in a damp voice. “A young woman, a child really, a ward of the duchess. I believe you know her.”

I tried not to laugh.

The duchess, Bansa Win, was the widow of a second cousin of the Autarch. She was the ostensible ruler of Ka-dal, which meant that her guards collected tribute from the temples and merchants. It also meant that she lived undisturbed in a high-walled manor on the riverfront, just beyond the city itself. And, if Anllela’s story were true, that she bought young women with sorcerous power from upriver in Far Ha-dal.

A sliver of pale blue light from the waxing crescent second moon illuminated the wall protecting the gardens of Bansa Win’s manor house. I waited on the riverbank among the paw-paw trees until the bored night patrol passed out of my hearing.

“Over the wall, in through the kitchen, and up the backstairs, is what your benefactor’s messenger said,” the spidery man had gurgled before I’d left the House of the Laughing God. I stole across the short distance and worked my way up the wall of old, slate grey blocks.

Upon reaching the top, I lay flat on the foot-worn stone and waited for the next wall sentry to pass. The man whistled a jaunty tune I did not recognize and never looked at the spot where I lay in a crenel’s moon shadow.

I tied off a climbing rope as discreetly as I could and slipped down the wall into the garden, where massive blooming flowers glowed in the moonlight. As I approached the fortress-like house with no interference, uneasiness crept in. I found a delivery entrance to the kitchens, and its latch was no impediment. Nothing should be this easy.

Sounds of sleeping came from the cook staff who lived in tiny rooms just off the cavernous kitchen. Anllela was supposed to be in a similar room on the top floor, off the central ballroom.

I found the servant's stair easily, as it was faintly illuminated by moonlight coming in through glazed windows on each floor. The tight spiral steps up to the top opened into a sort of food staging room, a pantry. The smell of leftovers there reminded me that I'd not had enough coin for the evening meal at the House of the Laughing God. My stomach growled.

I checked down the back hall and discovered a dozen whitewashed doors set into the outer wall with little space between them, like servants' quarters. There were open doors into the ballroom at either end of the long hall. Moonlight and firelight from the ballroom's hearth lit the hall, and I could see latches that kept these doors closed from the outside. That made this a jail.

I unhitched the latch on the first door and slowly pulled it open. A young woman with straw-blond hair crouched on a bed and covered back into a corner. An iron collar was locked around her neck, like Anllela when I first saw her, like the enslaved magicians in Far Ha-dal. I held my finger to my lips to ask for quiet. She nodded, frightened. I eased back out into the hall.

I opened the second door. A girl with grass-green hair lay catatonic on the bed. She also had a locked iron collar around her neck.

Whispers of men who were not good at whispering echoed into the hall from the ballroom. My time was running out.

Behind the third door, my luck turned. Anllela was stretched out on the bed and leaning on one elbow.

"I thought that was you stumbling about in the hall," she said in a low voice. She wore a new iron collar.

I pointed to my neck. She reached up and pulled her collar off. The lock was unclasped. I stepped closer.

"I think this is yours," she said and showed me the lockpick that I'd given her back in the tower.



“Keep it,” I said. “You took a big chance coming back here.”

“I couldn’t leave them to her. You didn’t leave me to Kema-tian when you had the chance.”

I shrugged. “These rooms,” I said. “All young sorceresses?”

“Yes.”

“This is wrong. And why haven’t you all...”

I hesitated.

“Done something?” she finished for me. “The others are truly enslaved by the cold iron. They all have different sources of power. Light, dark, water, many different things, but the iron blocks them all.”

“You couldn’t pick the locks?” I asked.

“They keep us supervised or separated.”

“But you?” I said and pointed at the collar in her hand.

Now she hesitated.

“You can’t use your own blood,” I suggested. “For the magic.”

She nodded.

Footsteps and less cautious voices echoed into the hall.

“One of the guards has the keys,” she said. “I’ll get started on the collars, but the keys will make it faster.”

“You get them out. I’ll get the keys,” I said and turned to leave.

“And Tobin,” she said to my back.

“Yes?”

“Blood.”

I nodded and walked through the hall and out into the ballroom. Five men looked at me and then at each other. One thudded away down the great staircase on the far side. The others drew long, thin swords and advanced to meet me.

*This will be interesting*, Petang whispered in my head, and then he was in my hand singing.

Even in the low light, I could see that the guards were uniformly handsome. And tall. And they moved well together. “Come for the witches, have you?” one taunted as he moved to flank me.

I found myself too busy fending off probing thrusts for a witty reply. I listened for the jingle of keys as I backed towards a wall. Through the ringing of steel, the scuff of boots, and the grunts of effort, I picked out the keys on the guard to my left. Petang led me through a furious assault on the man, occasionally parrying away the other three.

Finally, we let the keyholder pierce my thigh, but snapped his blade with a downswing and spun through a slash to his throat. His blood sprayed out across the floor in an arc, and my own leaked down my leg around the shard of his blade. Just what she needed.

The remaining guards hesitated. I stooped beside the bleeding man and snatched the keys from his belt. The other three realized what the keys meant, and they advanced.

“Anllela, keys,” I shouted, and slung them across the floor. They skidded through the open doorway into the back hall. I staggered from side to side to hold back the guards.

Behind them, three people topped the stairs. The returning guard led a spidery man advisor and a stunning, raven-haired woman in a blue-green dressing gown into the ballroom. The woman’s jewelry glittered in the firelight, even from across the room.

Two of the guards fighting me looked over their shoulders where I was staring, but the third took his chance and thrust past Petang’s parry. His foil glanced off my rib and gashed my side.

“Any time now,” I shouted over my shoulder and rubbed my free hand across the new bloody wound.

“So, you’ve come for her,” the woman who must be Bansa Win said. “You saw her power in the deadlands, no doubt. You should have taken your money and left for your homeland, Tobin of Rumah Sing. You will die here.”

I decided that if I got out of this alive, it was time to leave this city. Too many people seemed to know who I was.

I limped backwards, trailing more blood. The guards were unsure if they should come ahead and kill me or let the duchess talk. So, I talked to stall them.

“Why do you have these young women here?” I asked. “It seems a dangerous idea.”

“Their power, of course,” she said. “I want their power.”

“Because you have none?” I said and staggered.

“Indeed. But I think I will take it from them soon.” She smiled and turned to the hideous spidery man.

“Yes,” he slurred in a damp voice. “The transfer will work.”

The guard to my left finally realized that I was in no shape to cut him off and broke away to dash for the keys.

*It's about time*, Petang whispered in my head.

The guard rounded the corner into the back hall. There was a brilliant flash of lightning-white light and I heard a heavy body flop to the floor.

The duchess was no longer smiling. Young women began walking out of the doorways at both ends of the wall behind me. The guards backed away. Things started happening that I couldn't quite interpret. Angry things. Dark things. I slumped to the floor.

I heard Anllela's voice and tried to wake up. “Tobin, we should go,” she said. I looked up at her. There was blood on the hem of the tunic she was wearing. I looked around me. The rest of the blood was gone. All of it.

Other young women sat and stood nearby. Most of them were eating leftovers from the pantry and looking at Anllela.

“Tobin,” she said again. Morning light shone in sideways through the many windows.

“Yes,” I managed. I felt my thigh. No wound.

“We need to go.” She held up a small felt pouch. “Bansa Win’s jewelry will clear your debt with Pinda Na.”

“You hired me?” I said. “You sent the messenger?”

“Of course,” she said and pulled me up. “I needed the blood.”

The young woman with grass-green hair stepped over to us. “Are you ready?” she said.

“Wha—” I started.

“Yes,” Anllela said.

The young woman touched our shoulders.

I felt nauseous, and I doubled over, barely managing to not wretch. When I stood, Anllela and I were on the road that leads from the late duchess’s manor into Ka-dal.

Anllela started walking, and I moved to catch up.

“What—Never mind. Where are you going?” I asked.

“After the House of the Laughing God? I will go upriver, to Far Ha-dal. There are a few things that need doing there. Too many iron collars. Will you come with me?”

I hesitated.

*Take a chance*, Petang whispered in my head.

“I will follow you,” I said. “For now.”

She nodded, and we walked through the silver-gold sunlight into the city.

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*Michael Ray teaches history & government. He and his spouse live in north Alabama with dogs and turtles and more books than they can count. He’s been a Russian linguist, corporate manager, honors program advisor, broadcaster, Apple employee, and editor of Redstone SF. Visit him at [gatetree.com](http://gatetree.com).*

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# **The Way He Should Go**

By JOSHUA M. YOUNG

*Rostam has spent many years studying under the monks of Uqbar and wandering the ruined world, but nothing could prepare him for discovering a precursor child!*

The monks of Uqbar taught Rostam of many things: of the glorious cities of the ancients, bright and shining and miles tall; of the enormous bodies of salt water that once filled the deserts, and the life that once flourished on the plateaus where nothing now grew; of a time when the sun was a tiny orb, young and hot and too brilliant to look upon, not the cool swollen ball of red that all now knew.

The monks spoke, too, of people: of Suleman and Vareos and Akinas, the lovers of thought, and Anders the Wise, who was their student and who slew the civilization of the Penitents in order to save the Penitents. They spoke prophets of divine love and prophets of divine wrath; of the servants of the infernal and the servants of heaven, and of their eternal wars in which mortals were pawns.

The monks spoke of much, and in his years, Rostam had been a quick and attentive study.

But they had never spoken to him of fatherhood.

Rostam found the boy, preserved in the ways of the ancients, mummified in a dark, skin-tight suit, suspended in a fluid-filled sarcophagus of metal and crystal and thin sheets of bone. It had been abandoned in ruins at the edge of an immense canyon, the bottom of which could not be seen, at the confluence of three mighty rivers. The water was cold and clear and plunged into the abyss with a powerful roar that shook Rostam's bones. He wondered if the bones of the earth shook, too. It seemed as though the world itself might come loose.

The ruins spread for miles, and the sarcophagus itself lay discarded at a place near their end, where the roar of the waterfall was but a thin and distant sound. On it was the writing of the ancients, and for all his years with the monks of Uqbar, he could not read it, for even they had lost the secrets of the ancients' language. Letters danced and shimmered in the light of the flame Rostam conjured above the gathered fingertips of his left hand. Though unintelligible, the letters were familiar, but in the twilight gloom and shifting light, they lent the situation an otherworldly air.

Rostam ran his free hand across the letters, seeking the invisible structure in the air that so many of the ancients' enchantments carried. His fingers caught on a handle woven of the chill air itself, and he hauled up on it with all his might, anxious to see what treasures might be inside.

The tombs of the ancients were rarely without reward, and in the great basin deserts, every reward was another chance for survival.

The sarcophagus opened with a nearly silent whoosh of air. Fluid spilled out, somehow colder than ice itself, instantly creating a fog in the air where it fell. Rostam took a moment to say a prayer for the boy, offering it to whatever deity the child's people worshipped, and one to his own before reaching into the frigid liquid.

That was when the boy began to cry.

Rostam drew his hand back as though bitten. There were rumors, half-remembered tales, and tattered manuscripts that suggested the ancients might have once held sway over life and death itself. But he, like most, had dismissed the suggestions; if the ancients could choose when things lived and died, could they not have saved both themselves and their world?

He contemplated the crying child, taking in his features for the first time. Young and round, with the sort of softness that comes from a life lived in weal—it was not the kind of thing that Rostam saw in any but the youngest children, the ones who still nursed at the mother's selfless expense.

Rostam, a man who had stood on plateaus where the air is too thin to breathe easily, who had both plumbed canyons and climbed walls of the basins, who spoke three languages and read five, who had once faced down a heirovore with nothing but his blade, found that he did not know what to do. He allowed the conjured flame to die and pulled the boy from the preservatives, awkwardly trying to comfort the child as well as he could. He patted the boy's back uncomfortably, tried to shush the cries before it drew the attention of something wild or feral or worse still. The child continued to call out, murmuring a few syllables over and over in what Rostam assumed was the language of the ancients.

He could not have been very old, Rostam realized. The words were uttered with the kind of fervency that said they were among the child's only tools for communication. There would be no reasoning with this boy, no way to silence him but to actually calm the terrified boy—save for the solution a bandit might have taken. Rostam could not, would not, think of such a thing. Even with grown men, he did not take such actions. If a



man was to die by his hand, he would die in a way that brought honor to both Rostam and his foe.

But something already moved in the desert. He saw, in the fading light, a shifting trickle of sand. There were a number of serpents and near-serpents that made such a trail as they moved, and no creature Rostam wanted to meet moved so. He shifted the boy in his arms so he could draw his blade. To set the boy down would have been to imperil him. It was safer for him to remain in Rostam's arms than to allow the boy to draw the creature's focus or to wander towards the edge of the canyon.

The creature came at Rostam like lightning, launching itself from the sand with a swift uncoiling of looped and bunched near-serpent. Multitudes of tiny, useless legs flattened against the creature's body, and Rostam's swing, encumbered as he was, was sloppy. It did not sever the creature as he intended, but nicked it and batted it aside.

The boy cried. The serpent plunged into the sand. Rostam circled, sword finally at ready, trying to keep the serpent always between him and the edge of the abyss as it moved. A second ripple of sand joined the first.

And a third.

The second creature launched itself at him, and this time Rostam's swing sliced it cleanly in half. The slimy and gory severed head bounced harmlessly off the boy's arm, and the child cried all the harder for it. The first came again, and Rostam cut it apart with his return swing.

The third reared back, flaring its neck and body and wiggling the dozens of tiny legs that lined its body. It hissed like wind in a canyon at night. Its fangs glistened with venom. Rostam kept the blade between the near-serpent and himself, refusing to blink, lest the creature lunge. It dove back into the sand—

And fled.

Certain creatures, Rostam knew, were averse to the smell of their own kind's blood. Some might come upon it, seeking an easy meal, but many of those who were not prone to cannibalism fled when they smelled their own kind dying. These near-serpents were apparently the latter kind, and the rippling trail of sand led away from Rostam and the boy, who was now sniffing, eyes swollen and red from tears.

It was only then that Rostam noticed he had been cut. One of the creatures had caught him with a lucky blow from some sharpened claw or leg or tooth as they had raked past him. The wound was already hot to the touch. He dropped his sword, set down the boy, and drew the shorter blade he kept for utility rather than combat. Conjured flame heated the knife's blade to a dull, glowing red. Rostam set his teeth and ran through the monk's mantras against pain.

That did not help.

The boy watched all of this with the fearful interest that only children can muster, and when Rostam gasped in agony, he was surprised to see that the child ran *to* him, patting him on the arm. It was a child's gesture, fingers splayed, the palm thwacking heavily against Rostam despite the child's hesitant motions. It was raw and primal and, somehow, one of the most touching things Rostam had ever seen.

The venom burned in Rostam's veins. He slept fitfully and feverishly and woke frequently, sometimes because of the venom, sometimes because of the child stirring beside him. The child clung to him with the fierce determination of those just leaving infancy, and that allowed Rostam some measure of peace. The boy was too terrified to wander off.

Wards burned through the night, woven of fire and air and near-serpent's blood, to frighten off predators and prey alike. They began to fail near dawn, and Rostam was only dimly aware of them going out, one by one. The last died moments before the first wisps of sunlight came over the horizon, and he did not have the strength to reweave them. His wound was red and blistered now, and patches of veiny black and purple mottled his arm where the venom had escaped the cleansing heat.

He was, he reflected dimly, going to die, and the child would die with him. He felt distantly and obscurely grieved over that. It was one thing for an adventurer, a man of many seasons, to die alone and unremarked. It was another thing for a child, a life that had slumbered tens of thousands of years, to die without even the chance to thrive.

He did not know where the man came from. He did not care. He was just glad to see the child would be cared for.

But would he? Many plied these wastes. Not all were friendly and trustworthy.

Rostam drew his sword and waved it about as best he could: artlessly, aimlessly, wavering in the general direction of the startled visitor. The child cried, perhaps remembering the serpents that had come the last time he'd glimpsed Rostam's blade. The man jumped back, cursing, but Rostam's grip was too weak. The blade slipped from his fingers and fell to the sand with a dull thud.

Strong hands. Rostam fought.

Burning. Chill. Burning. Sweat.

A little body. Little hand. Heavy, guileless affection.

Rostam fought.

Rostam—

—opened his eyes. Striped fabric. A tent? Thin light—there, the moon, like a cloud of sparkling pink sand in the night sky, glimpsed just outside the open tent flap. The monks said it was white, the moon, or perhaps light grey, but that its light came from the sun, reflected, and so was now pink. The monks said that once man had—

The boy.

Rostam fought to sit up, clawing at his hips for dagger and sword. His muscles were sluggish to respond, his fingers and arms trembling. He could barely move—but he *could* move. He wasn't a prisoner. Just weak. And disarmed; his weapons were nowhere to be seen. His clothes were gone, too; he was covered with a thin—though warm enough—blanket, laying atop another thin blanket thrown over the sand.

He held up a shaky hand and conjured flame above his bunched fingertips. The fire was slow to respond, slow to form, but it did form. There was a soft shuffling of fabric nearby. Rostam tensed, but the face that appeared from the shadows was soft and gentle.

Her lips, not quite hidden by a gauzy veil, were full; her eyes, even heavy with sleep, bright and expressive. Hers was a face for kissing, for love or the animal imitation of love. The row of studs in her left ear, chained together with a line of delicate gold links, confirmed his suspicions.

"Peace," the concubine whispered. "You are safe."

“Boy,” he croaked.

“Safe. He sleeps in another tent. My sister nurses him.”

He let the flame go and slept.

In the morning, the concubine fed Rostam a thin and gently spiced porridge as she crouched comfortably beside him. Her “sister”—an appellation of professional courtesy, he realized, as the nurse’s skin was a nutty dark color, compared to his attendant’s creamy pale—brought the boy to Rostam. The nurse was no less a concubine, dressed in the same revealing gauzes, ear pierced in the traditional way, but her breasts were full and swollen with milk, the gauze across them damp at the nipples. A wet nurse, though Rostam would’ve judged the boy as too old for nursing. He had teeth.

But what did he know of such things?

The child ran to him. As with so many of the child’s movements, it was awkward; he did not bend his knees as an older child or grown man would and kept his arms close to his chest. But it was joyful, and Rostam wondered briefly that the child should have grown so attached to him in such a short time. Rostam wrapped his arms around the boy, feeling more than a little self-conscious.

How long had it been? Not that long; the child did not seem to have grown noticeably.

“He would not leave you, the first few days,” the nurse-concubine said in a lilting voice suggesting she came from Skohssa, or perhaps Alklind, both far, far south. “Your son, he loves you.”

“Clearly, though, he takes after his mother,” Rostam’s attendant concubine said, making a gesture that took in Rostam’s swarthy, lean build and the boy’s fair, pudgy body. “Where is she?”

“He is not mine,” Rostam said and regretted it an instant later. These women served someone else, and gentle and kind as these two seemed, he did not know the intention of their master. There were those who were scrupulous enough to not separate a man from his own get, but not so scrupulous as to not bend the rules where the laws of salvage and rescue applied. He hurried to add, “By birth, at least. I rescued him, and he has traveled with me since.”

No need to specify since when.

The dark-skinned concubine nodded as if this was the most normal way to obtain a child she'd ever heard. The light-skinned one hummed tunelessly for a moment, rocking a little on her creamy haunches as she cleaned the remnants of porridge from the bowl with a handful of sand.

Rostam walked in the afternoon, with steps as shaky and as unsteady as a child's. No—worse than a child's; the boy ran about Rostam, laughing delightedly and chanting some nonsense syllable over and over again. *He* did not have shaky steps. *He* did not require the support of some other man's concubine to walk. Rostam, worldly adventurer, a man strong of learning and of muscle, did. The effort took its toll; he made a circuit of the tent, eyeing the half-score tents and wagons, all rich and sumptuously decorated. At the end of his lap, he lay down and slept until the next morning.

He fed himself that morning, sparing the boy bites of his porridge, and though the nurse looked disapprovingly at him with every bite, the boy made delighted sounds out of proportion with the actual act of eating. Perhaps the child was too old for mother's milk and was dissatisfied; perhaps the ancients did not nurse their children at all. Or perhaps the child simply liked the porridge. Rostam had tasted far worse in his time.

At mid-morning, after he had walked a circuit of the whole camp, a man came for Rostam. He had the same dark skin as the nurse, but none of her softness. He was hard, muscled, chipped from dark stone. He stood six-and-a-half, perhaps seven feet tall, and wore the curved saber of Skohssa on his hip. The concubines traded looks with each other, and then with the man, who shrugged. He crooked a finger at Rostam and said, "Bring boy."

Rostam's skin prickled. The man's tone did not please him. The instructions did not please him. The flights of fancy that came with the instructions did not please him. But the rough men whose job it was to guard caravans and harems were rarely accustomed to pleasing strangers. The pale woman helped Rostam to his feet—almost unnecessary now—and walked beside him as she'd done previously. The boy walked between Rostam and his wet nurse.

He'd need a name, Rostam realized, and sooner rather than later. The trip through the camp painted a picture of his host: a man who could afford at least two concubines, a dozen workers, and a dozen guards. One whose temporary camp was more richly provisioned than many towns Rostam had seen. A man whose schedule could afford to take time to allow a sick stranger time to recuperate. There was always the chance that the man was rich and compassionate, but the compassionate man would've come to visit his guest by now.

No, this man was rich, and the inconveniences of nursing a wanderer back to health were worth what he wanted from Rostam. It would be the boy, of course. Even the child's garment, a single piece woven from a fabric that none could identify beyond recognizing it as the art of the ancients, would buy a small town.

The bodyguard took up station in front of a tent taller and more expansive than the others. Not quite at the center of the camp, but near enough to be safe in case of raiders. He did not enter, nor gesture at Rostam beyond a slight and impatient flaring of the nostrils when Rostam hesitated at the tent flap.

The pale concubine drew back the flap, and her sister urged the boy inside. Rostam followed, hand reflexively pawing for the weapons that were certainly *not* hanging at his hip.

He was only mildly surprised to find the weapons inside. The dagger, stark and utilitarian, lay sheathed and forgotten on the arm of a large and ornately carved chair. The sword, a more ornate piece of work, was held in pudgy hands, turned this way and that as the enormous man seated on the throne examined it. The man himself was fleshy and soft, but he did not give Rostam the impression of being lazy. The way he handled the sword, the way he sat, the way he breathed—this was not a man who had never done hard work. This was a man who no longer needed to do hard work. A man who had outgrown labor and danger. A man who had killed, but now had others kill for him.

He looked up from Rostam's blade, but only just, and smiled, but only just. When he spoke, his accent was clean and neutral.

"Uqbar-wrought. Rare in this part of the world, but it has seen use. It came to us covered in the ichor of near-serpents."

“It is a tool,” Rostam said. “It would not do for it to be unused.”

The man inclined his head. “You may call me Jabbar.”

“And I am Rostam. Your hospitality—” His knees buckled, and he stabilized himself on the pale concubine’s arm. “Your hospitality is appreciated. I am in your debt.”

“Yes, about that... Sit, sit.”

Rostam sat on the floor, legs crossed before him. The boy sat down heavily in his lap; the concubines flanked him on either side.

Jabbar leaned forward, the naked blade across his lap, and smiled. “You seem well enough.”

“The sisters have nursed us both. They are to be commended.”

“Good.” He nodded and smacked his hands loudly on his thighs. “Rostam, let us not mince words. I am a man of trade. You were in need of a service, and I provided it. It is time we discuss payment.”

“An Uqbar blade,” Rostam said, slowly, though he knew it was not what the man wanted, “is worth much. Perhaps not enough to repay a life, but it is what I have. That and my knowledge. I studied in Uqbar, you know. An orphan, raised by the monks. And I have traveled extensively.”

“This blade certainly testifies to your travels,” Jabbar agreed. “But though it is rare, I have several like it. I can buy more in any town large enough to have a weapons dealer.”

Rostam pursed his lips and nodded. “Perhaps you are right. Let us speak plainly, then, as you wish. The child is not for sale.”

Jabbar made a low, dangerous sound in his chest. “He is not yours. I do not know where you found him, but he is dressed as the ancients dressed. His clothes alone—if he is what I think he is—”

“He is not,” Rostam said, and the boy looked up at him, curiosity in his bright eyes. “I do not sell children.”

“A wagon. Two. I will give you the concubines. Mira is skilled in the Seven Acts of Love, as few are south of Ibra. Ellha, though recently with child, is still comely enough, and the women of Skohssa fetch a tall price. I will give you bodyguards as well.

“Four lives I give you—No. Five. The concubines. Two bodyguards. And,” he added darkly, “yours. For a child who is not yours, a child who will be well cared for.”

“I do not sell children,” Rostam repeated, “nor buy women.”

Pudgy fingers drummed against the bare blade. One of them came too close to the edge, and the sword drew blood; Jabbar did not noticeably flinch or otherwise react to the wound. “Your sword, then, for your rescue,” he said at last. “And your labor, until we reach the next city.”

Rostam considered, and then nodded. “Which is?”

“Nares.”

“Nares is two, perhaps three weeks away.”

“Yes,” Jabbar said. “And you and your boy will be alive.”

Rostam stood the boy up, then climbed to his feet; Ellha and Mira made to stand with him, but Jabbar cut them off with a curt wave. “He is a laborer. He no longer needs your care. He can share his food with the boy.”

The caravan set off the following morning, with Rostam and other bodyguards walking alongside the wagons. He had been lent a sword to replace his Uqbar-wrought blade, which now rode in the lead wagon with Jabbar and his concubines. The boy walked with him, or rode on his shoulders, or napped on the bench next to the driver of the wagon Rostam was guarding.

Rostam’s strength was quick in returning, but he was still weary at the end of the day. When the boy wanted to wrestle, rather than sleep, Rostam snapped at him, and though they shared no common language, the boy had been clearly stung by the tone of his words. He wished to call the boy by name and comfort him, but how could he know the child’s name? How could he convey to the child that this, this utterly random and utterly foreign word of Rostam’s choosing, would be his name from now on? That he should now respond to this word from a stranger, rather than the name his long-vanished parents gave him? Rostam pondered this question until he felt his eyes grow heavy and sleep take him.



At the end of the following day, he spent what little energy he had remaining to wrestle with the boy. The child laughed delightedly and threw his little body into Rostam's with a surprisingly weighty thud. They struggled, tickling and squirming, heedless of the looks the rest of the caravan gave them.

Heedless, even, of Ellha's unashamed look of longing.

"He will kill you," Ellha whispered, wrenching Rostam from his sleep. That he had not heard her enter the tent, nor felt her lay down next to him, testified to his exhaustion. She pressed against his side like a lover, arm across his chest, perhaps to obscure her purpose from the other men with whom Rostam now shared his tent. Her lips brushed his ear as she spoke. "He wants the boy, and while he prefers not to kill, the secrets of the ancients would drive many to violence."

Rostam drew breath to speak. Ellha felt his chest heave and placed a finger against his lips. "The words of a concubine are but wind in the night. The voice of a man is cause for notice. Be silent." When Rostam nodded, she continued, "The child whose milk fills my breasts is a girl. The daughter of Rancam—he who escorted you to Jabbar. Jabbar was furious, and demanded the unmaning of Rancam, until he realized that the child would be pure Skohssan. We fetch a high price in any market. More when a girl is young and can be raised as an unsullied courtesan; in a land like Ibra, where the Seven Acts of Love are perfected, a single girl of pure Skohssan blood can buy a title. Enfranchisement. Full membership to the Althing, even.

"But with your son," she whispered, "he could buy a nation."

Again Rostam stirred, and again the concubine silenced him. She made overtures to perform one of the Acts of Love, perhaps to reinforce her cover, perhaps for some other reason—to buy his aid? Her daughter must be nearby, unsold, for had she not been nursing, her breasts would have run dry. No doubt she assumed he would kill Jabbar to protect the boy, and free her daughter in the process. No doubt she sought to trade what currency she had to encourage that action.

What actions he took, he would take of his own accord, not because of the favors of a concubine. Rostam caught her hand as she slid it down his chest. It went no further. They lay together for what seemed a long,

long time before she slipped off into the night. It was longer still before Rostam could sleep once more.

Jabbar's move would come soon, Rostam thought as he played with the child, while he was still recovering. That it had not yet come surely reflected some reticence on the merchant's part. Some compunction, a shred of decency? The memory of some other child, some other father?

The shock of the word "father" drew Rostam short, letting the boy escape from his playful grasp. He did, indeed, think of the child as his. After all, his parents could not have survived, could not conceivably be found. And Rostam had found himself with a child under his care as surely and as unexpectedly as any father who had intended a moment's pleasure rather than a lifelong responsibility. Was he any different?

He gazed on the boy and his tousled blond hair, his heaving chest, and knew love as he'd never known it before. He knew that he would kill for the boy. He would have before, he was sure, but even if the monks of Uqbar had tried to take the boy from him, he would have drawn his blade at that moment, surrogate fathers to him or no. He thought back to Ellha and to Rancam, her countryman and paramour. Could he leave them childless?

They no longer slept inside the tent. Rain was infrequent, the weather mild, and Rostam felt it safer to sleep outside, near the cook fire the workers shared. The tent was a space he shared with four other men, none of whom he knew well enough to trust; any of them could have slit his throat as he slept. In such close quarters, he did not trust his instincts not to write off any movement as the other men leaving to relieve themselves. Instead, every night before bed, he nicked his thumb with the sword and surreptitiously wove wards of blood and air and fire to warn him of the approach of another. The wards would be easily noticed by all but the dullest of wits, dimly glowing specks of blood floating a few inches off the ground, joined to each other by luminous threads, but even their visibility lent him some safety. The common man did not trifle with sorcerers, and while Rostam was no sorcerer, only those with some power would recognize the distinction. It would take still more power to tell whether his wards were mere alarms or if they carried a bite of their own.

They slept under the stars like this for seven nights, perhaps eight, until Rostam discovered a flaw in his strategy: he was not the only man with arcane skill in the camp.

The night was cool and clear. The boy had long since fallen asleep; Rostam had long since quit trying to sleep. He watched the stars slide across the sky in a kind of trance, hardly noticing the bloody cloud that was the moon. The strange wandering points of light that moved too fast to be stars or even planets flitted across the sky. Rostam ignored them, as all who were not astrologers did, until one directly overhead grew sharply brighter. Rostam felt the hair across his body prickle. A moment's presentiment warned him, and he rolled, snatching the boy up in his arms, as light lanced out of the sky. A hole, perhaps an inch across, had been burned in his bedroll; the sand visible underneath was now dully glowing, molten glass.

He felt another prickle, this time of a trampled ward. He tucked the screaming boy to his chest and rolled again as a thick Skohssan saber bit into the ground. His back slammed against the man's shins—Rancam, he saw, unsurprised—and he swung his fist up into the man's groin. And he was still a man, or his unmaning recent, the scars still tender, for Rancam doubled over in agony. Rostam had never been good at using his meager arcane talents as a weapon, but he gathered fire to his fingertips and set the man's clothing on fire. Rancam shrieked and beat at the flaming cloth; Rostam scooped up the boy and fallen saber and ran.

Lightning rained from the clear sky, but each blast was preceded with a tell-tale prickling of hair, and Rostam lurched this way or that to avoid the attacks. A bodyguard, a man with the swarthy complexion and accent of Uqbar, leapt out from behind a tent to block his way, and Rostam ran him through without ceremony. He left Rancam's blade quivering in the man's chest, grabbing the fallen man's blade from the ground. It had the shape, if not the quality, of the Uqbar-wrought, and Rostam felt immediately more comfortable with it.

This would not stop, he realized. If Jabbar thought the boy was his path to wealth and power, he would continue to assault Rostam with lightning and hirelings until Rostam grew weary or otherwise made a mistake. Even as he thought this, he felt the prickle and danced a step or two to the side. The boy clung to him, sobbing, and he remembered the

fight against the near-serpents. The mistake would come sooner rather than later as long as he was carrying the child in his arms.

He drew a deep breath, steadied himself, and shouted, "Jabbar! You win! Come, let us talk!" The Uqbar-copy fell to the ground with a clatter that seemed like a headsman's axe falling. He waited for the sky to spit lightning again, but the prickling of his skin did not come.

Jabbar's bodyguards did.

One man ripped the crying boy from his arms. Two others kept bare swords pointed at him; Rancam, his clothing charred and holed but looking otherwise none the worse for the wear, wrenched his sword from the corpse of his comrade. He scowled fiercely at Rostam, and Rostam did his best to ignore him. Rancam was not his enemy. Not tonight.

He was marched to Jabbar's tent, given unnecessary directions only with the occasional tap from a sword point. The sole words spoken were the nonsense syllables that Rostam had come to assume were the ancient's equivalent of "da-da." The child struggled and squirmed in the bodyguard's grip and repeatedly thrust his arms out towards Rostam, but though it broke his heart, Rostam had to ignore him, too. At least for the time being. Jabbar's victory must be complete.

Rancam ripped the tent open and thrust Rostam in. He stumbled and fell and was immediately hauled to his feet by one of the men. He blinked in the sudden brilliance of a dozen or more lamps scattered about the tent. He had not noticed, on his first and only visit to Jabbar's tent, the arcane tools and elements scattered about the tent. Or perhaps he had and had simply been too foggy from his poisoning to assign them any importance; there was a certain lack of surprise at the sight of them that was not *entirely* due to the night he had just spent dodging lightning. But here, he saw half a dozen skulls, men and goat and serpent and other things he could not describe. There, a slab of the crystal and bone of the ancients, a myriad of sorcerous lights playing across its surface. Everywhere, the scent of aromatic herbs and chemicals used by the arcane practitioner.

Jabbar sat on his throne, wearing only a loose robe, untied and open to the night breeze. Mira reclined nearly naked on nearby pillows, the ease of the position and beauty of the woman spoiled by the look of fear

on her face. Ellha sat in the back, a baby with nutty brown skin clasped to her breast. The child nursed noisily.

“You could have been rich,” Jabbar growled. When Rostam said nothing to that, he said again, “You could have been rich. Now you will be fortunate to be alive.”

“The child,” Rostam said at last, “is indeed one of the ancients. But he is a child! Have you not seen him walk? He toddles and speaks in nonsense. He can tell you no secrets of the ancient world.”

“His words are not required,” Jabbar said. “Only his blood.”

“His body,” Rostam countered. “His life.” Ellha hugged her baby a little more tightly to her chest. Did Rancam, perpetually in the corner of Rostam’s vision, tense up?

Jabbar made a deep sound that Rostam interpreted as a laugh. “His life is mine, but he will be treated well. I have no use for him dead; the tools and magicks of the ancients respond most strongly to those carrying their blood in the greatest quantities. The wandering stars that hounded you tonight obeyed my command because I trace my lineage to a great and noble house of the ancients.” He waved a hand at the arcane slab of crystal and bone. “However imperfectly. Imagine, wanderer, what they might do with an ancient raised as my son.

“Now, you on, the other hand. Your life is also mine, and I no longer have any use for it. Unless,” and he licked his lips excited, expectantly, “you have something that you wish to bargain away for it.”

Ever the trader.

“Not the boy,” Jabbar said. “He’s mine.”

“As Ellha’s baby is yours?”

“Clever, clever. You seek to turn my servants against me. I have not unmanned Rancam, though he sired a get on *my* concubine. I am generous. He had something of value to trade for his manhood.”

Ellha looked sad, and Rancam visibly stirred. “And why would you unman him?” Rostam asked. “Not when you can have him sire child after child on Ellha, and sell the girls in Ibra as courtesans. Even men who command the power of the ancients can run short on funds—but not you.

You have a breeding pair of Skohssans. A sire and a bitch, and every little girl a fortune. Every pregnancy a potential windfall.”

“Enough,” Jabbar said. “Rancam, take him outside and slit his throat.”

Rancam’s fists clenched and unclenched, but did not move to obey Jabbar’s orders. “Rancam traded you his daughter. More than that, his love. He traded you his family for an honorless rutting.” He suspected that his words weren’t entirely true. That the deal had less been an agreement and more a set of conditions imposed on the couple. But Rostam needed to needle the rage in Rancam, to stoke it to a blazing inferno of fury, and so he suggested what he, Rostam, would have felt were he in Rancam’s place—that he had failed. As a man. As a father.

“You unmanned him,” Rostam continued, “as surely as if you had cut off his member yourself. You took everything that he had *but* his member.”

Rancam lashed out with his saber. His rage was wild, unfocused; Rostam had provoked him, but Jabbar had wronged him. The man simply swung, wild and heedless, at anything that happened to be nearby. He roared, his chest heaving, and stomped tentatively towards Rostam, who danced back from a swipe of the man’s sword, receiving a shallow and accidental gash from the naked blades of the guards behind him for his trouble. Jabbar barked something at the enraged guard, who spat something back in the Skohssan language. The merchant jerked back in the chair as the Skohssan blade swept towards his face.

The guard that held the boy had a clearer head than the others; he realized what was going on and whirled on Rostam, a knife emerging from his sleeve with its point at the squirming boy’s throat. “Call him off,” the guard commanded. “Call him off or I kill the boy.”

“Put that away,” Jabbar demanded, scrambling backwards from Rancam’s assault. “You fool, if you kill that child, I’ll have *your* balls.”

“And if you so much as nick that child,” Rostam said coldly, a ball of flame gathering in his hand, “I’ll have your life.”

The man dropped the knife and, after a moment, the child. He fled, and Rostam rushed to the boy, heedless of the empty threats and startled cry of the only guard left to him. The other had joined the fray to defend Jabbar, only to be cut in two by Rancam’s saber. Mira was

doused in his blood and shrieking now, clutching a pillow to her chest as though that would armor her against attack.

Rancam advanced on the merchant, who held up a hand and gathered flame in his palm. After a moment, he unleashed the fire in Rancam's face, but Rostam had noticed the tactic and conjured a wind to dispel the worst of the flame. The man's clothes smoldered again, but he did not hesitate as he lopped off Jabbar's offending hand. The merchant's head came off next.

The final bodyguard dropped his sword and fled. Rostam exhaled and sank to the floor, cradling the boy in his lap, and trembled unashamedly. The boy clung to Rostam and sobbed, and Rostam did not fight the urge to join him.

How quickly this child had become his son.

The monks of Uqbar may not have taught him how to be a father, but what had they known about fatherhood? Had they been any more prepared than he? Perhaps there was little more to it than honor and bravery and a dash of wisdom and those, those were things Rostam knew. And perhaps, he thought, gazing down at the boy, those were things he could teach.

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# **Tilting the Wick**

By J. COMER

*Mankind's lost colony of Pendleton's World has been wracked by religious war—but a new discovery may either fan the flames of conflict or bring about a new era!*

“We can’t get through here,” said Hilojat Shazhatson, as his manhorse cried in fear, snow on its legs. “They won’t tolerate it.”

“Brother Stablemaster never allowed the whip.” Charthat Thermatson rubbed the cheek of his manhorse gently. “He said it made the beasts rebellious.” His manhorse shied from the snow, though both mounts were shod in moccasins of woolbeast’s hide.

“Whip them or not. They’ll go no further.” Hilojat chirruped quietly and the four-meter biped whose shoulders he straddled backed out, away from the snowdrift, higher than her head or her rider’s, which filled the Hofathch Pass.

*We are four kilometers above sea level, and the air is too thin!*, thought Charthat.

“We could clear it out,” Charthat said and rose, standing in the chestirrup to see naught but more snow.

“Carrying a shovel that I don’t know about?” his partner responded. “Or is there a toolshed back there in those rocks?”

There was neither, nor a way to know how much further the snow extended. It might be ten meters or a thousand; they were not yet at the saddle’s stony crest. “What do we do?”

“We can’t go back down. We might never reach the Nurro with the Word of the Chelaib,” who had charged them to carry his orders, coded with the Name of Lord Sun Herself, to their homeland. “Is there another pass?” Hilojat asked, even though a mountain cave might be safer than the Nurro, split by war between his faith and his lover’s.

“There are two more, both over five kilometers up. One might be clear, or both, or neither. More to the point, we have one more meal for the beasts.”

“This secondday’s guttering out,” said Hilojat, looking to the west where a pinkish glow colored the clouds. He muttered a prayer to Lord Sun, made the *graichahun*, and turned his manhorse around.

For most of the next ten kilometers, they walked alongside their beasts. There was a pass that looked promising but ended in a dropoff whose bottom they could not see, and there was a useless meandering

climb that led to more snow. Twice, their mounts had to be backsaddled and ridden on all fours through dry waterfalls and mazes of tumbled boulders. Then it began to rain.

Hilojat asked Charthat, "Where are we going? Where does this lead?" as he pulled his manhorse's saddle back to its shoulders, the beast's lips blue with chill even with all of Hilojat's bedding as a cloak and hood.

"I don't know, but behind us is death. We need shelter and food, and that ice affords neither."

They rode down switchbacks, past two terraced fields where maize and berseem clover had been harvested. At the fourth switchback, they rounded a great knee of hornfels and saw lights in the windows of buildings. Around were gardens planted, now, in cover crops for the mountain winter. There was a stream, diverted into canals and at least two fishponds. In the middle of all was a *thtafet*, though to which saint was not apparent at this distance, with dormitories, barns, and silos.

"A stable for you, girl," said Hilojat to his mount. "And a warm bed, Sun willing."

"They won't be worshippers of the Lord Sun," said Charthat. "That looks to be a faTheyist monastery, though one I'd not heard of."

"Can we trust them for a bed and something for dinner? Something that isn't waybread?"

"Our code requires it of us. Don't expect dancing girls and silk robes, but what they have, we'll share."

"This is a lonely, bitter place for a band of monks," Hilojat mused, as the two men rode knee to knee. "What are they doing here?"

"I don't know. I thought I knew every monastery on our route."

"We aren't on our route, red man!" Hilojat retorted. "We can't be within a hundred clicks of it. Couldn't you have missed one, this far north in the Ferchus?"

"Maybe," came the reply. "Maybe so."

There were white-barked trees at the head of the valley and long stands of berry bushes.

They passed a terrace planted in garlic and collards, rode down and down, and into the valley itself. On other terraces, a potato crop had been harvested; they'd planted berseem in the lazybeds. Outside the monastery, there were huts—a village next to one fish pond.

*Was this a mission?*

*To whom?*

"Anywhere out of this Dark-damn rain!" said Hilojat as another sheet of storm washed over them.

Charthat was angry and cold, and his manhorse needed rest.

There was a door of oak.

They knocked.

They knocked again.

The door opened, and they saw a man, dressed in a wool robe, his feet in shearling moccasins of woolbeast's hide. His head was close-cropped. "Hail, and welcome to St Khanaz' abbey," the man said. "We are...what brings you here?"

"We are Hilojat Shazhatson and Charthat Thermatson, and the snow brought us here, for Yekhotok Pass is choked by it," the doctor replied. "You must get few visitors, here."

"We...yes, we do get few visitors here." The man frowned, heedless of the heavy cold rain. "Where are you bound, travelers?"

"To the nearest source of heat," cut in Charthat. "We will gladly answer your questions, brother, but may we do it inside?"

The man looked owlshly at Charthat and opened the door, letting them in. "Our manhorses," Hilojat said when the doorkeeper stared. "You've a stable, surely?" *If not, the beasts can sleep in the entry hall; it's tall enough.*

"Yes, we've a...a stable." He turned to the inner hall. "Farisak!"

The entry hall was plastered, its ceiling beams of pine. Charthat's and Hilojat's cloaks and coats dripped onto the stone flags.

"Farisak!"

A boy appeared in the hall, dressed in a tunic and woolen leggings. "Narim? Sir?" He goggled at the two newcomers. "Sirs?"

"You're Farisak?"

The boy nodded.

"I am Hilojat Shazhatson, and this is Charthat Thermatson, of the Churgan."

"I'm Farisak, Yunat's son. You're from the Churgan?"

"We are," replied Charthat, "and so are our manhorses. Is there a stable for them?"

Through all of this, Narim, if that was his name, had stood looking as if he would like to throw the visitors out.

When Narim saw the manhorses he blanched, but Farisak said, "You're from the outside, aren't you? Like in stories?"

"Wherever they are from, Farisak, show them and their...things to the stable." Had he never seen a manhorse?

Charthat told him that they were, and was peppered-and-salted with questions by the boy. "What is a manhorse?"

"These are manhorses, here, Farisak. We bought them in Khaliash at the Sign of the Dogs. Mine is named Thagorra; Hilojat's is named Adhefolchom.<sup>1</sup> They carry us where we need to go."

"Can they talk?" asked the boy.

"These two can't, but I've known one in Favashar city who could talk a little." He had heard of owners cutting tongues, but this interfered with eating, and manhorses eat a lot. His riding instructor had told them simply to watch for manhorses who talked and to use this if they could.

"What's the city, and do hundreds, even thousands, of people live there?"

"More than hundreds. There are nine-squared cities in the Nurro, to the west of here, below the great mountains. Seven-to-the-seventh power live in Gunkashar and more in Favashar, about half again as many.<sup>2</sup> The cities of the Inanigani to the east are greater still."

Farisak goggled at him. “So many all together?”

“So many, but, you know, you might live in a city of seven-to-the-sixth and know only eleven-squared people.”

“I think eleven-squared people would be fun to know. Do you have a lot of brothers and sisters?”

“Yes,” and here, Hilojat burst out laughing.

“Farisak, Charthat grew up in a monastery. Like this one. So he has about five hundred brothers, but not all the same age, or with the same parents!”

“Oh, you’re from—”

Narim cut him off. “They’re from another monastery, one that doesn’t follow our rules, so they’re going to have different stories, Farisak.”

“Aye, Narim.”

They turned down a hall of stone with wood-beamed roofs.

“Where do the demons live?”

“Farisak, demons take many forms. They might live anywhere.”

“Have you *seen* them?”

The one-time monk said, “I have. But you would be disappointed, because they look like men, except one, whose demon was in her sword.” For by that he meant Lord Sirat Tho’anchur.<sup>3</sup>

“What is the great sea, and is it fresh, or salt?”

Charthat replied, leading his beast, “The Mornwater, to the east, is fresh water, but the Nurro, where I’m from, has many salt lakes.”

The manhorses were stabled. Charthat inspected the place, which was at least warmer than the outside and well provided with straw and rough woolen blankets for the woolbeasts, who raised long-eared heads to look at the huge man-horses.

“Is she okay, there?” asked the boy. “Munuk needs me bailing.”

“Bailing?” Charthat imagined the whole monastery floating downstream, to a waterfall... “What needs bailing?” *Besides me*, soaked to the skin as he was.

“Silage vat, sir. Why?” They left the manhorses with oats and corn bread aplenty, and walked back into a long corridor.

“Why does it need bailing? We aren’t at sea.”

The lad giggled.

“The pump broke, sir. Only Munuk fell ill with fever, see, since he was hilling turnips up in a clamp, and got wet and cold, and his w—his helper, see, was scolding him. So the roof leaks, and Ekak won’t go up the ladder to fix it because he’s fifty-two, and he said if you’re—”

“Farisak.” Charthat spoke softly, but he was aware that if he didn’t interrupt, they’d be swept over a cliff by gossip, and not about turnips in an earth-covered pile. “Farisak, I’m an engineer.”

“A what?”

“I fix machines. If it’s okay, I’d like to look at your silage tank and the pump.”

“Can you fix it?”

“I can look at it and try to find out what’s wrong. If it’s something we can fix, then we’ll fix it, yes.”

“We can ask Narim.”

They went to the guest quarters to find Hilojat washed, sketchily, and Narim bringing a bronze lamp. He tilted its wick, touched another lamp in a wall cresset, and the room was brilliantly lit. There was an odor...pitch? Not pitch, not vegetable oil, and surely not woolbeast’s fat. Narim set a glass chimney over the lamp.

“Cap it when you wish darkness.” He saw the expressions on the visitors’ faces, and said, “Do you like it?”

“It’s a fine lamp, Brother Narim. But we’re told a silage tank is flooding?”



“Farisak, your tongue needs taming,” scolded Narim. “Would the cane serve for that?”

“He can fix it, sir, and the cane usually hits me lower down than my tongue,” said Farisak. “It’s an awful mess, really it is, and They have sent us help, isn’t it so?”

“How do you mean?” Narim looked at Charthat.

“I am an engineer who was trained at Vokherkhe Monastery.” This elicited no reaction. “Vokherkhe, in the Churgan.”

“And you can fix a pump?”

“I have done so many times. If I may look at it, I might be able to help.”

“Narim, you have to let him. The water’s almost to the—”

“Well, then, light a lamp and take him down there.”

Charthat wondered if it was worth changing out of his filthy, wet clothes since whatever he would put on would get filthier and wetter in a flooded tank of silage. He settled for stripping his coat, tunic, boots, and breeches off and heading to do the repairs in his breechclout. “Hilojat, I’ll be back,” he told Hilojat. “Sleep or not, as you will.”

“I don’t need your permission,” replied his partner with a half-smile, “but let’s make sure your clothes are washed and dry as we can get them?”

Narim said, “The sister who washes clothes is asleep.”

Hilojat said, “Shall I wash them myself, then, Brother Narim, or merely let them drip wet filth all over this room?”

“He can wear one of Father Yunam’s robes, can’t he, Narim?” asked Farisak. “Father won’t miss it!”

“I’ll see what I can do,” answered Narim.

Ten minutes later, Charthat, wearing his breechclout, was hip-deep in wet, cold silage. *Ugh*. He followed Farisak’s directions in finding the drain.

“How is this thing supposed to work?”

Two brothers had cleared the stinking stuff away from the floor of the silo, hauled it elsewhere, and he could see a groove in the floor. The monks had cleared away enough of the silage that he need not dig, but the filthy water had filled the silo too deep.

“The round pieces of bronze are on the chain, and the chain goes round and round on the gears to draw the water out of the hole,” said Farisak, who stood in the mess with Charthat carrying a lamp which burned the strange bright fuel.

“But what drives the chain and the gears?” Wind roared outside, and a splash of leaking cold rain made them flinch.

“Oh. I see what you mean. It’s a wind-wheel on the roof of the hall.” A piece of roof, wood shingle, fell near the light. It was caked on one end with a black stuff he didn’t recognize.

Charthat cleared away the last of the debris with a wooden spade and saw the round-pallet chain pump that Farisak had described. He drew the chain out and found it broken. “Get me some wire, and I can fix this for the moment, but the chain will need new links forged.” Which he could do, with a decent anvil and forge, but one thing at a time.

“Wire, sir?”

“Get me some copper or iron wire, and I can fix this pump.”

“I’ll see if we—no, I can’t leave you here in the dark.” He stood the lamp atop a pile of fermenting straw and left. It was still firstnight, about ten hours till the midnight transit. Outside it was simply dark, rainy, and cold, but the inside of the silage tank was much worse, fishy-stinking with the water leaking in. The chill from outside kept the smell down, but Charthat was glad of his empty stomach. While clearing yet more cornstalks from the chain, he wondered how a group this small had need of so much compressed winter fodder. They could hardly be exporting cheese or woolbeast’s hams, not across the hell of frozen Ferchu-tops between them and anyone sane. What were they doing with all this—

“Sir?” It was Farisak again. “The smith’s asleep, but I have some wire and things.”

It was links, meant for another chain, some bronze wire, precious as silk, for the labor it took to make it, a hammer and pliers, slung over the

boy's shoulder. He managed to re-connect the chain and then sling it over the gears.

Which did not turn.

“What connects these gears to the wind-wheel, Farisak?”

“The first ones know! I'll ask...Brother Amarab.”

He had had enough. He couldn't climb on the roof of this place in the rain and dark. He shrugged, gathered his tools, and with Farisak's help propped the door open, so that water could flow...where?

Into the long service hall that connected the buildings. If he recalled, the doors were no higher than the water would be. Unless the rain stopped, something he couldn't request from the Dhai. These people needed his help. But he couldn't get into the narrow space where the chains and gears turned. “Farisak?”

“Sir?”

“Can you fit into there?” He indicated the slot in the wall.

“From here, or from outside?” Of course! It was accessible from outside, in the dark, in the rainy chill.

“From here.” Their wonderful lamp would not stay lit outside, he was sure. The boy looked, twisted his head and torso, his light handed off to Charthat.

“My clothes will get dirty.”

“I solved that problem.” *And mine were dirty already.* The boy nodded, doffed his shoes, stripped off his woolen tunic and linen undertunic, and his leggings.

“Hold the light, sir, and what do you need me to do?”

“Yes. Find the gear and chain that connect the windwheel to the pump down here. If the chain is broken, then take this—” he handed Farisak a spool of iron wire “—and loop it round to fix it. Can you do that?”

“I can try, sir.” Charthat waited till Farisak had shimmied far enough up the tall narrow slot that his rump wouldn't be toasted, and then held the lamp in the bottom of the slot, near the machinery of the round-pallet

chain pump. He had earlier ascertained that the outlet of the pump was not blocked by filth, so once they got this hooked up, the pump should work. "There's a gear turning up here. The chain is piled up lower down, caught on something."

"Caught on what?"

"A lot of branches that fell down. Maybe a daybat's nest, sir?" The wind was almost silent.

"Get them out. See if you can hook the chain to the gear."

There was a long pause broken by some swearing. A shower of dirty wet branches and twigs fell down from above. A head appeared in the silo door. "Farisak? Are you there?"

"He's helping me fix the pump." The newcomer was a stout middle-aged woman wearing another of the long wool robes. Her head wasn't shaved, but her hair was knotted in a scarf of wool.

*Women, in a monastery?*

"Well, I suppose he needs to do that. But it's time for his—his breakfast, stranger." Had they worked through sleeptime? Charthat wasn't sure. She looked afraid.

"Ma'am, we'll be along as soon as this pump turns. And is there any hot—"

There was a terrific noise which made them jump. Creaking its protest, the chain had begun moving, and the pallets began hauling water up to the outlet. *There*, Charthat's monkish sense of duty said, *you're done*.

What did the silage *do*? He could find out. "Farisak, what other vats do you have here?"

"Other...why?"

"Their pumps might need a looking-over."

The tired boy said, "But they're—I see, you don't want them to fail like this one, sir?"

"I don't. Maybe I could see them before we wash up?"

They went to the next silo along the walkway. The vat contained silage, which was dissolving into...he didn't know what. It was a thick brown liquid smelling of pine pitch, or of the bubbles from a pond bottomed with rotting vegetation. Had the monks here, who weren't monks, found a way to make silage into pitch? But pitch did not burn with that clear, bright, high-smokeless flame. Pitch made a *mess* when it burned. "What about this one?" He asked Farisak.

"It's the finishing vat," said the boy. "They make the *fitharut* there and then crack it." He showed Charthat the vat. In it, a glossy black stuff sparkled, its surface rainbowed with iridescence like indigo fermenting in old piss, its odor overpowering and not vegetal in the least. Somehow Charthat felt that he saw gold there. "This isn't good for much, but it'll burn if you set fire to it, so be careful."

Charthat withdrew his hand and the lamp.

"Don't worry, sir. Y'can put a spill out in the *fitharut*, just throwing it in there. Takes a wick to burn it, see?"

"What is this, Farisak?"

"Sir, it's the *fitharut*, that's all. Never seen any before?"

"No. I haven't." He recalled the chemical formulae. Char, and the water-making gas, all in long chains, chains of eights, twelves, tens. "May I see the machine that cracks it?"

"We aren't doing a batch right now, but you can see it, yeah." The boy led Charthat to a shed room, rain beating on the roof, where a thing stood, cast-bronze and hammered pieces fitted into a...

A still. This was a still. Old Volegh had drilled him enough on machinery, all the sorts the Nurro knew, and many known only from the knowstones, machines they couldn't build, but this was a series of stills, designed to make... he didn't know what. Not liquor, or he'd smell it. He knew that the *fitharut* was not alcohol, which was made all over the Nurro and all over the world, and which made a poor lamp oil when compared to—to this.

"And from the *fitharut* you make lamp oil, and the tar on your roofs, and what else?"

“They can make anything from it, sir, waxes and pastes and medicines, and all. This’s made from it.” He pulled a charm on a string over his head, and held it out to Charthat. The thing had the shape of a temple pillar with a Protector’s crown. “It’s to give me luck, see?”

This was a priceless treasure, indeed. This was victory for whoever held and could use it, in the war that convulsed the Nurro like epilepsy. He had to get it, one way or another.

The sister brought food, which he ate without noticing, and then took them to the baths and a guest room, where Charthat went to bed and slept without lighting the lamp.

He woke, still in strange darkness. Hilojat was there. “Hilojat.” He knew the other man was awake. “Who are these people?”

“Some off-kilter monks of your own faith? Is this a guessing game?”

“Hilojat, they aren’t...I don’t think they’re faTheyists.”

“How do you mean?” Hilojat pulled the smaller man to him, drew the heavy blankets over them.

“They don’t recognize any of the words I used, don’t seem to know the basics of doctrine. Women in the monastery!”

“There are nuns at Vokherkhe,” Hilojat said.

“Who live apart, and if that woman is a nun, I’m Fayu the Second!”

“Huh?”

“She was his mother. I should’ve seen it right off.”

“You didn’t have a mother,” Hilojat snorted.

“Doc, I *know* what one is.”

“Why are we talking here?”

“We won’t be overheard. Are we in danger? What did you see?”

“They fed me, and they took our clothes to give to the washerwoman, when she wakes, and she should be awake now. The man who let us in, Narim, brought tea, asked me questions about who we were, where we

were going. I think he doesn't know about the war. It makes sense. This far up, anyone who gets here might never get home alive."

"They...are they dangerous?"

"They were talking about you fixing the pump. I think they have a lot of machines and devices here that we aren't...familiar with. That I don't know, anyway," Hilojat said. He was a weaver's son, despite his training in the Shi'akhat schools.

The engineer Charthat asked, "I need to know about them, then."

"That grim face you make," Hilojat said, under the bedcovers, in the dark, "is one of the things about you I like."

"They're heretics, do you think?"

"Of my faith, or yours?"

"Either! Don't you mind?"

"Not as long as they host us. Monk-or-monkey-man, we may end up staying here till the snow melts."

"Are they pagans?"

"I don't know. Anyone who doesn't acknowledge Lord Sun as God is a pagan. Or you mean, not faTheyist? Looks like it."

"There were other religions, once. Before the Dhai."

"I don't know. We are told that there were five-squared prophets. The Prophet of the Mask was only the last, and the Sigil."

"Other prophets? Are they followers of another prophet? How would you know?"

"I'd ask about the Elabethoket," Hilojat said, meaning the monotheists' confession. "If they follow Her, they're faVashala, regardless of the fiddling matter of this prophet or that one."

"Well. Ask them, then. I'll...what should I do?"

"Ask for a tour. I'll offer to help in their infirmary. See what they are proud of; see what they're silent on. They never get visitors. They must be eager to show off."

They weren't offered a tour. "Are we guests, here, or prisoners?" Hilojat asked.

Niram answered, "We are few here, and long shut away. The Lord Abbot must permit you to see the secret things."

"Do any of the sick require attention?" A brother sat on a stool outside in the hall, doing nothing obvious unless it was guarding them.

"I will see," replied Niram. "Keep to these rooms, please."

"So we shall, and we're grateful for your hospitality. We would wish to repay it."

The door closed.

"They're terrified of us," Charthat said, aware that the rain had slackened off. "What do they fear?"

"Plague? No, then they'd not have spoken to us, or let anyone see us. And we don't look plaguey—"

"Speak for yourself," said Charthat, and they laughed. *We do look ragged after so long traveling.*

It was early secondnight. Charthat murmured, "I'll creep out, see what's here. See what it is they hide, besides the biggest, most evil-smelling silage vat on the Nearside."

"I can't dissuade you, I know." Hilojat set his doctor's bag in order, and took out a prayer book bound in woolbeast's skin which had crossed the mountain walls of the Nurro more than twice. "The Lady God requires my devotion, in this place more than else."

"I need your devotion, bonesetter," said Charthat. "Shall I have it, then?"

"In its time, and yours, red man."

They rested, Charthat cleaning and oiling his sword and dagger, and then listening to the drone of Hilojat's prayers, in a four-note scale, and Niram returned, knocking at their door. "Stranger, the healer of the monastery would speak with you. If he may." Charthat thought quickly, and asked, "Your corn beer is good, brother Niram; might there be



another gourd somewhere about?” Niram shouted an order to the guard, who left and soon returned with the beer.

Hilojat went off with Niram.

Charthat waited till their footsteps were gone, on the stone floors of this strange not-monastery. He drank some of the corn beer (which was awful) and gave the rest to the guard, who took it. And then he arranged his arming-coat and cloak under the bedding, to fool a casual observer—*it would not fool a close look*—into thinking he slept, and he put the lid on the lamp with its wonderful oil. He looked outside.

The guard-brother sat on a stool, drinking the beer. Charthat grinned, silently, imagining how a fight would go, and then was sober. Against the whole community here they would die, and the Word of Peace would be silenced.

He took the lid of the lamp with him, and a scroll case.

Very well, then. How to pass the watcher, unobserved? The hallway led to a latrine and a locked maybe-storeroom. He watched carefully, pretty sure that the boy couldn't see him, even looking into the door, which was ajar. The hall was lit with another of the glass-chimneyed lamps, sitting on the floor beside the watcher.

Charthat put himself into a *hemishi*-trance, tracking the movement of the guard's head. Back...forth. Back and forth in what must be the bowels of boredom. Charthat had always memorized enough lessons to keep himself busy, and therefore alert, when he had to do something like this. The boy, after what must have been an hour and a half, rose, went to the latrine. Charthat went out, silent on bare feet, letting a store-basket hide him, while the boy looked his way, then passed him silent, his head turned. Charthat was to the lamp, and lidded it.

It guttered out, leaving the hall dark.

He was out. He heard cursing from the boy, and smelled the stink of the extinguished lamp, so different from palm oil or wax candles. He felt his way along the walls to the hall that ran round the central courtyard. He came to a window and saw the *thtafet*. A dash through the shadows of a stone wall, and he was there.

The sky was clear, and huge Butros shone, bright as ten thousand moons, into the long windows, and a brilliant presence lamp burned on the altar. Charthat could easily see the great icons of the Makers of ocean, sky, of mountains, the Scribe who had recorded the Lifemaker's Code, the First Ones who, legend said, had come from the Sky, at the bottom of time. Their images were ranked along the walls, each wearing the great inverted conical crown that served as a top to the pillar. He realized that he was holding his breath and let it out.

He had read about this cult in a History of Religions class at Vokherkhe, under Shandokar, before Shandokar was abbot; the class said nothing about the worshippers of the First Ones after the Dhai's religion had come to the Nurro astrobleme. *The First Ones could not free us from the circle of death and rebirth, and so the Savior came...* Yet here they were, shipwrecked in time. By all rights, he should be preaching in this place, but somehow...it didn't seem as if it was a good idea.

Suddenly it occurred to Charthat that there was a reason that his textbooks hadn't mentioned this cult still existing, and that he was about to be part of that reason. He was trained in the *hemishi* disciplines, but he couldn't fight off all these people alone. And neither of them could escape the remote mountain valley in winter.

He was scared enough to need a latrine himself.

He looked round the religious art for clues: he saw what looked like chemical formulae, picked out in mica and...white salt? They had no—

"The stranger sees our secrets." Niram was behind him. "It's well that Brother Annak trained each of you in arms." Charthat turned and saw four of the 'monks' bearing spears, long knives in their belts. "Return him to the cell he shares with his lover."

"I don't mean you—" Charthat was cut off by a brother advancing, circling him. He fell into the no-time of combat, danced the finch-vulture and charged his foe, feinted left, struck the spear aside, punched the man and missed, took a clout with the spear-shaft, then kicked into the brother's solar plexus and left him sprawled, spear forgotten.

"You! Khanar, get—" Niram had not studied under the merciless durrick armsmaster of Vokherkhe; one lesson Charthat had absorbed

was that one fighter can coordinate his actions better than can a group, unless the group is trained—

He felt-not-saw the spear that came, stomp/kicked, recovered, punched the man in the face and let him drop to the floor. Charthat avoided being backed into a wall painted with saints flying in a great crowned raft, stars streaming past, and let a man charge him, spear reversed to club him. He dodged, skipped sideways, grabbed the spearpoint, and drove it into the stone floor, then saw another spear's point coming and could not avoid it. It took him across the belly, tearing his coat and tunic and cutting across his gut.

The wound burned like fire, though the *hemishi*-disciplines walled the pain off, while Charthat chopped one spear-carrier in the neck and threw the other one in a fine cartwheel. Bleeding nastily, he faced Narim, who fled, shouting for aid.

He bent, pain jabbing up through him, and picked a spear up. One brother attempted to rise, and Charthat struck him hard on the back of his head. With a competent doctor, none of them would die.

Charthat felt blood run down his woolen trousers. He got out of the worship hall of the dead gods, then left the courtyard, out a water gate that was bolted only on the inside. Red and pink shone in the eastern sky, and mighty Butros was in half, with Maria Elena a bright not-quite star at his limb, and Ngobi in crescent. He walked toward the south, though, to the huge cliff where the stream poured over a lip of flood basalt, a layer of hard stone left over from eons when mountains had fallen from the nothing above the world.

His wound hurt, and meditation was not helping much. He heard footsteps and voices calling behind him. The spear made a decent walking stick. There were outcrops of rock by the stream, away from the spray of the waterfall. He turned and saw the 'monks' advancing on him. Behind them was someone he didn't recognize. He hefted the scroll case.

"Lay down your spear," said Niram, "and come here; you'll not be harmed. We wish naught but to be left alone, as we have since the First Ones came."

"Your spears tell me otherwise."

“Take him,” said Narim.

“This,” Charthat said, holding the scroll case in his right hand and bracing himself with the spear, “tells of your location. The tube is bamboo, sealed tight. I’d hate to drop it since the valley below has a road.”

“What is this?” asked Narim, coming forward to where Charthat stood unsteadily. “There is no—”

“I’ll speak to him,” said a new voice. “You are named Charthat, stranger?”

The newcomer was a fat little man in a grey robe and a long chocolate-colored cloak figured with mica; he leaned on a cane of walnut.

“I am. To whom do I speak?”

“My name is Tzovet Arhabason; I am the Starwalkers’ Heir, the leader here. I understand that you helped us out with a pump?”

Charthat shifted his weight, conscious of blood flowing down his belly, groin, and legs. “I did. And your silage—”

“Stranger, your wound needs treatment. Your companion may use our surgery, if he cares to.”

*“What is the oil?”*

“We carry the knowledge of the First Ones who came from the Sky. But this we can discuss when your wound is drawn and salved.”

“Your brothers—”

“My people here know only this place,” said the old man. “I have seen the Nurro and great Vokherkhe, and prefer my mountain hollow. They fear any stranger, and more so, one who might expose us, again, to the world’s anger.”

“How do you make the—” He was growing dizzy, he knew. The *hemishi* strength could sustain him only for so long. “How—the oil?”

“Brother Niram fears outsiders, rightly, as persecution drove us here.” Old Tzovet looked at Niram. “Lay down your arms, brothers. This man is

our guest.” Spears glittered, red in the red dawn, slanting up, away from him.

“He saw the—”

“Niram, if he had meant harm to us, he would have left and called the Questioners to come here.”

“Lord, he—”

“Never make decisions based on fear,” said Tzovet. He came to Charthat, offered an arm. Charthat realized that standing was a burden, one he needed to lay down.

*Need to lie down now.*

A long time later he sat in a chair of beechwood under a long mica window.

“Their surgeon is a carpenter, as much as he’s anything,” said Hilojat. “Be glad I was the one who worked on you.” He had sewn up Charthat, verified that the bronze spearhead had not pierced his gut, and dosed him with vighinap to regrow the torn muscles. He had bandaged and splinted the men whom Charthat had wounded, as well.

“I’m glad, but I wish it hurt less!”

“It would hurt less were you dead, and me too, since I’d have no chance alone in these sun-forsaken mountains.” Hilojat had agreed to exchange bud samples of his medicinal plants for shelter and food. The message of the Chelaib would have to wait, for good or ill.

“Granted. They’ve been good to us,” in return for promises (talk, at least) of trade goods, metal. Old Tzovet had asked for iron, above all; the refuge had none. Charthat said, “I have no head for business; I don’t even really know what money’s worth.”

“What do they have that we want?”

“Hmmm. You haven’t seen their library, I know. See what they have that you red-robles don’t have?” Copy their ideas? Tilt his wick to theirs?

“Makes sense. But...books. Hmm. I love the idea, but I’m me. What do they have that we need?”

“They...I don’t know. Wool? Lots of wool.”

“Wool can’t be worth carrying over these mortal mountains, not in any quantity,” Hilojat said. “My parents were weavers; unless they have better cloth than we’ve seen, it won’t be worth much more.”

His gaze fell on the lamp, now extinguished in late firstday, when wan sun lit the valley. “Those bronze lamps have a nice line to them, but they weigh too much. One or two as curiosities, maybe?” They’d walk out, leading manhorses laden with grain for the journey. To be truthful, the little settlement made enough for its own needs and not much more. “No. Not the lamp. The—”

“They make it from silage. That’s what I repaired for them. They really need a better pump for that tank.”

“They can make that bright lamp oil from...what?”

“Silage, doctor. Chopped fermented animal fodder, kept for the off-season, most places. We do it at Vokherkhe.”

“But how? I’ve seen animal fodder, and it doesn’t turn into magic oil!”

“It’s...it must be something like what turns flour into bread, or rice into wine. A ferment.”

Hilojat nodded. “We have them—that’s how some of the medicinal plants turn into drugs, a fermentation. You got some?”

“Of the ferment? No—I washed and my clothes too. But if we asked?”

“It can’t harm them to give it to us?”

“Hilojat, think about what that stuff could do, if someone like the Wizard Etroklos got his hands on it!”

“Then give it to your monk friends, and let them file it in their libraries, right beside that old picture-machine they have. Can’t you red-robos use a brighter light?”

“We could, they, I suppose, could. Yes.” *Or a hotter fuel for flame engines?* “Or a feedstock for plastic making.” Or a flame weapon to put

Batharkh pitch to shame. “Hilojat, with *fitharut*, we could do *anything*. The Nurro—”

“Which has no government—”

“Warlords. They’ll fight with this; they’ll fight *for* it. And, an oil as useful as this? The peasants will plant half the Nurro in silage!”

“It is fortunate that you monks are unbiased good-doers, now, isn’t it?” asked the doctor.

“We need the *fitharut*. It’s a bargaining chip—”

“That explodes and sets the board on fire. Yes, I see.”

“We need it,” said Charthat. Charthat attempted to shift position, winced, and desisted. It had taken two brothers’ arms to get him from the bed to the chair, as Hilojat wouldn’t allow him to sit up on his own.

“Well, we can ask for it, surely. And before we do, you can rest and get well, warrior.”

He squeezed Charthat’s hand affectionately. “This will change everything, you know.”

“It’s about time something did.”

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# **Slave or Die**

By BENJAMIN COOPER

***Convicted of a crime he has no memory of, prisoner T196-A3 has been sentenced to solitary labor on an automated penal installation where he must work or starve!***

The white light emanated around me, piercing through my eyelids, jarring me awake from a deep slumber. Glowing letters came into focus: a white O followed by *r-i-o-n* in neon green.

“The time is seven-hundred hours Earth Standard Time,” a pleasant female voice announced.

“Come on with the lights!” I complained, shielding my eyes.

“Lighting can be reduced for a three-credit expenditure.”

“Fine, whatever!” I groaned, wincing. The lighting instantly dimmed.

I propped myself up on an elbow. My head was pounding. Had I gone on a bender the night before? The minimalist, spherical shaped room seemed foreign, yet familiar.

“Where the hell am I?”

“You are incarcerated on detention planet Bulrathi in the Orion system, designated and sanctioned by the United World Federation,” the remote voice stated dryly.

“A prison planet?” I mumbled, barely coherent. I was in a daze, and it was difficult to focus. But my mind was coming out of the fog. It was gradually coming back to me: I was a convict. Did I even want to recall the heinous crime I must have committed to deserve such a harsh sentence? Next to the bed was a panel displaying basic environmental data and vital signs. A glossy black plaque in contrasting white lettering proclaimed *Senso-bed*. The mere sight of the Orion Corporation trademark filled me with disgust. Strangely, I couldn’t place why I felt such contempt.

“What is my crime?”

“The file on prisoner number T196-A3 is officially closed,” the voice said firmly.

“Thanks for nothing.”

“Deposit your linens in the sanitization chamber.”

“No machine tells me what to do,” I barked. The voice fell silent. My eyes wandered around the enclosure. The cell was modest. Everything

was white, including the walls, which seemed to be composed of some type of durable plastic. A sturdy desk with beveled edges sat against the wall, along with a cushioned sofa and chairs, and a toilet and shower stall were in the back.

“Water,” I demanded. I received no response. I felt as if my body was glued to the cot’s memory foam. I pried myself out.

“Thank you for using Senso-bed,” the computerized Senso-bed voice chimed. “We were able to decrease your left ankle swelling twenty percent as well as boost your vitamin levels. Your immune system is running at optimal efficiency.”

I stumbled over to the kitchen nook. Above a chrome lever with a black rubber grip a metal plate declared, *Food regenerator Pro 1000*, followed by the familiar Orion logo. I switched the lever from the food setting to water and hit the button. The contraption dispensed a cold glass of water, and I gulped it eagerly.

“What am I supposed to call you, anyway?”

“You referred to me as Heather yesterday.”

“Well, Heather, how long have we been going out now?”

“Please clarify the question.”

“How long have I been here? What is my sentence?”

“In Earth Standard Time, you are currently serving the sixth day of a six and a half year sentence.”

“Naturally.”

“Please comply with the mandatory health check,” Heather stated politely.

“Later,” I grumbled. A high-pitched alarm began wailing.

“You must comply, or there will be a credit deduction.”

“Okay! Geez! Turn it off!”

“Press your forehead against the headrest and slide your finger inside the hole.” A thin curved bar emerged from a hidden panel in the wall, and below it, a small hole glowed blue. I pressed my forehead against the

conformed headrest and stuck my index finger in the hole. Seconds later, Heather chimed.

“On behalf of the Orion Corporation and the Bulrathi Detention System, you have been cleared for work detail. Please proceed promptly to the airlock to ensure your daily quota will be fulfilled.”

*What awful mess had I gotten myself into? And what's this about a quota?* My memory was still impaired, but my awareness and rationality did not seem to be affected. A lengthy list of rules was plastered on the wall in bold black lettering. A panel in the wall slid open soundlessly, revealing a dated mid-grade bio-suit. *Property of Orion Corp* was predominantly embroidered on the front and back. The rudimentary suit had undoubtedly been worn by the last unfortunate dweller of this hellhole.

“Now I get it. Orion is double-dipping, capitalizing on a revenue stream from both the United World Federation for prison fees and the free labor for whatever my *quota* is. Greedy bastards of Orion,” I grumbled to no one in particular as I scanned the rules.

The very last rule made my stomach churn. *WARNING: Failure to harvest the minimum allotment of nine kilos per cycle will result in the shutdown of the life support systems of the Eco-Chamber.*

This set-up was a racket incarceration method referred to as privilege-driven manual labor by the government and as “slave or die” by those unfortunates who ran afoul within the system. The harder I worked, the more credits I accumulated. The credits could then be used to make my detention more bearable. It was a genius play which benefited Orion Corp tremendously.

In the beginning, prison planets had been leased by governments to house dangerous criminals. UWF-sanctioned corporations took over the business model, formulating a strategy to both cash in on the bid and leverage free labor to harvest in-demand commodities.

*How the hell did I know all this?* I was thinking more clearly. Still, my business acumen seemed to be returning more quickly than my memories.

Before suiting up for labor detail, I powered up one of the three computer tablets docked on the table. After briefly perusing the

disclosure agreements, I explored the various leisure applications, all requiring a nominal fee. There was a library of news publications, literary works, music, and even television. I shut down the unit, discouraged with the lack of viable information.

“Well, time to get to work, I suppose. Slave or die, right, Heather?” Heather did not answer, apparently her circuits did not respond to sarcasm.

I donned the suit, which had clearly seen better days and was a bit too big. I brought the helmet over my head, and it automatically locked into place. The inside of the visor flickered to life. My vision was inundated with automated data readouts and scrolling text. I entered the airlock. The door shut behind me with a pneumatic hiss, and the airlock light flashed green.

The outer airlock door opened, revealing mountainous cliffs of jagged purple rock in the far distance. I stood motionless, in utter awe of the magnificent beauty of the alien landscape. I gazed upon the vast expanse of purple tundra and sparse scrub that encircled the Eco-Chamber. Cautiously, I ventured outside, a feeling of *déjà vu* overcoming me. Yes, I had done this before. The stale air in the helmet was familiar, as were the visuals superimposed on my visor. There was nothing but a vast sea of mauve, violet-tinted sand dunes, ending with a seemingly impossible array of towering rock formations many kilometers away. Upon closer inspection, the clusters of vegetation contained bunches of cabbage-like heads. The pastel sky suddenly grew dim with the passing of a billowing cloud system, and my screen flickered with a faint purplish glow.

A thorough search of the perimeter turned up a small shelter containing my harvesting tools and the harvest processor, which was merely a receptacle with a handle, much like those at a package delivery station. The processing portion of the machine was underground, protecting it from both tampering and the elements. The setup was simplistic, which was the key to its effectiveness. There was nothing for me to sabotage or protest. My only feasible option was to harvest and survive. Slave or die.

The familiar Orion logo was predominantly displayed in the corner of the processor as well as on every piece of equipment. The various

gardening tools were rudimentary, composed of hard plastic. Several four-wheel carts were docked alongside the shelter.

“I guess I have to farm, otherwise the world has no qualms with letting me rot, huh?”

Heather’s voice echoed inside my helmet, “You must harvest nine kilos to maintain the life support systems of the Eco-Chamber, assuming you are cleared for work detail.” Heather droned on, her voice soft yet as cold as the depths of space itself. “Your survival depends on providing enough mass for the Orion Life Cycle Process Master to convert to food and water.”

“This whole place is probably powered by solar energy, transmitted from the upper stratosphere. How many revenue streams do the bastards of Orion have on this dust ball anyhow?”

“Based on your average productivity level, reaching the minimum harvest level will take approximately three Earth Standard hours.”

“I get it already! Quit yapping in my ear!” I grumbled, fumbling with an armful of tools. I yanked a cart out of its dock, and secured my tools in the side compartments. The cart was not motorized, although it could have easily been solar-powered, judging from the adequate amount of muted light fighting through the hazy atmosphere.

Shaking my head at the absurdity of the situation, I pushed the cart to the closest cluster of vegetation. I discovered only girthy stumps protruding from the base of the plants, the results of a previous harvest. I moved on to the next, pulling the cart through the sandy terrain. The next root cluster had three sizable cabbage heads, and I parted the leafy foliage to expose one of the stems. I yanked and pulled, but to no avail. My gloves did not provide an optimal grip. Using the trowel to dig out the root, I proceeded to hack at it with the hoe. I pulled at the head, straining to break it free from the sandy purple soil.

Then with a heaving twist, the head popped off. My stomach dropped as I noticed movement inside the root hole. What had I awoken? Suddenly, a swarm of insects emerged. The horrendous looking bugs had countless legs, menacing mandibles, and three antennas with eyeballs atop them. I stumbled backwards in a panic as the finger-sized creatures scurried about. To my relief, they ignored me and scattered

before burrowing back into the sand, likely returning to the deep roots they utilized for their burrows.

I toiled from cluster to cluster, moving in a circular pattern around the Eco-Chamber, all the while brainstorming a plan of escape. *Would sabotaging the Eco-Chamber or purposely injuring myself result in a visitation from my captors? Could I then possibly overcome my imprisoners and hijack their transport?*

The suit was clunky, and although the gravity here was slightly less than that of Earth, it made the labor tedious and exhausting. My sweaty feet were not properly secured in the straps inside my boots, and I could already feel blisters forming as I jostled for leverage while working the hoe. *What would happen once I harvested all the cabbage in the vicinity?* I wondered as I struggled to shake off several leaves stuck to my arm with plum-colored sap. I would inevitably be forced to continue widening my harvest circle until I'd eventually have insufficient time to harvest the minimum allotment. By pacing off the diameter of the harvesting circle, and taking into account the rate and volume of my productivity, I could calculate how many days I was from that critical day.

As the day wore on, I questioned Heather relentlessly. Her logic systems were rudimentary. The only viable information I was able to ascertain was that there were only two scenarios where my captors were forced to return prior to the completion of my mandatory sentence: a change to my court case or mechanical failure of the Eco-Chamber. Since I no longer had the right to speak with my lawyer, the first option was out of my hands. I considered sabotaging the chamber in order to force a repair crew to land, although Heather had warned me if I purposely caused a malfunction, Orion Corp was not obligated to repair the damage before the system's failure led to my expiration. If I survived, my sentence was likely to be extended due to insubordination. As for the hasty plan to deliberately fall and break my leg, I would then be on the mend, confined to the Senso-Bed until a medical droid could be deployed. When it arrived, the Eco-Chamber would fill with gas, knocking me out instantly, before the droid entered to work on me. Another dead end.

The cart held about an hour's worth of work. I deposited the plants into the hatch of the Orion Life Cycle Process Master. It made a rumbling, churning noise before the light on the side flashed green, indicating it

was ready for another load. How many cartloads would I be forced to harvest before the punishment ended?

My daydreams were interrupted by Heather. "Congratulations, you have earned twenty-two credits."

"Hooray for me," I cheered sarcastically as I pushed the cart along, starting the process anew. I began to pick up the pace; the faster I accumulated a sizable amount of credits, the sooner I could get back into the Eco-Chamber and remove the uncomfortable elastic bio-suit for the day.

My mind continued to wander. Did I pose such a threat to society that I deserved to be exiled to another planet? What had become of my family? Did I even have a family? I had no memories of them. Perhaps that was a good thing, considering the circumstances. But why was my recollection so selective? Someone had undoubtedly tampered with my mind. I was certain that practice was outlawed and would have been detected upon my screening. Perhaps Orion Corp had programed the Senso-Bed with a mind-wiping feature. I knew Orion Corp had been in trouble for violating laws before. They were becoming more powerful, more brazen. Just what the hell had happened to me?

After several more hours of harvesting, my back was crying out in agony and my palms and fingers were raw from rubbing against the inside of the coarse gloves. After dumping my final load into the processor and returning my tools, I lumbered into the airlock, and slammed the button so hard my palm hurt.

Heather promptly spoke, "Please be aware credits will be deducted for any damage to the Eco-Chamber as a result of negligence."

"Then why don't you open the door for me next time!" I fumed, spittle spraying the inside of my visor.

"Remove your suit and place it in the sanitization chamber. You may reuse the suit after the sanitization process is complete."

"Orion would like it if I worked myself to death, wouldn't they? I'm not a mindless slave yet," I grumbled, struggling to kick the pesky suit from my legs. Heather maintained her silence. "What, no comeback, you sorry excuse for artificial intelligence?"



Inside a drawer, I found folded and neatly pressed prison garments. The orange jumpsuits with the ubiquitous Orion logo on front and back were, surprisingly, free of charge. Socks and slippers were in another compartment below. I splurged my hard-earned credits on a shower, followed by a glass of non-alcoholic beer and a synthetic meat platter. After gorging myself, I took one of the computer tablets and nestled into the sofa, ready for a lengthy session of research. But a majority of the news feeds were blocked, government-sponsored channels being the exception. Even those had certain sections omitted.

The day's vigorous workload had apparently gotten the blood circulating in my brain, as details of my life were gradually coming back. I spent a long period of time staring mindlessly at the wall, desperately trying to piece together my life. A childhood in New Denver. Business school at Mars University. My immigration to the Orion System on a whim to take advantage of the lack of regulation due to the Corporate Trade Wars. Still, questions of my criminal past and the cause of my memory loss remained.

Heather's voice was becoming unbearably grating as the days wore on. The tone of her voice increasingly irked me, and the mere sight of the Orion logo sometimes made my fists clench. It was possible to program a new voice module for a fee, but it would have cost me over a week of video programming entertainment, a perk with which I was unwilling to part. The Earth-based light-hearted sitcoms and reality shows of the twentieth century were my only respite from the daily grind and the only factor restraining me from stuffing myself inside the processor. Without taking my eyes off the tablet, I haphazardly tossed the plate containing the scattered remains of my vegetables and rehydrated chicken on the table.

"Please deposit your dishes in the receptacle."

"Video off. Play music."

"Please be more specific?"

"Classical."

"Do you accept the two credit charge?"

“Never mind, I’ll pick,” I snapped, scrolling through the music library on the tablet. I selected a Beethoven track, tapped the *Accept Charges* button that popped up. I cranked up the volume. The chamber filled with the pleasant sounds of the symphony.

I paced, deep in thought, my eyes darting around, attempting to detect some sort of vulnerability in my prison. Heather informed me it was ten minutes until lights out. My isolation apparently did not exempt me from the penitentiary’s strict scheduling.

I found myself lost within my daily rituals. The Eco-Chamber was designed to wear down the human spirit with a routine that would have converted even the freest of spirits into mechanical harvesting machines. At least my disorientation and memory loss had dissipated somewhat. To fulfill my need for social interaction, I began talking aloud to the old video programs. The innocence of that time, before interplanetary space travel, simply could not be replicated. The world was naive back then, oblivious to the delicate balance of the universe.

I discovered that I could project the video, for a nominal fee, onto the wall of the Eco-Chamber. I found myself squealing in delight upon discovering this unexpected luxury, the chamber filling with the glow of unadulterated television from the past. Soon I found myself squandering credits on salty popcorn doused with butter.

I must have looked just as pitiful as the zombies glued to their phones and social media at the turn of the last century. No wonder they had outlawed video in many countries on Earth in the Old Middle East. But I had an excuse: television was my only companion, excluding Heather. Human beings were social animals, even loners such as myself. Eventually, my mental faculties would breakdown, causing irrevocable psychological scarring. If that happened, survival would become a moot point as I would have become a raving lunatic with no comprehension of reality.

Theoretically, one could spend a lifetime carrying out the meticulous daily regimen. Even on this purple monstrosity of a planet known as Bulrathi, with its toxic ammonia-based atmosphere, I was perfectly healthy, strong, and conditioned to survive. Hard labor during the day, Vito-Meals and the Senso-Bed at night had forged me into a fit and

efficient working machine. I could sustain myself as long as the purple cabbage-like scrub plants were available. My ever-expanding harvest radius failed to deter me from increasing my workload to appease my now unquenchable desire for food and entertainment. I slaved each day in order to relish the handful of hours with my beloved old videos. Slave or die, indeed.

Two days later, a weather anomaly interrupted my daily labor. I was in the thralls of a harvest, pumping old Earth rock and roll music into my helmet (for a nominal fee, of course) when the alarms sounded. My visor began flashing red, and Heather beckoned me to retreat to the Eco-Chamber at once due to inclement weather approaching the area. On the horizon, I spotted what looked to be a tsunami of sand closing in. Lightning flashed atop the towering wall of sand. I was mesmerized by the amazing spectacle, in awe of the wondrous display of natural beauty, undaunted by its destructive power.

“Orion Corporation strongly advises you seek shelter immediately inside the Eco-Chamber!”

Forgoing my usual protests, I dropped everything and hurried back to wait out the storm. When it hit, the chamber began to creak and groan. Heather assured me it was adequately fortified, tested against the highest grade Bulrathi storms. She even projected a radar map of the area on the wall. Because the workday was now lost, Orion Corp graciously supplied me with my average daily credit allotment as compensation. I quickly blew them on junk food and my usual dose of television.

The following morning, I was back to work and hacking away at a particularly stubborn root. The rootstalk was tough, but I was determined to pluck the head, the largest I had ever come across. The massive vegetable would likely save me several hours of work, as the larger ones were denser, thus more valuable. After failing to slice the tether, I dug around at the base a bit more before redoubling my efforts. When I finally managed to tug it off, a bright blue insect, easily the size of my hand, scurried from the hole in a frenzied panic. The thing snapped its mandibles in my direction and sprayed a glue-like liquid at me. I lost my

balance and fell, landing mere centimeters from the tip of my shovel. The realization that I had come precariously close to piercing my suit and letting in the toxic atmosphere, jarred me from complacency. The bug scurried off, dumping sand over its body with its shovel-like feet, desperately searching for another hole to call home. When I arose, it was as if I was looking upon the formidable landscape for the first time. And with this fresh outlook came a renewed perspective towards my predicament: a sense of urgency.

I was hung up on the notion of my gradually expanding harvest radius. Eventually, I would not have enough time to harvest the minimum for survival. Perhaps the crops grew back quickly. Or maybe I was sentenced to death, and this was Orion's idea of a cruel joke. Whatever the case, Heather would not provide me any viable insight, so I had to assume I was on borrowed time. And with such a notion came not only the motivation to discover a mode of escape, but also uncover the circumstances of my incarceration. That evening as I washed up, I realized I could not recall what I looked like. Vanity, after all, had no place in such a dire circumstance.

"Is there a mirror around here?"

Suddenly, a section of the wall dissolved. In its place was the reflection of a disheveled man I barely recognized. I was of average height and build, pale and gaunt. There were big, looping bags under my eyes and a thick beard covering my face. I was ashamed at the defeated, shell of a man I had become. But there was still humanity in my eyes. Yes, there was still reason to live. It was no longer a question of slave or die but live or die. Endless days of harvesting vegetation on this toxic-laced rock would not be the end of me. In that moment, I vowed not to spend the rest of my days in solitary confinement, forgotten by society. Against all odds, I would endure.

"Mirror off!" I barked in disgust.

"Current time is twenty-two hundred, thirty hours," Heather chimed. "Lights out."

The Eco-Chamber went dark, the tablet on the table automatically powering down. The neon glow of the Orion Corp logo illuminated the room, especially the ornate O, glowing ominously, cutting through the blackness, attempting to brand my brain. I retreated to the comfort of the

Senso-Bed. The sedatives soon kicked in, and my world plunged into nothingness.

I awoke rejuvenated, determined not to let the monotony of Bulrathi beat me down. The curiosity regarding my past fueled my quest to escape. At the very least, I hoped to better understand the limits of my incarceration.

After a budget-friendly breakfast of oatmeal and Vito-Water, I headed out with the aim to both gather enough credits to accommodate my lifestyle and to venture out on an exploratory mission. I once again donned the foul-smelling bio-suit and began to gather my tools in preparation for another day of hard labor. My body had grown accustomed to the work, and my back no longer throbbed. I lugged my cart out and labored with a work ethic that would have made the CEO of Orion Corp proud.

Once I had surpassed the minimum threshold, I went back to the dome to change suits in order to replenish my oxygen stores. Because the air of Bulrathi was unbreathable, the suit contained a small Matter Producer, which converted the ammonia-based air into oxygen. But the conversion ratio ever so slightly favored the ammonia, so after exactly five hours, the air became unbreathable. This defining limitation confined me to a certain radius around the Eco-Chamber, a metaphorical ball and chain, which acted as a safeguard.

With a full oxygen readout, I picked the tallest point on the horizon, a magnificent lavender-colored mountaintop. I figured I would travel as far as I could to test the boundaries of my captivity and perhaps, by some miracle, discover something or someone that could aid in my escape. A meter in the upper right corner of my visor constantly reminded me of my ever-depleting oxygen level. I aimed to maximize every minute of that air.

I headed out at a vigorous pace, my strides stretching as far as my bulky suit would allow. Gradually, I slowed to a brisk walk. The first hour was uneventful as I kept a constant lookout for bug holes. Tripping and breaking my ankle in a hole would have been a death sentence.

“This quadrant is sparsely populated for harvesting,” Heather reminded me.

“I don’t care. Just tell me when I have two hours and twenty minutes left of juice. And keep the map and compass on the screen. Other than that, I would prefer silence to your constant badgering.”

“You are not permitted map access to this area. Your mapping functions will shut off momentarily. I have marked the location of the Eco-Chamber on your navigation grid, however, so that you may return safely.” Her wry reply grated on my nerves, making me wish I had purchased a more tolerable voice modulation.

The dreary landscape remained unchanged as I pushed farther into unknown territory. My legs began to ache, even with the decreased gravity. Without any navigation aids, the chances were slim I would find anything. Still, I was determined to thoroughly scout the territory. I would keep the Eco-Chamber at the center of my search grid, and explore the radius. Perhaps I could make it to a neighboring Eco-Chamber. At the very least, I would find solace in the fact I did everything within my ability.

Despite my improved physicality, I was struggling. Walking in a suit through sandy terrain was no easy task. Sweat began rolling down my brow, stinging my eyes. I had Heather blast my face with precious air bursts to cool down. The cooling system was taxed, and I could feel the sweat pooling at the tips of my gloves.

“There’s nothing out here!” I declared, exasperated. Heather announced I was several minutes away from my deadline. Dejected, I glanced to the horizon one final time to scan for anything even remotely resembling civilization. That’s when I saw it. Initially, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. But at second glance, I was certain the flash of light was abnormal. The bright reflection pulsed like a beacon. “Heather, zoom in on the horizon line, one o’clock!” The visor promptly zoomed to the 20x maximum. “Can’t you zoom any more, you worthless piece of garbage?” I fumed, squinting.

“Orion Corp does not deem it necessary to allow for more magnification than is currently applied.” The pulses of light were not consistent and were grouped in distinct patterns.

*Some kind of signal*, I pondered. *Morse code!* I gasped, a rush of excitement surging through me. Using a rotting cabbage stalk, I feverishly etched each letter in the sand. I hadn’t even known that I knew Morse Code. It was as if the skill was buried deep within my

subconscious, awaiting this exact moment. I spoke each letter until the message was complete. I took a few steps back to look upon the crooked words.

“Bastards of Orion,” I read aloud, ignoring the blaring alarm and flashing red warnings in my view screen. Was this a deception, or did it hold a deeper meaning?

“Per your request, this is a warning that the designated time has been reached. Orion Corp advises you turn back immediately, otherwise you could face irreparable bodily harm.”

“I wouldn’t give you the satisfaction of seeing me in pain,” I said, frustrated, glancing one last time to the horizon before turning back.

On my return trip I was elated, my imagination running wild with theories. But my rational, skeptical side reminded me there was no telling if the signal was conceived by friend or foe. How tragic it would have been to expect rescue, only to discover the signal was a ruse to execute me for retribution for prior transgressions stemming from my criminal past?

The more I repeated the phrase, the more I was convinced the message was intended strictly for me. After much contemplation, I decided I would find out the following day, forgoing my morning forage to earn credits to sustain the Eco-Chamber. Why else would someone or something be out there but to aid in my escape? It was likely the best chance I would have to get off this hellish planet and out of the clutches of the bastards of Orion for good.

The rest of the evening felt like an eternity. I felt as if I was staring at the clock, awaiting a preordained execution. Too anxious to watch my usual dose of television, I spent my time scouring the online catalogs for information on Bulrathi, and the less restricted Florae System, to prepare for the slim chance I could get off-world. I decided to leave at first light.

I managed to get some shuteye before arising to fix an oversized breakfast in the darkness. I fumbled around until my eyes adjusted to the dim light given off by the glowing Orion logo above the Senso-bed. I had no choice but to await zero six hundred hours when the chamber would

come online, allowing me access to a bio-suit for what would surely be my final trek outdoors.

When at last the chamber lights flickered on, I was sitting in quiet contemplation on the couch. I never thought I'd be so eager to don the shoddy bio-suit. I barely gave a courtesy glance to my domicile before departing.

I stepped onto the sands of Bulrathi. The double suns had yet to rise. No stars or moonlight penetrated the dense lavender atmosphere and the sky was nothing more than a deep shade of violet. I was able to make out the familiar mountain peak on the horizon line, and I headed for it. I observed my first, and hopefully last, sunrise; a majestic display of muted orange and red hues creeping over the vista as the two suns, the diminutive red one and the larger orange sphere, emerged from the skyline, blanketing the sand in a dazzling display of shimmering light.

Hours into my trek, Heather warned in her usual intonation, "Warning! Approaching the point of no return. You will not have enough oxygen to return to the Eco-Chamber if you continue on this heading." I glanced over my shoulder, staring past the glimmering purple dunes of Bulrathi, overlooking the expanse of my prison world. I contemplated my unresolved guilt. Still, I was convinced my fate was undecided.

"Sorry, Heather. I am Orion's slave no longer. I'm breaking up with both of you, for good."

Heather responded, speaking in an earnest tone that surprised me in its finality. "I'm sorry you will be leaving us, prisoner T196-A3. The Orion Corporation thanks you for your service. A recovery team will be deployed, dependent upon optimal scheduling, to recover your remains and salvage the bio-suit for future use. Upon recovery of your body, we will facilitate the processing of a death certificate and inform your next of kin."

"You'll pick up my carcass next time Orion Corp has a maintenance crew in this sector, huh? Don't want to pay to send out a team just for my crusty old corpse, I suppose."

"Due to power restrictions, I am going offline. Good-bye, prisoner T196-A3."

"Good-bye, Heather, it has been a blast."



The suit was beginning to itch as I pushed on. I felt as if those damn cabbage bugs were crawling all over me. The air was getting stale, and the stink of the suit filled my nostrils. "Quicken the pace, slow my breathing," I uttered to myself. I checked the horizon again. Had I hastily thrown my life away for a mere aberration, a vision planted by my subconscious? There was no rescue from this dreadful place. I had at least escaped the confinement of the Eco-Chamber and the evil clutches of Orion. No longer would they profit from my sweat. No more slave or die. Only die.

I trudged on, my will to survive slipping away with each passing minute. The toes of my boots dragged through the sand, every step a struggle, as my oxygen level plummeted to three percent. Succumbing to my inevitable fate, I dropped to my knees, panting. I figured I'd give one last courteous glance to the world that had done me in, so I forced my head up.

Amazingly, in the distance was the outline of a large metallic object and a small figure beside it. Was the figure waving its arms? Was I hallucinating from oxygen deprivation? Could it be a rescue party or perhaps a neighboring Eco-Chamber? Somehow I knew Orion Corp would never have overlapped the radiuses of chambers, as there were strict guidelines to the design requirements.

My strained eyes struggled to make out the object. It was a ship! My stomach dropped, and I let out an exultant cheer. The four cone-shaped cylinders on each end of the metallic monstrosity were engines. My suit's remaining emergency power began failing, the glow of my visor dimming. I gulped desperately, like a fish out of water, clamoring over the dunes as the wailing alarms and warnings from the suit bombarded my senses. The stranger, dressed in a newer model silver bio-suit, did not come to my aid, but emphatically motioned for me to hurry. With a final effort, I lunged up the last portion of the dune, collapsing in a heap at the stranger's feet.

"Hello there, friend! Out for a morning stroll?" the person asked, his voice booming through the external speakers of his sleek suit. His visor was tinted, hiding his identity. "I've been waiting for you a long time. If you'd like some air, come aboard!" Weakly, I extended my hand towards him.

Gradually, I came to. I was lying in a cot. My vision was slightly blurred, and my breathing was still labored. My body ached, and my head was throbbing, but I was elated to be alive. The stranger was sitting across the room, facing me.

“You couldn’t have shot some flares in the air or something? I’m lucky I saw you,” I rasped, forcing myself up to a seated position before running my hand through my matted hair.

“That’s the first thing you ask? You’re not curious as to who I am? That’s the old Sam I know, always so critical. Your Eco-Chamber’s sensors, or the next chamber over, would have detected such an atmospheric anomaly. But of course, you already know that since Orion’s Eco-Chamber design is almost identical to the one we proposed to the UWF. I still can’t believe Orion hacked our systems and pilfered our files.”

“So my name’s Sam?”

“Oh boy, this is going to be a long trip.”

“So they’ll notice flares but not a ship taking off, right?” I shot back skeptically, glancing around the ship’s cabin. Discarded food containers and clothes were strewn about, and the console was cluttered with junk. I focused on the man sitting on the stool. He was a stout gentleman, his round face eerily familiar.

“Well, they won’t notice *this* old scrapheap. You found this beauty in the Cenizion system. It’s powered by ancient anti-gravity technology, undetectable to the planetary system’s detection array. Sorry about the close call out there. I couldn’t get any closer to your chamber, unfortunately. This was as close as I could land and still be out of range of your Eco-Chamber’s radar. That was the loophole we were aiming to exploit. Orion Corp went cheap on the defensive installations, only allowing surveillance to reach the exact point of no return for the prisoner. What fools! Our proposal had full planetary monitoring systems. This little escape of yours will prove a critical oversight, and will surely win us the bid for the next prison planet the UWF contracts out.”

“I take it I’m in the industry.”

“Planetary appropriation and solvency business.”

“I thought so. I somehow inherently knew about Orion Corp and the Eco-Chamber’s protocols.”

“Never thought you’d be able to pull this off, I owe you that drink,” he said with a relieved chuckle. “We were hoping your memory would be fully restored by this stage, but that Zargonian elixir you bartered for really did a number on you, huh? It worked like you said, though. You downed it right before the authorities came for you, allowing you to pass the court’s mind probe, thus bypassing any conflict of interest in sentencing you to Bulrathi. We had to bribe a hell of a lot of people to create a new identity for you, lots of paperwork. We even had to get a forensics expert to alter your fingerprints. All of it to avoid raising red flags upon your sentencing.”

“You mean, I volunteered for this?” He handed me a cup. Hesitating only briefly, I drank the bluish liquid. It was refreshing, and my body immediately screamed out for more of the nourishing concoction.

“Of course! Your incarceration was of your own volition. What kind of employer and friend would I be if I forced you to do it? We could have hired a third party, but you insisted on doing the job personally instead of going with a patsy. Said you didn’t want to expand the inner circle, too risky.”

“I don’t remember any of that. Or you.”

“What do you remember?”

“Orion,” I murmured flatly. “Are we...the bastards of Orion?”

“So you *do* remember!” the odd man hollered, slapping me on the back. “We are the bastards of Orion, indeed!”

“I never should have done this. It was a mistake.” The man’s face went slack.

“We’re friends, good friends, in fact. It’ll come back to you in a few days. You not only wanted to do this, it was your suggestion. But you’re safe now. We’re going back to headquarters for some well-deserved rest, after a proper debriefing, of course. Let’s get going. I’ve spent almost a week waiting for you in this death box, eating nothing but tasteless reconstructed mush from the crappy food generator. I’m even seeing purple in my dreams.”

“Bastards of Orion? What the hell does that even mean!” I yelled, perplexed, as the man shifted to the controls, inputting the launch preparation sequence.

“Bastards of Orion was our code name for this covert mission we had devised. You repeated it to yourself constantly, hoping that when you heard it, it’d help you remember.” The antique space transport rumbled to life. Several cups and papers that were on the console precariously close to the edge tumbled down.

“If you’re telling the truth, I’ll know for sure when my memory is fully restored. I can’t wait for this all to make sense.”

“You told me stinkweed extract aids in the cognitive recuperation process. You might want to sit down and strap in. This baby is light on the stabilizers.”

I scampered off the cot. My stiff prison garb, saturated in dried sweat, crunched in protest as I shifted to the co-pilot’s chair. Hastily, I strapped myself in. The video screens flashed various data and maps. Soon a green bar flashed across the screens, and a composed female voice announced we were on autopilot. “Should be a smooth elevator ride to the upper atmosphere and off this pitiful excuse for a planet.”

“I must have a knack for whatever it is that I do, considering I put myself in this predicament.” The man swiveled his chair to face me.

“You sure do!” he replied gleefully. His genial visage was almost unbearable. “Wow, were we lucky the day you knocked on the door of GMMCO Inc. to drop off your resume! Some lucrative contracts will be coming down the pipe soon, thanks to your efforts. Since we have a few minutes to kill before we go into deep sleep, I’ll summarize what happened.”

“GMMCO? What does that stand for?”

“Galaxy Management and Maintenance Company. You’ve been with the company going on five years now. As I was saying, you had stumbled upon an ugly, grade seven planet on the auction block half a year ago. Overlooked by everyone else, you saw value, not in the land, since it was mostly uninhabitable by human standards, but in the indigenous race that lived there. You acquired a memory wipe serum from them. One so primitive, law enforcement wouldn’t pick up on it.

Once we worked through the details, you injected yourself with it, and we committed the premeditated crime. We pulled some strings in the District Attorney's office, and had you assigned to Bulrathi."

"What crime? Did I hurt anyone?" I asked worriedly.

"What? No! It was embezzlement, a white-collar crime! Our accountant fudged the numbers on a shell company we had linked to your fake identity. We transferred credits on your behalf from that company into your personal account. We then used that money to fund a defunct terrorist organization. Naturally, the government froze the accounts, so the money didn't go anywhere, but the crime was treasonous enough to get you a hard labor sentence, which was insisted upon by our appointed lawyer."

"How many laws have we broken?" I asked, flabbergasted.

"Believe me, we didn't set out to be a criminal enterprise. The circumstances left us with no alternatives. That evil, corrupt Orion Corp forced our hand. They have been engaging in industry-wide hostile takeovers and corporate sabotage for decades. They are a monopoly that everyone, including the UWF, turns a blind eye to. Anyway, you were determined to take this job, so our little entrepreneuristic company could be put on the map. Once we win the next contract, we'll have enough working capital to really get started and make a dent in this industry. The exorbitant costs of this endeavor will more than be recouped. Then once we're established, we can begin to lobby the UWF to crack down on Orion Corp."

"At least I'm off that hellhole. Maybe my life will go back to normal, whatever normal is," I said with a tentative smile. A large rumble echoed from outside. We had just cleared the atmosphere.

"Don't count on a vacation just yet. You're an equal partner now. And we have a lot of work ahead of us before we can get back at those bastards of Orion!"

My eyes drifted to a small port window. I gazed far beyond the endless expanse of space to the twinkling stars blanketed across the universe. Had I traded one prison for another? Somehow, I knew I'd never be the same. Bulrathi had changed me.

Regardless, I was certain it was my destiny to expose Orion Corp before they became too powerful even for the UWF to impede. I would be continuing this journey on my own terms, compassionate and fair, but uncompromising in my methodology. I had sacrificed enough of my morals and values. GMMCO owed me some leniency in this regard.

But for now, recuperation would have to take priority. My eyelids grew heavy. I began to nod off, visions of Bulrathi's majestic mountainous landscape flashing before me.

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*Amongst the long boxes of his comic book collection, aquariums, Civil War reenactment gear, and concert posters, published author Benjamin Cooper concocts his fantastic works of fiction. Having studied creative writing at the University of Iowa, he now aims to expose his creative mind to the world through the written word. You can find him at his home on the internet, [www.MindofBenjaminCooper.com](http://www.MindofBenjaminCooper.com)*

# **He Who Rides on the Clouds**

By TREVOR R. DENNING

***A cult has resurrected the worship of an ancient evil earth god! Can retired space cop Aleksis Leonard rescue the children being trafficked to feed the beast!?***

Humanity has built outposts, then colonies, and eventually entire cities on the Moon, Mars, and Saturn. I'd seen them all and thought I knew everything they had to offer—the good, the bad, the pure evil. Turns out I didn't know a thing. They say terraforming saved humanity. But I don't think we've changed a bit; we're just more spread out. You'd think, after all our progress, the human race would stop trying to cheat to get ahead. But you'd think wrong. I see it every day. People stealing. People manipulating. And recently, people performing human sacrifices to a prehistoric pagan god, just because they think it'll give them an angle on everyone else.

It all started for me at the poker table. After my last case, I'd had my fill of detective work, so I was playing cards in a Martian casino to fill in the gaps. It's a universal fact that wherever there are men and money, eventually there'll be gambling. The rules are forever the same, of course: the winner takes the money, and the loser gives it up. I'd been on the wrong side of the equation all night, so when the waitress delivered my last drink, I gave her a generous tip. If I was going down, I was going down in style.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Thank you.” She slipped the credit into her small dress but smiled at me. Women did that sometimes—smiled at me—even when they didn't think I had money. But they never smiled when they knew I was broke. I enjoyed her smile, because I knew it was the last one I'd see for a while.

I folded, drained my drink, and got up to go. At least my room was covered through the end of the month. If I could find a job or something, maybe I could stay next month too and get something to eat on the side. I shouldered my way through the crowded room, where things thinned a little near the bar.

“Buy you a drink, Leo?”

I stopped and looked. “Lieutenant Thatcher? What's a respectable guy like you doing in a temple to avarice like this?” Mars has everything. We've got casinos and swimming pools, four-star restaurants, you name it. It's nicer than Saturn, which is a backwater outpost in comparison, or



the Moon, which is basically a military base. What we don't have are many guys like Thatch. "Shouldn't you be in church?"

"Probably," he said. "But I wouldn't find you in one of those."

I laughed. "Not likely." I motioned for the bartender.

"Hey, Leo," he said. "How's the detective business? Must be pretty good after figuring out who did all those murders on the Moon."

His name was Johnny. Good kid, but talked too much for a bartender.

"I'm retired," I said, looking directly at Thatch so he'd get the point. "Decided to become a professional gambler instead."

"How's that going?" Johnny asked.

"Pretty good." I leaned toward the lieutenant. "You said you were buying, right?"

Johnny knew what I liked. He poured it and left.

"What do you want, Thatch?" I sipped my drink. It was cool in my mouth, burned on the way down, just the way I liked it.

He took a napkin and a pen. "There've been some kidnappings. Little kids. At every crime scene the kidnappers have left a silver coin with a picture like this on one side, and something equally weird on the other." His sketch looked like a bull-headed man on a throne, a sphinx on either side.

I folded the napkin. "Uh-huh. Why are you coming to me? You deal with it."

Something about the drawing unsettled me. I'm not a superstitious guy, but I believe there are things that get passed along through the generations. Call it the collective unconscious memory, if you like. And my collective was conscious enough to dislike the bull-man and not want him anywhere near my memory.

Thatcher shook his head. "Here's the deal. I've traced the image to a group that's set up shop on Saturn, but my jurisdiction doesn't carry off planet. You know how interplanetary law enforcement works. Something tells me those kids don't have that much time."

“No.” I stood.

He put a hand on my arm. “Listen, just see what you can find out. Officially we never spoke. But the families are offering a reward if the kids are returned safe.” He gave me another long look. “Don’t do it for me, Leo. Do it for the families.”

I glared at him. “I’ll do it for the reward.”

I took a cab to God of War, a dive bar just off the strip. The man I needed to talk to was Seamus. Nothing happened on this planet without his say so. If there was a group taking children, he’d know more than anyone. Unfortunately, that meant going where I was persona non grata.

The bouncer stopped me at the door. “Aleksis Leonard, you have a lifetime ban,” he said in a voice like tectonic plates rubbing the wrong way. “Get out of here.” His name actually was Rock, or at least that was all I had ever heard anyone call him. Not Rocky. Definitely not Rocko. Rock. It seemed unfair that he knew my real name, and I didn’t know his. Rock sat on a barstool by the door, and most people still had to tilt their heads back to look at him. “I won’t tell you twice.”

“Look, I’m not here for trouble. So let’s not have any and say we did, all right?” I tried to step past, but Rock placed a hand on my chest. Walking through a brick wall would have been easier. I sighed. “Don’t make it like that.”

Without otherwise moving, Rock said, “I told you, lifetime ban. And your life ain’t over yet.” His yellow teeth flashed, grinning at his own cleverness. For a guy like Rock, framing a joke is like framing a house: a lot of work if you aren’t used to it.

“You said it twice, Rock.” Now was clearly the time for a math lesson. I extended the steel baton I keep up my sleeve. “One”—I hit his elbow on the upswing—“and one”—I smashed it again on the way down—“is two.” Rock howled in pain with each strike. “Don’t play with words, Rock,” I said, walking by. “You’ll only get hurt.”

He growled, but let me pass.

God of War was a single room, with a bar along one wall and a few tables scattered around. Seamus and his cronies could always be found

at a table tucked into the back corner. Except tonight, of course, when they weren't. Frustrated, I turned to go and walked smack into Brittany, my ex-wife. She went to slap me on reflex, and I caught her wrist on the same. Old habits.

"Hello, dear," I said. "If you'll excuse me, I was just leaving."

Her dark, too-big eyes flashed. "Why are you here?"

"So I can leave." My brain told my feet to keep moving, but a stronger impulse made me stay.

"Aleksis," she said. Something I couldn't identify, but something I could feel, shifted inside her. "Why are you here?" Her voice had a gentleness I'd never known, and that, more than anything, got my attention.

"Let's sit down," I said, hoping Seamus might still show up. "Little kids are being kidnapped. I'm looking into it."

Brittany swayed in her seat. "How did you. . . ? No, that's stupid." She took a deep breath. "I have a confession." She was the only person on three planets and the Moon who could give me anxiety, and she was giving it generously now. "I'm here for the same reason. The exact same reason. Because my little girl was taken too." Tears filled her eyes.

Well, that was unexpected. "Who's the father, Britt? Don't lie to me. You know I'll know."

She bit her lip. "That's what I need to confess. I'm not sure. After you left, I went a little crazy, was a little irresponsible. The timing is right, though, so it's possible."

"That I could have a daughter," I said. "What is wrong with you?" I could see she was getting angry again, but I didn't care because I was already there. Before things could get out of hand, I stopped. "We can fight later. What can you tell me about the kidnappers?"

"Don't you get self-righteous," Brittany said.

Or we could also fight now.

She went on. "You walked out on me, remember? You didn't *deserve* to know whether or not she's yours."

She was trying to get a reaction, but I wouldn't play. "You hate me. Fine. That's not new, and it's not helpful. For the next few minutes, settle down, shut up, help me find them. Now, what can you tell me that I don't know?"

Glaring but quiet, she reached into her bag and pulled out an amulet, a ceramic disk on a broken leather string. "We were attacked outside my apartment by two men. I managed to pull this off one of them." She laid it on the table. Once again, I was faced with the image of the bull-headed man on his throne.

I wasn't any happier seeing him the second time.

"Do you know what it means?" Brittany said.

I picked it up and took a closer look. There was some sort of inscription under his feet. I used my comm to take a picture and launched a database scan to find a translation. "Not really, but maybe I can find out. Could you tell if both guys were wearing these, or just the one?" I turned it over. A computer chip was embedded in the back, probably a key-card.

"No," Brittany said. "I was a little preoccupied fighting for my child's life."

She was ready to unleash more, but just then my comm pinged.

"It's Ugaritic," I said, "an extinct language from the twelfth century BC. Very old. Translated, it means 'He Who Rides on the Clouds.'" I shrugged. It meant nothing to me.

Brittany had cooled down while I read the translation. "Where do you suppose Seamus is?"

"We don't need him," I said. "This symbol belongs to a cult with a temple on Saturn. Just got to find a way to get there." I wondered if Thatcher could pull some strings to find me a ticket.

Brittany had another idea. "I overheard that group of guys over there," she indicated some men at the bar who might as well have had "smuggler" tattooed on their foreheads, "say they're leaving for Saturn tonight." She grinned. "I'll persuade them to take us along."

Brittany's powers of persuasion were frightening in their efficacy. Last I knew, she was making a killing in sales. You work on commission when no one can tell you no. She could do things with her eyes, or the tone of her voice, that made sane people do crazy things. Like, for example, marry her. I had no doubt that with the right amount of money and her deadly charm, those smugglers would take her anywhere she wanted to go. But I had my objections.

"You're not coming," I said.

A few hours later, we boarded a spaceship bound for Saturn. Traveling between planets was supposed to be a process. Passports. Flight manifests. Documentation. The government likes to keep track of us, with most people willing to play by the rules. I'm usually one of them. Brittany's not. And neither was our captain, a big man with greedy eyes. I was surprised when he didn't haggle over the price of getting us off planet, but I wasn't complaining either. He'd simply counted our credit chips, pushing them from one hand to the other with his thumbs, then back again. Having some idea of the going rate, I knew Brittany had got us a deal. I'd rarely known her not to get what she wanted from anyone, not just me. It was the reason I'd finally just walked out on her. Call me a coward if you want. You weren't there.

All the bunks were taken by the crew, but they had a pallet on the floor in the cargo area with blankets and pillows. Something told me these guys smuggled people often. Thankfully, the entire ship was outfitted with an artificial daylight replication system. Ambient lights got brighter and darker according to the cycle of the destination planet. Jet lag is bad, but spaceship lag is worse.

"What are you going to do when we get back?" Brittany made herself comfortable on the bed. We'd barely spoken since leaving the bar. From the time we settled on the price to the time the ship left, we had less than an hour to get ready. It was a scramble to gather what we needed, and I hoped I hadn't forgotten anything.

"I dunno." I glared at the brown shipping containers that formed our walls. "Maybe get a paternity test. Find out if I have a kid."

"Oh, now you want to be involved?"

“How could I be involved when I didn’t know?”

“You chose that when you walked out. If you’d been around, maybe none of this would have happened.” She was choking back tears. “Now I may never see her again.”

“And I’ve never seen her. Never had the chance. Because of you.” I spat out the words. Marrying Brittany had been one of the bigger mistakes of my life. Sometimes though, when the night was quiet and the memories came back, I wondered if splitting up had been the biggest one. Right then, I wanted to apologize. I wanted to say worse things. I wanted to rehash things that had been said too many times already, too.

“You haven’t even told me her name yet,” I said instead.

“Karina.”

“Karina,” I said to the growing darkness.

We didn’t speak again for a long time.

“Hey,” she said. It was so dark now I couldn’t see her. “I’ve missed you.” She was telling the truth.

“I’ve missed you too, Britt.”

Eventually, we fell asleep.

The trip to Saturn took days, which when you consider the distance is a miracle. The way it all works is beyond me and my simple understanding. I’m no rocket scientist. While we waited to get there, I watched the crew. They didn’t speak to us; we didn’t speak to them. Even at meals where we all sat together at a long table in the galley, it was just grunting and chewing. The smugglers were clearly not to fraternize with the smugglees.

I stretched out on the pallet and studied an aerial view of the temple and surrounding area on a computer tablet. Only a small part of the gas giant had been terraformed, and there was only one isolationist cult in residence, so it wasn’t hard to find. Brittany had somehow gotten the satellite scans from one of the crewmen, though with her, it was generally best not to ask questions. Like, where she went when she

wasn't around. Or, where did she get that bottle of liquor she was waving in my face.

"Where did you get that bottle of liquor you're waving in my face?"

She giggled. "A gift from the captain on our shusess . . . shusessival . . ." She screwed up her face in concentration, looking for an easier word. "On our good voyage." Then she half fell on the pallet next to me, draping her leg across mine. I ignored her.

"Fine, look at this with me," I said. "The compound only has one entrance. Here." As I pointed, Brittany poked a finger in my ear. "Stop that. They have guard towers here, here, and—cut it out." I pushed her hand away from my face. "But they've got a blind spot in this area." My voice went up as her hand went down where it didn't belong.

"You're so tense," Brittany said in my face. "Have a drink." She tried to press the bottle between my lips, missed, and jammed it under my nose. "Oops."

It wasn't that I wasn't tempted. Or interested. I just knew everything she was suggesting was a bad idea. She wasn't quite as powerfully persuasive when she was drunk. Or not in her usual way, at least. I pressed on with my analysis of the compound, knowing full well she wouldn't remember a thing.

"It's bigger than I thought," I said.

"That's what she said," she said.

"So they'll have more guards and firepower than we can fight. Once we land, we can rent a cruiser and hide out in the mountains until dark. This must be their temple—and are you even paying attention?" She wasn't, because now she was straddling me and couldn't even see the screen. "We're landing tomorrow and need to focus."

Brittany swiveled her hips in a very interesting and familiar way. Taking the tablet out of my hands, she set it aside. She leaned over me, so her hair draped to either side of my face. "Enough work, Aleksis. Let it go and clear your head."

The look in her eyes and the smell of her hair reminded me of how much I'd missed her. I took the bottle. "This will clear my head?"

“Yes.” She laughed.

“This right here? You promise it will clear my head?”

“Uh-huh.” She gently helped me lift it to my lips.

I don’t remember much after that.

There’s an alarm that goes off when a ship is entering the atmosphere. It’s loud and obnoxious, but when there aren’t any windows and no one is talking, it’s good to know when to buckle up. This time there was no alarm. The ship landed and we never knew.

I woke up to a boot in my stomach. Bleary-eyed, I looked around. The cargo bay door was open, and real daylight after days of artificial stung my eyes. It was possible I was also a little hungover. Several men with blasters were standing around, and all those blasters were pointing at me. At first, I thought the authorities had caught us. Then I saw the captain counting credits, pushing them back and forth from one palm to the other with his thumbs just like before.

Brittany was somehow still asleep. I gave her a nudge. “Time to get up.” My voice echoed in my head.

The guys with the blasters didn’t say anything. When I got to my feet, though, I could see they were all wearing the same kind of amulet Brittany had taken off the kidnapper. How the captain had known to sell us out to them was another mystery for another time, but I promised myself that if I got out of this in one piece, I’d figure it out.

They pushed us toward a cargo truck. My eyes were still adjusting to the sun, and it felt like a swarm of angry bees was buzzing in my head. I was woozy with the pain, the light, and from getting up too fast. Consequently, I tripped over my feet and fell into the dust.

“Watch where you’re going,” one of the guards said. “We got a schedule to keep.”

Brittany bent to help me up. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” I said, even though I wasn’t. As I stood, I whipped out my baton from my sleeve and slammed one of the guards right in the throat. It was a lucky strike, for me. Not so much for the other guy, who writhed in the



dirt choking on his own windpipe. The other guards stood frozen, shocked. Amateurs. Pros always expect a fight, even when the numbers are on their side. “Britt, run!” I screamed, swinging drunkenly at everyone else.

She must have seen I was in trouble because she grabbed my free arm and pulled me out of the scuffle toward a group of buildings. A sizzling blast of energy made my hair stand on end. She fell. She fell hard. And she didn’t move or make a sound.

“No,” I moaned, falling to my knees, the fight going out of me completely.

They put us in the back of the truck. Brittany and the still-gasping guard I’d injured lay on the floor, while another kept an eye on me. I couldn’t tell if Brittany was alive or dead.

“What did you hit her with?” I said. No answer. “What did you do to her, you bastards?”

The guard hit me in the face with an open hand, and bolts of pain flashed through my head. I couldn’t say anything after that. It was a bumpy, hellish ride.

We drove for hours, never stopping. This part of Saturn was mostly flat and dry, minimally terraformed. As my vision wavered in and out, I tried to identify anything—buildings, landmarks—that might be useful later. I never did. But I couldn’t let myself look at Brittany, who remained motionless at my feet, barely breathing. What if my stupidity had gotten her killed? She was a mother now, the consequences of our actions bigger than I could comprehend.

Finally we stopped, and the guards in the cab shouted. A metal gate creaked on dirty hinges, and soon we were moving again. There was more to see once we were inside the compound. I had a frame of reference from studying the aerial map and could orient myself somewhat. Unfortunately, the map couldn’t do justice to the number of guys with guns. It was hopeless.

I was taken into one of the only brick buildings. Nice of them to have a solid jail, if nothing else. Inside, I had an empty bucket, a small pan of water, and a single blanket. It looked more like something out of a black-and-white western than anything you’d expect to see on a frontier planet.

The empty bucket wasn't empty for long. I didn't remember throwing up ever burning so much.

"Brittany," I said, even though she wasn't there, "this is the last time I let you make travel arrangements."

Another wave of nausea rocked me, and I curled up on my side so I wouldn't drown in my own vomit when I passed out. And then I passed out. In my delirium, the bull-headed man and his sphinxes pursued me. No matter where I went, they were there, making unholy sounds that sent me into convulsions of terror. On some level, I knew it wasn't real, and I was dully aware of the racking pain in my head that kept me pinned in the dreamscape.

"Easy now," a female voice said, just above a whisper. "The medicine is working already. Just let it work."

"Brittany?" I said, my mouth full of imaginary thistles. I coughed.

"Just relax," the woman said. My head was in her lap, and we were still in the jail cell. "The medicine is working quickly now. You can sit up in a moment. Slowly." Her voice was soothing, with a hint of a smile in it. Brittany's voice had never been this nice. Brittany had never cradled my head like—

Brittany.

I jolted upright.

Big mistake. The world tilted and I momentarily saw two women in front of me before they blurred back into one.

"Or you can do that." The woman was young, early twenties at best, but the look on her face said she was used to having her good advice ignored. "You should have listened to me." She went on, talking fast. "My name is Nora. I'm a nurse. I had to bribe the guard to let me see to you, so keep your voice down. Once they know you're awake, they'll make me leave."

"I gotta go," I said.

"Hold still." She shone a light in my eyes. "Do you have any drug allergies?"

I batted the light away. “No. What? Yeah, I’m allergic to a sedative. Desy . . . ? Desy, uh—”

“Desydexmedadine?”

“Sure.”

“Could someone have slipped you some, maybe in alcohol?”

It didn’t take a detective to figure it out. When Brittany had asked for the map, they knew where we were going. The captain sold us out and drugged us to make taking us easier. I’d cut off his thumbs for that. “Yeah.”

Nora dug through a medkit and unwrapped a syringe. “You’re lucky you woke up at all. Here, give me your arm. This will help counter the drug reaction.” She slid the needle in and out of the vein with practiced ease.

“What about Brittany? She had some too.”

“Unless she’s also allergic, it probably didn’t affect her as much.”

“Sure, but she also got shot.” That guilt I’d felt earlier came creeping back. “Which doesn’t tend to help being drugged, or anything else.”

“They took her to the infirmary. I’m sorry, that’s all I know.”

Pain still threatened to flare up with my every move, and panic gnawed at the back of my brain. I took a moment to get things under control. Breathe in. Breathe out. “Do you know if she’s alive? Is she okay?”

“I don’t know,” Nora said, sympathy her eyes. She was telling the truth, but I needed more.

“How do you not know? Aren’t you a nurse? Don’t you work in the infirmary?”

The young woman waited for me to calm myself before she spoke. “I’m a nurse, yes. But not in the infirmary. And not like you think, though my background is in medicine.” Nora was talking around something, and I didn’t have time. I could feel myself tensing up, but when I did, the pain came back, and I swayed, thankful I was still on the floor. Didn’t have as far to fall that way. “Careful.” Nora put a steadying hand on my shoulder.

“Why don’t we start with what you know,” I said, though it strained my patience. “From there, maybe you can tell me who you are, Nurse Nora.”

She nodded. “They call this place Hammon, after an ancient city on Earth. Ages ago the people there worshipped a god associated with the planet Saturn. The leader of this place, Ben Moloch, has convinced his followers this same god is present here. If the ancient ritual is performed, he says, then the god will appear in physical form and bless those present with knowledge, and wealth, and power.”

“The hell?” I wondered how scrambled my head really was. “You don’t talk as if you’re one of them, though.”

“No. I practice an ancient religion as well, but one that does not require child sacrifice. Few on Saturn worship anything. Fewer still revere this monster, this false god. I and the other two nurses, who are here to care for the nine children, are prisoners just as you are.”

“Did you say child sacrifice?” I thought I was going to be sick again, and it had nothing to do with my head.

“Ben Moloch is an evil man,” Nora said, “but few can see through him. Though he promises great things to the faithful, his only interest is for himself. Recently he murdered the priest and declared himself high priest. According to him, only the blood of an innocent is pure enough to summon the god. Young children are guaranteed innocent, when an adult may not be pure enough to satisfy.”

My head was clearing, or maybe I was getting used to agonizing pain. Nora had brought some meal bars and fresh water along with the medicine. All I needed was a hot shower, and I’d feel halfway human again. Although I figured it would take more than some food and a shower to prepare me for getting myself, Brittany, nine babies, and three nurses out of an armed compound.

I said, “How much time do we have to work with before the sacrifice?” I’m no great strategist. Poker is about my limit, and we know how that goes.

“Not enough,” the young woman said, defeat in her voice. “It’s tonight. I had hoped you could help us escape with the little ones. But the more I think about it, the more impossible it seems.”

“Hey, now, let’s not give up yet. Are the other nurses on board with the escape?”

She nodded.

“That’s good. So we’ve got you, me,” I paused, afraid, “Brittany, and two others. At least. That’s five against—how many would you say?”

“Many.”

“Hey!” A guard interrupted us, making us jump. “Visiting time is over. Get out of here, Nora. They need you back in the nursery.”

The young woman scrambled to her feet, and I carefully stood up beside her. “It was nice to meet you.” She took my hands in what looked like a warm gesture, slipping something between us, which I neatly palmed. “I hope we meet again, if not in this world, then in the next.”

She and the guard left, and I was alone in the back of the building. I opened my hand to see that she’d given me her medallion. Instead of the bull-headed man and his sphinxes, there was a lioness-headed woman with a crescent moon over her head. I didn’t know what to think of that, but the same key-card chip was in the back. Obviously it didn’t work in the jail, but Nora must have thought it would be useful.

Again the door opened, and again the guard came in. But this time, he had another prisoner.

“Brittany.” Relief, a medicine more healing than anything Nora could ever find, flooded through me. The guard pushed her into the cell, and we embraced. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“Try again,” she said. Her voice was weak, but she held me tight.

We stepped apart. The black leggings, top, and jacket she’d worn on our trip were gone, replaced by a purple shift, tied at her waist with a white cord. “What’s with the new outfit?”

Brittany glared down at herself. “Better than the hospital gown I had on when I woke up. From what I saw on my walk over here from the infirmary, this is what all stylish cult women are wearing this season.”

“Way to follow the latest trends.”

“Shut up.”

I hated to admit it, but it was good to have her back. “What else did you see?”

She briefly described the layout of the compound. Except for the jail, which was probably here first, all the buildings were cheaply made and designed to be temporary. “The temple is where you thought it was,” she said, surprising me that she remembered. “It’s a stone monstrosity made to look ancient, and there’s a steady stream of purple people going in and out.”

“Huh, I wonder what’s going on in there.”

“Sex.”

“Excuse me?”

Brittany rolled her eyes. “It’s a cult, dummy. What do you think they’re doing? Having a tea party?” She was trying to make herself feel better with jokes, but it wasn’t working. “I managed to get my guard to talk on the way over. He explained that they worship fertility gods, and having sex in the temple gets the psychic energy up for the main event. Any idea what that is?”

“Sex? No, I’m as pure as the driven snow.”

She gave me a look. “My jokes are funny because they’re clever *and* helpful. You’re just being difficult.”

I was being difficult, because the answer was difficult, and I wanted to spare Brittany from it for as long as I could. It seemed unreal. Yet here we were, in a jail cell, Brittany in a purple dress, me holding an amulet with a pagan goddess on the front and a computer chip in the back. This whole story belonged in the dusty pages of occult history. “The main event,” I said, growing serious. “Brittany, they’re going to sacrifice the children.”

It’s a good thing the cell was small, and she was standing by the wall, because she needed the support to lower herself to the floor. “Oh, no. My baby.”

I knelt with her. “We’re not going to let that happen.” You shouldn’t make promises you don’t know you can keep. But sometimes you do

anyway. “We’re going to figure this out. A bunch of crazy lunatics against you and me? They don’t stand a chance.”

Waiting is its own special hell, but there was nothing else we could do. Britt took my hand, and we sat on the floor with worry gnawing on our every thought. Finally, our guard reappeared at the door. “Move,” he said. “Everyone must be present for the ceremony.”

He led us to the temple. The intricately carved door was locked on the inside, and we had to wait for someone to let us in. Logically, I knew it had all been manufactured to look prehistoric in this eternally empty place. Everything was about as real as an amusement park haunted house. Like an amusement park, if the intention was to make you feel you were somewhere else, it worked. Unlike a haunted house, I wasn’t sure demons weren’t real.

“My God,” Brittany whispered.

“I hope not.” I gazed up at the idol before us: the bull-headed man on his throne, a sphinx on either side. This time he was four times bigger than life, overwhelming the space. At his feet sat an altar filled with burning hot coals, to his left were nine cribs with one crying child in each. The implication was clear.

Brittany saw the cribs about the same time I did. “No. No, no, no. You monsters!” She took a step forward, but her guard pulled her back. “Let me go,” Brittany snarled, twisting away and trying to stomp down on her captor’s instep. She missed, and the guard brought his blaster down on her head with a crack. Brittany stumbled, and a trickle of blood started at her hairline and ran down the side of her face. She stopped, but she wasn’t finished.

Besides the guards and us, there were the worshippers kneeling before the idol. Like Brittany, all the worshippers were dressed in identical purple robes and barefooted. I could sense more than hear them murmuring in a low, monotone buzz, and though I couldn’t understand the words, I assumed they were in some dead tongue. Before us was a scene that might have existed in the time of Solomon.

The priest, Ben Moloch, and the priestess, dressed in white, entered from either side of the temple cavern. He was old, distinguished. She

was young and beautiful. A quiet interrupted only by the cries of the children spread across the room. It made me sick. The priest and priestess began a new chant in the same weird language, their voices blending in an eerie pitch, my insides recoiling. The other cultists sat up and joined in, and soon the space rang with the incantation.

And nothing happened.

So they got louder. Louder. *Louder!* When still nothing happened, Ben Moloch tore the thin material of his robe, and the priestess did the same. They let their arms go limp and swung them, writhing their bodies in a hideous dance, striking themselves hard enough to welt their pale flesh. But not a drop of blood was shed. I realized Ben Moloch really believed in what he was doing. This wasn't just a performance put on for his followers. The monster truly expected his god to show up and reward him. The people took up ropes and sticks or simply used their fists to pound their heads. Shouts of pain, ecstasy, or something worse punctuated their chanting.

The cacophony hurt my head. Nora stood with the other nurses near the cribs, which had wagon-like wheels. Even from where we stood, I could see a toddler with Brittany's thick hair and too-big eyes. Nora was watching me, hoping I would do something.

Just when I thought the crowd couldn't get any louder, it did. Their god was appearing before the worshippers to accept a terrible sacrifice, and everywhere people shrieked in adoration or abject terror. A cloud descended from the temple ceiling as if from the sky and through the stone walls, summoned by the people's cries. I got that nightmarish feeling I had the first time I saw the picture of the bull-headed man called He Who Rides on the Clouds.

Given the title, this mist was probably a really bad sign.

Sometimes you just can't make things worse. Move or don't. Either way, you might be screwed, but if you don't try, you're done. I'd lost my baton when they'd captured us, but I still had me. A well-placed foot or elbow can be every bit as destructive as a weapon. I twisted at the hips and lifted my elbow, smashing into the side of my guard's head with a satisfying crack. Surprised and half-blind, he hardly resisted when I grabbed his blaster and jerked it up into his jaw with teeth-shattering



force. He went down, but I kept the blaster, shooting the nearest guard twice in the body, once in the head. One-two, three.

“Get the kids,” I said to Britt. “The nurses will help you. Go!”

The guards were obviously untrained and didn’t know how to react to someone shooting back. Self-preservation is a difficult instinct to overcome. That was their problem, not mine. I backed my way to the door, taking shots at anyone who even looked at Brittany. I hit a few.

The ecstatic revelers before the altar never noticed. The floor trembled, only exciting them further and making it harder for me to shoot with any accuracy.

An otherworldly wail screamed through the mist, as if it came from the cloud itself, growing denser as the sound grew louder. I was at the door now but had lost sight of Brittany, the nurses, and nearly everything else. I fished out my key-card. Above the noise, weapons blasted from their general direction, and the clouds flashed as if filled with lightning. “Come on, come on,” I said in uncertain prayer.

The fog parted like a gauzy veil as Brittany burst through. Dried blood covered half her face. In one arm, she carried her child, in the other, she balanced a blaster. She fired the blaster left and right, clearing her path, and it was her shooting that lit up the clouds. The nurses stumbled along in her wake, cribs in tow, the ground shaking with such violence I wasn’t sure they’d make it. I was screaming, “Let’s go! Hurry!”

I looked at each of their faces as they rushed past me out the door. “We’re missing a nurse. Where’s Nora?”

Brittany was the only one who stopped to look back. I doubt the others even heard me in their mad panic to escape. “We must have lost her back there.” She tried to push Karina into my arms. “I’ll go back.”

“No.” I stopped her. “Keep everyone together.”

For once, she didn’t argue. “Be safe,” she said, and darted through the door.

I ran into the mist, determined to find Nora. Amid the screams and the thunder of the trembling temple, a woman’s voice cried, “Leo, Leo!”

“Nora!” I called back. I pushed my way through the crowd. Where was she? With a sick feeling, I moved toward the idol and the altar. Then I saw her. The priestess held Nora from behind, a handful of the young nurse’s hair clenched in her fist. To her exposed throat, Ben Moloch pressed a black dagger. Though I still had the blaster, I couldn’t shoot for fear of hitting Nora.

“Leo, go!” she cried. She hadn’t been calling me to come save her, she was willingly sacrificing herself so we could escape. I didn’t know her well. We’d only spoken for a few moments. But if she was as innocent as I believed, her blood might be good enough for the god. Not as pure as that of an infant, but who knew how particular these ancient demons were? I sure as hell didn’t.

While I stood frozen, Nora pulled a syringe from her pocket and stabbed it into Ben Moloch’s neck, tearing flesh. She stabbed until the needle broke. She must have struck an artery, because hot blood sprayed from the wound, all over Nora and the priestess. And the altar. His wicked blood, an unwilling offering driven by a selfish heart, was not what this god desired. The air turned cold, and the walls began to shake.

Across the distance, Nora looked into my eyes. Hers were sad, but she smiled as she mouthed, “Go.” Behind her, the altar crumbled. She and the priestess fell back into the mist and dust, lost to sight. There was nothing else for me to do. I turned and ran. Parts of the temple rained down as the floor collapsed behind me. Somehow the key-card still worked, and I fell through the door.

Brittany had everyone loaded into a cargo truck like the one we’d arrived in. My feet were barely off the ground before she hit the accelerator, the force of our takeoff pressing me into the seat. Gravel flew as we raced away from the implosion. Leaning my head out the window, I saw the compound falling into the void as the very surface of the planet gave way. We crashed through the metal gate and into the Saturn desert.

He Who Rides on the Clouds fell to the planet’s core, cast to the dust of the alien world.

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*Generally reluctant to leave town, Trevor R. Denning writes stories about people overcoming fantastic difficulties, sometimes across the vast*

*reaches of space and often in their own backyards. You can follow him on Twitter @TrevorRDenning*



# **To Rest Among the Stars**

By SU-RA-U

*It is the most dangerous job in the galaxy—hunting space dragons in the ether! But the humans who risk life and limb to do so are what make space travel possible!*

Shreya was floating among the stars: a lonely figure reclining on a chair and sailing unprotected along the celestial currents that coursed through the inky, thick oceans of space. She possessed no ship, spacesuit, force field, or life-preserving membrane to shield her from the cool, naked immensity of the black void that surrounded her. Her only companions were the sparkles of starlight shining from the alien constellations that decorated this sector of the cosmos—a cosmos that, because of its sheer size and unquantifiable mystery, served as the source of the serenity that effortlessly blanketed her senses.

Shreya, soothed by the infinity all around, had been close to fading off into much-needed slumber when a jarring knock disturbed the tranquility of her setting. She emerged from the twilight of her consciousness and called out that the door was open. A rectangular block of harsh light shone into the room as part of the black sky slid away to reveal a man standing in a hallway.

“Hello, Jay,” Shreya said lazily as she turned on to her side and faced the captain of the ship. “Come on in, and do me a favor and turn off the star-scene.”

The door slid shut behind Jay as he stepped into the room and walked to the opposite wall. He pressed a switch and the VR hologram disappeared, revealing a spartanly furnished, windowless room dimly lit by a ceiling light that had automatically turned on.

“So, I guess you like my gift?”

“Yeah, a lot; it really helps me sleep,” answered Shreya, “especially when I have no one to sleep with.”

Jay grinned as he watched Shreya’s lips angle into a playful smile. However, he noticed that the cheerfulness on her lips could not completely dispel the weariness that had cast a pall over her countenance. The sympathy he felt turned his mind nostalgically towards their last R&R break on Nanda, a space station orbiting Indus 3. It was there that he had found the “star-making” device in a curio shop selling antique and obsolete tech from the various civilizations of the Ky-Too galaxy. Their ship, *The Tsuiseki*—or the tin can as the crew commonly referred to it—had made one of its regular stops at Nanda to unload its

cargo, stock up on supplies, and make any repairs (usually the bare minimum) to keep the ship functional.

Jay and Shreya, after the standard detoxification and repressurization protocol, had walked first side-by-side and then arm-in-arm through the streets of Nanda, enjoying the freedom that came from escaping for a brief period the cramped, stuffy confines of their ship.

The curio shop had been located on the outskirts of the station's sprawling shopping bazaar, and Jay on a whim had bought the device as a gift for Shreya. They had then meandered through the station's streets and alleys before finding a small room in a quiet part of Nanda, away from the debauchery most of the hunters and traders indulged in during their short respite from the drudgery of space. It was in this room that Jay and Shreya had made love for the first time—made love under stars that had recaptured the night sky over Shreya's home planet millions of light-years away.

"We haven't had much time together since Nanda, have we?" asked Jay as Shreya felt his eyes following the outline of her figure under the diffuse light that shone down upon her.

"Well, we're on this tin can to work, not enjoy ourselves," replied Shreya with an air of wistfulness.

Jay walked to her side and knelt on the ground. He put his hands through Shreya's long, black hair, and then, with a tight grip on her locks, pulled her head towards his so he could bestow a kiss upon her lips.

Shreya's skin tingled as Jay whispered in her ear, but she was too worldly to lose her composure over a kiss and some sweet words, no matter how endearing or passionate they were. Being in a playful mood, she asked with a smirk on her face, "What's with the kiss? You're setting me up for some bad news, aren't you?"

"So you're saying that was a bad-news kiss? No chance of it being a good-news kiss?"

"If it was a good-news kiss your hand wouldn't have been only in my hair."

Jay's brief but affectionate laughter filled the room and echoed off its metallic walls. It was at such moments that Shreya loved him the most—

those moments when his mood was good-humored and jocular, and his demeanor laid-back and carefree. She couldn't help but remember how the initial touch of attraction towards him had occurred when she had first witnessed the booming baritone of his voice, the friendly kindness of his smile, and the mischievous gleam of his eyes as he had generously laughed at a joke by a lowly crewman.

These thoughts, however, quickly faded away when Shreya noticed Jay's face lose its mirth and become withdrawn and serious. He put his fingers through her hair again, this time gently, and said, "I'm sorry, but there *is* some bad news. You're not going to have any time to rest."

"What is it? It can't be another dragon?"

"Eko detected one about an hour ago in the ether. I haven't seen anything like this. We could break the Guild's record of 40 in eight months," said Jay referring to the Earthly measure of time still used by most humans in space despite the destruction of their ancestral planet of origin.

"Eight months? At this rate, we'll reach our quota in five."

"There's some kind of mighty pocket of dragon activity we've hit on. I've never seen anything like it."

Shreya sat up with her head down, back hunched, and her forearms upon her knee. "God, I need some rest. My guess is we all do." She stretched her arms out as she let out a big yawn. "But at least this will be a short tour—hopefully."

Jay stood up straight, took her by the shoulders, and tenderly raised her up. "I wish you had some time to rest, Shreya. I really do. Just take your time, okay, and freshen yourself up. When you're ready, meet me in the hangar."

"In the hangar? Did your number come up?" asked Shreya, mildly concerned.

"No. Perez's sick and Wan's exhausted."

"But it's not your responsibility. Your number hasn't come up."

"I'll get a bigger bonus from the firm. It's okay."



“I don’t care about the bonus. I want you to be safe, Jay.”

Jay smiled and replied, “Just get ready and meet me in the hangar.” He kissed Shreya again and walked out of her cabin.

Shreya took a cold shower, dressed, and then popped some DZ’s to counteract the drowsiness that had started to assault her eyelids.

She made her way to the bottom level and entered a massive hangar where two hunting crafts were receiving their final maintenance check. Jay was standing by one of the crafts discussing something with Dixit, while Rick was making a last-minute inspection of the landing gear. As Shreya walked towards them, she saw Jay and Dixit shake hands before and Dixit turned and headed towards his own vessel. Rick was the first to notice Shreya and greeted her with a raised hand.

“Hello Shreya, what are you doing down here? Shouldn’t you be on the bridge?”

“I should be in bed sleeping, to tell you the truth. I just thought I’d come down and see Jay off.”

Rick threw Jay a knowing glance.

The glance did not escape Shreya’s attention. With raised eyebrows and a tilt of the head, she asked, “What are *you* doing down here, Rick? Shouldn’t you be in the engine room?”

“I asked him to come down,” said Jay as he joined them. “I wanted someone to check the landing gear. It seems to be a little erratic.”

“What did the mechanics say?”

“They’ve looked at it. Said it was nothing to worry about, but I wanted a second opinion.”

“Captain’s privilege to drag me out of the engine room. I’m just his humble servant,” said Rick in jest. “Anyway, I think it should be okay for a couple more hunts. But then we’ll have to replace the booster regulators.”

Rick wiped his hands on a rag and added, “Well it’s about time I got back to my day job,” and with an exaggerated, stiff salute, he sarcastically asked, “Do I have your permission, sir?” His hand came

down, and body relaxed as he added, “Take care of yourself out there. I mean it, Jay!”

Jay gave him a reassuring nod. Rick turned and walked away with the swagger of a man confident that he knew every inch of *The Tsuiseki* better than any man or woman in the entire fleet.

Jay watched Rick exit the hangar, but Shreya’s attention was focused on Jay’s hunting craft.

“Are you sure the landing gear’s safe?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. It’ll probably be a little bumpy when I take off and land, but that’s about it.”

Shreya’s body bristled at the knowledge that they were low on spare parts. “Cro-GL1 must be the cheapest company in this galaxy.”

“They’re all cheap, and we’re all expendable.”

“Don’t talk that way, Jay. I want you back safe, you hear?”

“You know how many times I’ve done this,” said Jay confidently. “I’ll be back safe. We’ll be enjoying the extra credits on Nanda—just you and me—before you know it. Trust me.” Jay grabbed hold of Shreya’s right hand and gave it a squeeze.

Shreya was touched by this tender expression of reassurance. She looked at his face and spent a moment to take in his features: his sharp chin and high cheekbones, his black mustache and hair, the small scar right above his hairline, and the dreamy brown eyes that were now directed at her. Shreya lovingly squeezed his hand back.

He left her side, turned and smiled, and then entered his craft. Shreya walked to the exit but felt compelled at the doorway to turn around and face the hangar.

It was here, only a few hours ago, that she and her team had finished the laborious process they had been hired to do: butchering the dragon and mining all that was precious from its carcass. The entire process usually took from 24 to 26 hours, with her team of twenty divided into two overlapping shifts of 20 hours each. However, it was her responsibility as second-in-command to oversee both teams during the entire process (thereby making DZ’s a necessity).

Her team's first priority was to extract the dragon's blood—which went by the name *LXR* among those who spoke with a human tongue. It was the most prized commodity procured from the dragon hunt and one of the most valuable substances in the universe. It was the magic that cheaply fueled a ship past the speed of light and pushed it into the ether, thus making large-scale interstellar travel possible; a ship could travel thousands of light-years in a matter of minutes by entering the ether at one point then exiting at another.

The profits were enormous, which is why the various alien species who funded the hunt, through a confederation of companies known as the Guild, were the universe's richest beings and thus conferred the status of guild-lords by humans.

The dragon hunt was also the sole reason humans had not been completely exterminated. Though most intelligent life in the cosmos perceived them as an invasive and fast-breeding form of vermin, humans were luckily deemed by the guild-lords to be one of the few species perfectly suited to hunt dragons, in part due to their hardiness and ability to adapt to life in space, their moderate levels of intelligence, their propensity for violence, and their subservience to authority, but for the most part because they were incredibly cheap.

Shreya's team of cheap laborers would begin their work after the dragon had been killed and the carcass had been towed by the two hunter crafts into the hangar. They would hoist the dragon upside down up by its feet and make two incisions on both sides of the beast's neck. Suction pipes would be attached to the cuts—which considering the toughness of the skin closely resembled holes bored into the side of a rock face—and all of the beast's blood would be pumped out into vats where an anticoagulant was added before it was transferred to the processor. The blood, which had the look and consistency of black sludge, was then purified so it could be preserved in large barrels for the remainder of the hunt.

However, the most time-consuming post-hunt process, due to the toughness of its hide, was the skinning of the dragon to extract its scales. A dragon's scales were considered precious stones and possessed such value that they were commonly used as dowry by the cosmic aristocracy or demanded as ransom by space brigands.

Other valuable products were also extracted from the dragon carcass. The brain, for example, was considered an expensive but appetizing delicacy by the political and economic elites who ruled over the universe. Another organ, whose purpose scientists had not been able to determine (some thought it analogous to the gall bladder) was highly sought after in the medical trade for its anti-inflammatory properties.

Finally, the feet were removed and the flesh burnt off so the talons could be collected. The talons were sold to industrial plants where they were ground up and added as a thickener to lacquers and paints or as a sweetener to ice cream—the only human invention besides creative accounting that had been embraced by other life forms in the universe.

What remained of the carcass, mostly the flesh and the skeleton, was ejected from the hangar into the ether. If the meat or the bones had been edible, they certainly would have been monetized by the Guild. However, the bones were too hard, and the meat itself was poisonous to almost all the inhabitants of the known universe. Xerxans and Cadrills were exceptions, but Xerxans were economically underdeveloped and thus too poor to constitute a profitable market, while Cadrills, though highly advanced, were a bartering species averse to trading in currency.

Though a ship's crew received a minuscule fraction of the wealth generated by the lucrative trade in dragon parts, their remuneration was considerable by human standards. Yet, they faced a casualty rate that was needlessly high, due in most part to the stinginess of the guild-lords. Worker safety was substandard and safety gear was minimal; slipping on liquids, falling into vats, and sliding off carcasses were common hazards; crewmembers could be crushed under the immense weight of the dragon when the rig holding the carcass snapped; the fat of the dragon was highly corrosive and could eat through flesh and bone in a matter of seconds; the chemicals used to process the blood were toxic; the diamond-encrusted drills and cutters used to pierce and slice through the hide were a regular cause of injury and death.

However, Shreya knew the most dangerous job during any expedition was the hunt itself: the brave act of entering the ether and killing one of the dragons. Shreya thought about this as she watched the mechanics make a final check of the hunter crafts. She exited the hangar nagged by a strange sense of foreboding and restlessness.

Shreya was joined in the lift by Uwem, who was also on his way to the bridge. His disheveled appearance and red hung-over eyes belied his reputation as the best human navigator in the fleet; his reputation was, of course, the primary reason his regular overindulgence in juice was ignored by both his commanding officers on board and by the mid-level managers at Nanda who oversaw the day-to-day operations of Cro-GL1 in this sector.

“Oh, hello, ma’am,” he said awkwardly after he had raised his eyes and realized with whom he was sharing the lift.

“Hello, Uwem. How are you?”

His eyes turned towards the floor again. “I’m fine. A little tired.”

“We all are, I’m sure. So have you calculated the coordinates for the jump yet?”

Uwem’s body stiffened, and his chest went up, but his eyes looked down as he answered. “Of course, ma’am. I finished it about half-an-hour back. I just went down to get a snack before the jump.”

Shreya understood that the term snack was being used euphemistically, but she, like Jay, never held it against Uwem. Though they never openly told him so, they preferred that he take a couple of sips before a jump into the ether for the sole reason that it loosened him up and relaxed his nerves.

“No reason to explain. Get me the calculations so I can review it.”

Shreya by this time had already stepped out of the lift and onto the bridge where Eko had been patiently waiting for her.

“Hello, Shreya. Here’s the preliminary report on the dragon I detected,” she said, speaking in an informal manner that was common among science officers, the fleet’s most educated members.

“So what have you got?”

“Initial reports point to a red, a pretty large one at that. The data is inconclusive about the species, but I would guess a three-horn.”

“Do you have any idea what’s causing all the dragon activity we’ve been seeing?” asked Shreya.

“No, not really,” Eko replied.

“Would you hazard to speculate?”

“Same answer. The Guild funds studies on finding, hunting, and harvesting dragons, not on why they might congregate in a certain region. You would think there’d be at least something in the literature describing a previous occurrence of such a large number of dragons in a particular subsection of the ether, but I couldn’t find anything.”

Shreya scanned Eko’s report and Uwem’s calculations and then made her way to her seat in the center of the bridge. The bridge itself was cramped and dark, with grime and dust infecting every corner of the room. Some wires covered in duct tape hung lazily from the ceiling, while a metal column placed randomly by the ship’s manufacturer served only to obstruct Shreya’s view of Eko.

In front of Shreya was a screen that covered half the wall and was now displaying a section of the outside starscape. A compact touchscreen attached to her seat allowed her to shift the central screen’s display from one external camera to another and could also open an interface with other parts of the ship. Seated around Shreya in workstations placed haphazardly throughout the room were the rest of the bridge’s crew, quietly navigating and monitoring the cramped tin can they now occupied.

Shreya linked to Rick in the engine room using the interface, and he informed her that the ship was ready to proceed with the jump. She took a deep breath and then ordered Uwem to commence acceleration.

The moan of the dimension displacer gradually built to a high-pitched whine as it revved up to push the ship past the speed of light. Deep in the bowels of *The Tsuiseki*, in the engine room, dragon LXR was drop-by-drop being added to the ship’s fuel. The ship’s hull began to rumble and vibrate like a starving stomach. On the screen, the pinpoints of starlight began to stretch and bend around the ship.

Shreya closed her eyes and grabbed the armrests of her shaking seat as each drop of LXR caused a radical boost in velocity. The weight she felt, which initially had been localized only on her chest, grew muscular tentacles that encircled her and within its massive embrace seemed solely intent on crushing her very existence to dust.

Then the bubble popped in slow motion.

She felt as if she was being rocked in her mother's arms.

The jump had been made, and the ship was still.

Shreya opened her eyes and was confronted by the floating mists of the ether: a vast vista completely bathed in an incandescent golden radiance devoid of even a scintilla of the blackness of space.

Shreya felt the butterflies swimming in her stomach as she beheld this odd and otherworldly dimension. Though she had always found the gossamer glow of the ether sublime and beautiful, during the hunt itself, she couldn't help but experience a sense of trepidation that she might end up witnessing the tragic loss of a crewmember's life. Her apprehensions were only heightened by Jay's direct involvement in the hunt and the knowledge that, on average, one in three hunts ended in the death of at least one hunter.

"Do you have a lock on the dragon?"

"Yes ma'am," replied Uwem as he steered *The Tsuiseki* towards their target.

It was one of the mysteries of the ether that any object that flew far enough away from the ship seemed to be engulfed by the ether's yellow mist, but the ship itself, no matter how far it traveled, always remained a constant distance away from the clouds that surrounded it, thereby creating the illusion that the vessel was motionless. Therefore, with the mist always distorting a navigator's sense of space and movement, Uwem could never trust his sight and instead had to depend solely on his monitor's instrument panel. Luckily, dragons emitted a unique form of radiation, referred to as a d-sine, which made it possible for a trained navigator like Uwem to identify the dragon's location and steer the ship towards its prey.

Shreya waited for the slumbering beast to appear so the hunt could begin (wide-awake dragons were never hunted since they were too violent and unpredictable and were difficult to track when they were moving). The hunt usually commenced once the dragon was sighted, at which point the hunter craft would exit the hangar. They would cautiously approach the dragon from behind and position themselves on opposite sides of the beast.

The safety of both hunters then depended on them launching their harpoons simultaneously and piercing a patch of soft skin located right behind each hind leg close to the pelvis. Harpooning a dragon in such a manner, for reasons still undiscovered, caused the dragon to charge ahead rather than turn around and attack the craft. Yet if one of the harpoons missed its target, the dragon almost always attacked, most often the craft that had had the bad luck of successfully harpooning the beast.

Most hunters knew dragons were generally docile creatures that possessed no inbred fear or animosity towards humans. But if a dragon felt threatened, it could be deadly. Its teeth could crush the hull of a craft, and its talons could rip it to shreds. Its powerful wings were also dangerous. However, once successfully harpooned, the danger diminished significantly, at least until the time of the finishing kill.

The harpoons were connected by long cables to the hunter crafts, which allowed the vehicles to be dragged by the fleeing dragon until the beast grew deathly tired and stopped flying—usually between six and ten hours. At this point, one of the craft would have to risk approaching the head of the dragon, a maneuver as dangerous as the initial harpooning. If the dragon was not completely exhausted or if a hunter took too much time, he faced the threat of having the dragon clamp its jaws down upon his craft and chew it to pieces. Therefore, once in position, the hunter would immediately have to shoot a harpoon precisely into the dragon's skull, thereby killing it instantly.

During this entire time, the command ship was forced to stay within range of the hunters as the guild-lords had seen fit to provide the crafts with only an undersized fuel tank and a rudimentary navigation system. A hunter craft could thus not return by itself if it became separated from the command ship, and due to the wave interference caused by the ether and the fact that a dragon's d-sine disappeared once it was dead, it was almost impossible for the command ship to locate the hunters or the dragon once they had vanished into the ether's yellow clouds.

As Shreya was waiting for the dragon to show up on the screen, Jay's voice came over the interface. "I've made a final check of the controls. The engines have started and everything seems to be in order. The scanners say we should be coming upon the prey any minute now. Once we see it, I and Dixit will be commencing the hunt."



“Okay. If you need any assistance let us know,” replied Shreya. “Good luck.”

“I’ll be back in no time.”

“I’m sure you will,” Shreya said confidently, though her hands were balled tightly into a fist.

She turned off the interface and waited. Then on the screen, with a suddenness that every time left her breathless, a dragon materialized from out of the distant clouds. It was red and three-horned, just as Eko had predicted. Its scales glittered in the amber luminosity of the ether as it lazily floated in the mist-swept expanse.

Shreya knew that the hangar doors were opening, and Jay and Dixit would soon be making their way through the airlock. A short while later, the two craft appeared on the bottom-left corner of the central screen. Wispy puffs of yellow haze wafted by as the crafts made their way closer to the dragon. Shreya’s nails dug into her palms as the two hunters positioned themselves on both sides of the dragon. Everyone else on the bridge joined Shreya in staring at the screen as the craft prepared to launch their harpoons—everyone except for Alonzo, the detect systems analyst.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Could I show you something?”

“Now?” asked Shreya, a little peeved.

“I’m sorry, but I think it’s urgent that you see this.”

She walked to Alonzo’s side and looked at his monitor.

“My sensors have detected an object off our starboard side,” explained Alonzo, who was measuring the fluctuations in gravity waves.

Shreya’s attention was momentarily interrupted by a cheer that went around the room. She looked up at the central screen and was relieved to see that Jay and Dixit had successfully harpooned the dragon.

“Ma’am,” said Alonzo, whose attention had not wavered from his monitor, “the object is heading straight for us.”

“What?” Shreya said mildly alarmed. “But the only things out here are... Eko, please come here for a moment.”

“One more thing, ma’am,” said Alonzo with a slight quiver in his voice, “I was able to detect it even though it’s moving in the ether because it’s... I’m not sure, but the readings say it’s almost half the size of the ship.”

Shreya’s lips parted slightly as she registered the implications of what she had just heard. By then Eko had joined both of them.

“Eko, I want you to look at the monitor. Do you have any idea what that could be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a...” Suddenly a rush of wonder and excitement flew across Eko’s face. “Do you think it could be a dragon?”

“Have you ever heard of a ship, anywhere in the literature, coming across two dragons in the same quadrant?”

“No. But there’s a first time for everything,” said Eko as she dreamed of the papers she would publish and the recognition she would gain if true.

Shreya ignored the science officer’s lightheartedness and asked, “Have you ever heard of a dragon almost half the size of a Guild LXR ship?”

Eko’s levity vanished. “No. A quarter is the largest; nothing even close to a half.”

Shreya returned to her seat. The other members of the crew had slowly turned their attention away from the screen and towards their commanding officer.

“Something is approaching our ship, everyone. Uwem, I want you to be ready to take evasive action. Send him the object’s speed and trajectory, Alonzo. But whatever happens, don’t lose track of Jay and Dixit. Alonzo, how much longer until it’s in visual range?”

“About 20 seconds.”

“Danix, I want you to inform the crew that we are facing a code amber situation that could become code red.” As the communications officer complied with the command, Shreya switched the central screen to the starboard camera. The waiting seemed to last for eons. The fleeting shapes made by the ever-shifting clouds seemed to eerily portray all the possible forms the approaching unidentified objects could take.

Then without warning, a gigantic dragon burst out of the mist—a dragon so unimaginably colossal it stunned the entire crew. It advanced like an avenging wraith, with its fangs and talons bared and its expansive wings rhythmically flapping. Yet a sole thought kept flashing through Shreya’s mind: *It’s black. The damn thing is black.* This applied to not only the scales and wings but also its teeth, claws, and horns. It was as if the night itself had come alive—a night of mad delusions and horrifying dreams. However, its eyes were not black; they were a blazing, furious, incandescent red. She could only comprehend what she saw by using one word: *monster.*

Shreya turned her face away in disgust and exclaimed, “Good God. Dive! Take us down right now!”

She heard the engines roar as the ship began its descent.

“Alonzo?”

“It’s adjusting its course. It’s descending with us.”

Shreya’s hands began to sweat.

“Right now, Uwem—take us up. Turn the ship as sharply as possible.”

The G-forces (along with her fear) made her feel as if her heart had been pushed into her stomach.

“It’s following us. It’s going to hit us,” warned Alonzo.

Shreya fastened herself to her seat. “Brace yourselves!” The words had no sooner left her mouth than the ship was tossed aside by the extreme force of the impact of the dragon’s attack. She heard the skin of the tin can shriek as it was brutally slashed, and the vessel’s hull painfully groan as the ship spun out of control. Curses and cries emanated from the throats of some of the crewmembers.

The words, “Stabilize the ship,” were able to escape from Shreya’s lips. She heard the engines sputter and choke before they came back to life.

“I’ve got the ship under control,” said a breathless Uwem in a monotone voice that signaled he was just beginning to recover from the shock.

“Where’s the dragon?” barked Shreya with a tinge of panic clinging to her voice.

“I don’t know. I’m searching,” explained Alonzo.

“Uwem, have we lost sight of the hunt?”

“Almost, ma’am. They are almost out of range.”

“I want you to head straight towards them. Whatever happens, keep them in visual range.” She activated the interface, “Engine room? Rick? Can you hear me?”

A long moment of silence passed, and Shreya raised her voice and repeated the question. Finally, the dazed voice of Rick replied.

“Yeah, I’m here. What the hell happened?”

“We’ve been attacked by a dragon. I want to...”

“By a dragon? But that’s impossible.”

“Rick, I don’t have time. I just need a damage report.”

“Excuse me, ma’am,” Alonzo said. “I’ve spotted the dragon. It’s to our rear and accelerating right towards us.”

“Take us to maximum speed,” Shreya ordered Uwem before addressing Rick on the interface. “Quick, tell me what the structural damage is.”

“Well, the hull on the starboard side has been ruptured with a gash going from the fourth to the second levels, but it’s been contained. Six cabins had to be sealed. That’s all I’ve got right now.”

“How are the engines, generators, life support systems?”

“We took a hard hit, so I’m not sure. I’ll need to run a full diagnostic scan, but they seem to be functioning.”

Her relief over Rick’s assessment was short-lived as Alonzo’s voice broke her concentration.

“The dragon’s catching up with us, ma’am.”

*God damn that monster! What should I do?* Shreya thought as she felt her head start to pound. She knew she hadn't been trained for combat. No one on the hunting fleet had. The Guild held such training, and the weaponry required, to be prohibitively expensive—after all, human life was of little consequence to a guild-lord.

Then through the muddle of Shreya's thoughts, an idea, or perhaps a desperate hope, broke free.

"How much more time do we have, Alonzo, before the dragon catches us?"

"About twelve seconds."

"Give me a countdown."

"Eleven, ten..."

"Uwem, when I give you the signal..."

"Eight, seven..."

"...I want you to take us down a couple notches then come to a complete stop."

"Five, four..."

The counting reverberated throughout the bridge.

"Three, two..."

"Now, Uwem!" Shreya exclaimed. "Stop the ship!"

Shreya did not feel the effects of inertia as the ship dropped and rapidly decelerated. She was instead entirely focused on the screen in front of her, which displayed a forward view of the ship. She saw the awe-inspiring, black bulk of the beast fly over the ship and onto the screen. She hoped the dragon would overshoot the ship and the mass of the beast would carry it far enough away to give her time to formulate some strategy to save Jay and Dixit and then return to deep space.

However, to her dismay, the dragon spread and flapped its wings and came to a quick halt. It then turned itself around with the speed of a switch being flicked. The dragon, its jaws agape, swooped straight up and out of the screen's view.

*Where did it go*, she asked herself, but then her blood curdled as she remembered an axiom even children knew: what goes up must come down.

The entire ship shook with the sound of a deafening crash. Some of the bridge's top paneling fell to the ground, and a large crack formed along the left wall. Danix screamed and fell to her knees as she grabbed her headset and threw it to the floor. The crew could hear a loud, high-pitched squeal pouring out of the set's earpiece.

Shreya switched to another camera to view the top of the ship. A collective gasp spread through the bridge. The monster was perched atop *The Tsuseki* and was tearing apart its exterior with a primal fury. It had pulled the ship's primary parabolic antenna off and was dismantling it with its teeth and claws. The dragon then threw it aside and focused its attack on the hull of the ship.

"Rick, do you see this?"

"My God. Yeah, I see it. Our communications system is gone, Shreya. I'm reading a deep gash in the hull that's going to become impossible to seal if more damage occurs. Oxygen is leaking, and the dragon's hit our fuel reserves also."

Shreya could hear Danix sobbing in pain and fear. Through the corner of her eye, she noticed two crewmembers lying on the floor suffering from injuries caused by the falling debris.

However, despite the chaos that surrounded her, she perceived on the screen some loose, severed cables where the antenna had been torn off. The cables were releasing flickering sparks into the ether only a few meters from the dragon's feet.

"The communications system. Can we send a powerful jolt of current through it?"

Rick caught on to her train of thought. "It's possible. I'll need to jettison much of the fuel. You want to waste that much?"

"You have a better idea? I want that son of a bitch to burn—burn badly—do you understand? It's just," she paused for a second, "Jay and Dixit are out there. We need time, as much as you can give me."

“Okay, but I’ll have to calculate how much damage the ship can take. I’ll need to seal the entire area and figure out how to contain the fire. I’ll also have to goddamn take a wild guess about how much fuel will hurt the dragon. I’ll need... I don’t know. Five minutes?”

“That’s too much time, Rick.”

“Two and a half minutes.”

“I want one. We haven’t the time.”

“I know my ship, Shreya. We *have* two and a half minutes. I’ll get it done.”

Shreya did not feel reassured. She watched the dragon shred and slash the skin of the ship as if it were feasting on a fresh kill. The seconds fell like drops of water from a leaky ceiling, and each drip of time that landed on her head felt like a surreal and never-ending form of water torture.

But then without warning, the sparks from the cable increased in intensity before bursting into a blinding inferno. A split second later, she heard the roar of an explosion from above. On the screen she saw the dragon consumed in a column of fire. The dragon jerked back its head, spread its wings, and in terror jumped off the ship. It then disappeared off screen. Shreya smiled as she basked in the pain of her tormentor.

On the screen she saw that Jay and Dixit had detached themselves from their dragon and were heading towards the ship. “How long will it take to reach the hunters?”

“About 30 seconds,” said Uwem.

Shreya knew that all she could do now was bide her time while remaining alert and collected. The yellow wall of mist on the screen, to her weary eyes, resembled at that moment an army of ghosts, spectators to a lopsided and pointless battle conducted it seemed only for their amusement. The golden glow of the ether, which had always seemed so serene and had symbolized for her good pay for hard work, now seemed sallow, jaundiced, even sepulchral.

“Ma’am.” Alonzo’s voice seemed to come from far away. Shreya felt nauseous and giddy. “The dragon—I’ve spotted it. It’s... I’m sorry, but it’s

heading right for us.”

Shreya regained her composure and asked, “How much time.”

“Less than a minute.”

She calculated how much time it would take the hunter crafts to reach the ship and enter the hangar, how long to close the hangar doors and then make the jump out of the ether. The answer was what she expected. It would take more than a minute.

“Uwem.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Reverse the ship. Take us out of the ether,” she said as nonchalantly as possible.

“But...”

With a calm, controlled growl, she directed her voice at Uwem and commanded, “I don’t want to hear it. *Get us out of here.*”

As Shreya heard the engines and the thrusters begin the process of slowing then reversing the ship, she couldn’t help staring morbidly at the screen. She gazed at the two crafts hovering in the ether slowly progressing towards the ship and found them so frail and defenseless.

She felt numb as the dimension displacer started to whine. On the screen the yellow ether, the red dragon in the distance, and the hunter crafts carrying Jay and Dixit vanished like smoke dissolving into the night sky, to be replaced by a black vacuum speckled with white beads of starlight—and all she could think of was that the landing gear on Jay’s craft would never have its booster regulators replaced.

There was a moment of silence on the bridge. It was interrupted by Shreya clearing her throat.

“Rick, I want you, Eko, and Uwem to prepare a detailed report on our situation and then meet me in the conference room in half an hour.”

Eko asked innocently, “What are you going to do, Shreya?”

“That’s really none of your business. I’m now the captain of this ship. I am going to get a cup of coffee and wait for your reports. My job is to



decide how we're going to get back home safe," she said before addressing everyone on the bridge, "*And we will get back home safe.*"

She spoke with an air of defiance and authority. She raised herself from her seat and confidently left to go to the cafeteria. However, in the lift, she realized how fragile her state of mind was: she didn't just *want* a cup of coffee; she *needed* it to stop her hands from trembling.

After finishing only half a cup, she went to visit the injured in the medical station. She discovered that six had died during the attack, and two were currently in critical condition. The two would most probably succumb to their injuries due to a lack of sufficient medical supplies onboard—a situation common to all ships in the fleet. A medical officer's role was not to save lives but to reduce suffering and pain—which is the only option the circumstances (and the Guild) gave them—a responsibility *The Tsuiseki's* medic carried out diligently.

Shreya then went to examine the damage and raise morale. Though Shreya had been compassionate with the injured, she was firm but positive with the other crew members; her main concern was to assure them that there was a strong and capable leader at the helm.

When she finally entered the conference room, the other three were already waiting for her. The four decided that their first priority was to restock the ship's supply of air and water since most of it had been lost during the attack.

Eko informed them of a moon fortunately located within range of the ship. It had been selected for colonization twelve years ago, but the project had to be abandoned when funding from the Guild had run out. Records showed that the moon had been partially Type-K terraformed and therefore should have a breathable atmosphere and plentiful sources of drinkable water.

Uwem noted there was an old shipping route that was still used by older model cargo ships, but the traffic was very intermittent and sparse. If they made it there, they could be rescued as early as the next day or as late as next year.

Rick explained that much of the ship's fuel had been lost, which would prevent them from jumping into the ether again. Currently, they had enough fuel to take them to the moon and then further on to the shipping

route, but after that, they would only have a few months, perhaps as little as four, before the generators stopped working and the life support systems started to fail.

“Well, that’s a lot of if’s,” said Shreya, “but at least we have a plan. Go to the moon, restock, and then onto the shipping route. There we wait to be rescued.”

The meeting concluded, and Uwem and Eko left the conference room. Shreya asked Rick to stay behind.

“So you’re now second in command. Tell me. What do you think our chances are?” she asked.

“I would say 50-50.”

“You know we’re in an uninhabited corner of our galaxy cluster. Honestly, I’d say more like 30-70.”

“Let’s not think about the odds right now, Shreya. Have some hope. We’ll make it—somehow. Why don’t you get some rest? I’ll watch over the ship, okay. You really look like you need to sleep.”

“You’re right. The DZ’s are wearing out.”

Rick walked Shreya back to her cabin. They were quiet most of the way until Shreya asked, “Be honest with me. Do you think I handled everything correctly?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Even though I lost both Jay and Dixit.”

“They both knew the risk. You don’t need to beat yourself up about it.”

“That’s easy to say. But they were my responsibility, and I let them die.”

They reached Shreya’s cabin as the last syllables left her mouth. A moment of silence hung in the air as they stood there in the empty hall. Rick gently put his hand on Shreya’s shoulder.

“Jay and I joined the fleet at the same time, and we served together for twelve years. He was my closest friend. He was the strongest man I’ve ever known. He could face anything. I’m sure even death.” Rick paused

for a second to steady his voice. “I know how much you meant to him, and let me tell you. The way you handled yourself, the decisions you took, he would have been very proud of you. Nothing you did would have taken away his love for you.”

Shreya’s eyes became moist, and she was forced to swallow hard. She murmured a soft “thank you” before turning and entering her cabin. By the time the sliding door had shut, Rick was already on his way to the bridge.

Shreya proceeded to the opposite wall and turned on the star-scene. She adjusted the controls and was soon surrounded by the stars and constellations that shone over Indus-3. Memories of a small but special room situated in a quiet section of Nanda overwhelmed her consciousness as she lay down on her bed, exhausted. Tears rolled down her cheeks for quite a while before she at last could fall asleep.

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*[Editor’s note: The author has chosen to remain anonymous and forgone inclusion of a biography.]*



# **Ecliptical Musings**

By BILL SUBOSKI

*A young woman is accosted by a group of thugs! Her rescuer, John Dellon, an eccentric billionaire and visionary, has a secret to share with her—if he finds her worthy!*

The dark vault of the heavens sparkled with icy diamonds, brightening only to the deepest navy blue low over the Atlantic. John Delleon was barefoot so he could feel the sand of the dark beach. The eastern horizon was to his left as he walked south, and the beach finally cool after the hot Florida day.

He savored each step. Each foot landed first on the ball, causing him to lean forward as he walked. It was a medieval way of walking, before the advent of hard soles, when boots were little more than leather socks. It was a slower and more methodical way of walking that builds strong calf muscles.

He had woken at three AM and made the short drive, and now he walked slowly on the beach in the early morning. He was alone and feeling a strange peace. He spent much of his time alone; he preferred solitude. There is no moment of sunrise; the world just gets brighter. Life goes on, and the planet keeps turning. Step, step, step through soft sand.

It was a wonderfully still night. He was both a little too late and much too early for the active beach life to be around. Away to his right, he could hear muted traffic sounds, but this part of the beach widened as he headed south, and as he followed the water's edge, the distant sounds grew smaller.

The brightest stars made dancing ghost lights in the sky-dark ocean. As Delleon walked, he increasingly looked out over the water, trying again to see the moment when black turned navy blue. He smiled. Again he missed it. He always had. He stopped and stared across the sea—like so long ago—at the place where the sun would rise.

He scrunched sand in his toes as he stood. Life goes on. An errant thought, Miriam and... Chemotherapy, a revision, life mostly goes on. A finger to ruby lips—when?—yesterday, perhaps. Beautiful, wonderful Miriam, eaten from within by ovarian cancer and still the waves will lap the next day and a thousand years later.

He chastised himself for his melancholic reverie even as he permitted himself the slow feeling.

A sound rose up from down the beach and to the right, on landside, and Delleon faced it and took slow steps. Kids, maybe twenty-five yards

away—three men and a woman lying on the sand. He took a cigarette from his breast pocket and lit it as he walked forward. His hand put the lighter back in his pocket and picked up loose change.

She was a dirty blonde, young and husky-voiced, clad only in a tea towel dress. She had drunk beer with them all night, first in the bar then later at the beach. She had flirted and teased and passed out. No problem. Tom had objected, so Jason made him go first. But now Henry was making noises.

“You’re in it, man. You’re part of it. You may as well enjoy it.”

But Henry was ten feet away and making slow steps backward. The look on his face said it all.

“Jesus—give me a break!”

And away from and behind Henry, down the beach, was a sudden light. It took Jason a moment to figure it out: an older Hispanic guy, lighting a cigarette, walking toward them. The girl stirred, protesting, “No!” not Jason’s fault.

“Just keep walking, man, nothing to do with you!”

The voice was old and tired.

“I wish I could.”

The one furthest away was probably already out of it. Off to the left. The second one would not lead. So, only the lout over the girl was an immediate threat. Delleon said nothing, walking steadily.

Then, a game-changer, the little loser had a gun. Waving it. Delleon sighed inwardly. Seven, maybe eight feet. Get ’em up old man; always the same. Delleon raised his hands over his head.

Jason would live a long time and never really understand what happened next.

Delleon swung his left hand counter-clockwise from his body. At the same time, he knelt down and to the right and lunged forward. Jason reflexively swung the gun toward the first movement and barely managed not to fire at Henry, just as the coins Delleon had thrown at him hit his face, stunning him.

Jason stumbled backward and tried to swing the gun back to his left, but a strong hand was around his wrist. A forearm went across his face, pushing him back, as he felt his legs kicked from under him. He fell backwards onto the sand. When he hit the ground, the forearm across his face broke his nose. He lay blinking on the sand, struggling to see. The world blurred then sharpened. The old man jumped off him and leapt up, holding Jason's gun.

The old guy was standing over him. He held the gun down, the short barrel centered on Jason's chest.

"I think I should shoot you."

The old guy inhaled from his cigarette, a red star in the coming dawn. He was staring fixedly into Jason's eyes. He waved Tom and Henry forward, into his field of view; they moved like sheep.

"How many people would be saved from harm, how many women unmolested, if you die here, now, tonight."

Jason heard his own voice, pathetic with terror, pleading for his life.

Tom spoke up.

"Please, man, don't, don't..."

Delleon glanced up. He smiled and said, "Ah, yes, the witnesses."

And Henry spoke up.

"Shoot him. Shoot all of us." He paused. "I think we deserve it."

Delleon kept smiling and inhaled again.

"Wallets, lads. You can keep your money. You—", he waved the gun at Henry. "You are the witness. You will support their claim." He glanced at Tom then down at Jason. "And you will allocute to the proper authorities and plead guilty. And if you do not—", he gestured with the gun to the wallets lying on the sand.

Delleon enlisted them to carry the young woman to his car. They were cowards, not their fault; they just placed false power in the gun and numbers. It was sickening fun to wave it at them. Only Henry kept silent,



miserably doing as told. As the others tired, they gained false courage, cured by a few swift kicks to their asses. Bullies always hate losing.

In the end, he could not resist, and he pistol-whipped Jason once more across the mouth. The boy howled like a selfish little child, causing Delleon to smile even as he felt nausea rise within himself.

“Wear colored ribbons and take up knitting, or act the gentleman.”

And now where to? Miriam sought magics, and he would instead bring a sleeping girl. But not yet, barely five AM. Home, then? A few more hours' sleep. She roused a few times, dozing on the backseat, and Delleon fireman-carried her to the guest bedroom. He lay in his own bed, refreshed in the cool sheets, the back of his right hand pleasantly sore.

He lived in an older suburb, still with boxy homes from cookie-cutter construction. But in back of his property, the yard dropped quickly to a small stream that ran by, with tall trees on both sides.

He woke at nine-thirty. The day was already warm. He set the coffeemaker to brew then checked on his house guest. She lay akimbo, breathing heavily. He pulled the door quietly shut and had coffee on the patio.

He relaxed in the mild sun and made some entries in his journal. A beautiful day, warm but not yet hot. The trees that overhung the patio held dew in the air, creating a finely glittering mist high up between the leaves. Much of this was from the stream, but some was ambient. A good life, that goes on, even with strange young women in the guest bedroom.

Jeffrey arrived at ten-thirty, parking in the front drive and walking down the side lane to the back steps up to the patio. He took the steps easily, a fit man in his early thirties. John rose to greet him, a warm handshake and genuine smile, both returned. A minute in the kitchen and the two men sat studying the blueprints Jeffrey had brought, carefully placed polished stones serving as paperweights.

It was a great plan. John had contributed a great deal, but he had to admit that the bulk of it was Jeffrey's work. Still, John had capital and connections, not insignificant.

It was a hybrid of gated communities and green communities. The first concept had been a hole in the ground, literally. A twelve-sided hole, two hundred feet across. Each side of the hole became a one-story earth-sheltered home. The entire area was covered by a plastic dome, with enough small windmills to meet the electrical needs of the homes. The dome itself would dampen the noise of the mills.

Underneath, there would be a safe and secure area, dropping to no cooler than fifty degrees through any but the coldest winter. This protected recreational area could be used year-round, for play, barbeques, and even gardening. They had prototyped the concept here in Florida but always with the plan to transplant it with minimal change to any part of the world, and especially more northerly climates.

The dome itself was expensive and even more so when it was recognized as an active device. A computer-controlled system meant that the dome would operate to a preset temperature, either by venting warm air or capturing solar heat. But this was the single biggest expense, and it was amortized over twelve living spaces.

Snow and rain could be captured as needed, thus making the "community" self-sufficient for water. Each home came with multiple heating options, but all were modest. With common walls and a domed sunspace, heating loss to the environment was almost eliminated.

There were many such details. Jeffrey was a rarity, an idea man who also worked the small picture. But he had completely missed the gated community aspect. Delleon greatly disliked the idea of gated communities, but still recognized the value as a selling point. Many issues remained, but solutions kept falling into place. Tornado? No problem. The dome would open and adjust airfoil. The homes were already underground.

Ground had broken last month, and still Jeffrey was worrying the details. Each unit had an estimated cost of about \$55,000, with a market price of at least \$450,000. Careful vetting would help prevent problems with neighbors. But the one detail that made Delleon smile was the small observatory located at the apex of the dome; nothing major, just a spiral staircase winding sixty feet up to another small dome. If the residents chose not to look at the stars, it would at least be a private spot for young lovers.

Interesting how proper housing changed lives. Already Jeffrey was envisioning commercial components, small stores, and so forth, connected by underground passages with skylights. A new city, a new way of being, and life goes on.

So the new units were already three-quarters sold, the site was highly profitable, and Jeffrey wanted to start more. That was fine with John, and he called his bank and authorized another million and a quarter. One meets a man like Jeffrey so rarely—only once in several lifetimes.

He walked down the stairs and back up the driveway with Jeffrey. They shook hands again at his car, and John turned to the left and walked three blocks to the mini-mall. On the way, he called Miriam and confirmed dinner. She spoke in a musical voice and was in her usual good mood.

Some fresh bread at the bakery, and he walked home, nodding to neighbors as he passed. He handed a rye bread and a bag of bear claws to Bruce Wilson as he passed.

“They gave me the wrong order again, Bruce.” He shook his head, baffled.

Bruce was a former engineer who had fallen on hard times in retirement, and John had quietly given him extras which were purchased to be extras. Bruce nodded, dignified and grateful.

“Thanks, John, I appreciate it.”

She was up when he got back, sitting at the patio table. She had helped herself to coffee and kept a blanket from the bed wrapped around her. She greeted him with a confident if uncertain smile. He ignored her and refilled his coffee before joining her.

“Do you remember last night?”

She shook her head, her gaze going to the table, embarrassed. Lying already.

“Might be best you don’t. Lose the blanket.”

She stiffened, paused, and lifted her arms, taking the blanket off herself. As he suspected, she was naked underneath. On her face were questions, but on his face was silence.

“Stand...turn.”

She remained so. He thought a long time and said, “I believe I will sketch you. Fetch my pad and charcoals from the desk inside.”

She padded inside, quickly, quietly obeying. She said nothing, but her body language betrayed embarrassment. The naked gamble had failed and left her merely naked. But he gave her credit; she neither fled nor dressed, instead fetching the pad.

He posed her by the railing. The pose was not overtly sexual—just a beautiful woman on a wooden deck. He asked questions while he sketched. She went to speak unasked, and he touched his finger to his lips. He covered the basics and grew sad with the answers. Another confused young woman, mistaking ephemeral sex appeal for more. She had a degree, the market was bad, and she started working in a bar.

He sketched quickly and took no more than twenty minutes. His sadness made him short-tempered. He placed the sketch pad face down on the table and went inside. He threw the BDU's at her with a gruff, “Put these on.”

A quick dash to the bedroom for her shoes, and she caught up with him out front. She was confused but perceptive. She knew to stay quiet. He cocked an eyebrow, and she walked quietly to the passenger side. He paused a moment then reached across to the lock.

His sadness had slowly turned to irritation, and he took it out on the road. Always the same mistakes made and no short cut to the lesson. As he pulled onto the freeway, he reached into the back seat, handing her the sketch pad. He did not really care, and without paying attention, he was aware of her surprise at the sketches.

An hour later and they were touring Altair. Delleon was still amazed at the scope of it. On one side, bearing walls were being erected. She stood silent beside him at the edge of the pit. His bad mood had passed and he started talking about the future. She slowly started to ask questions, but no rapport sprang up. The ride back was silent until he spoke up.

“I have a friend who is coming for dinner this evening. She is ill and soon will be coming to stay some weeks.”

Delleon navigated the highway traffic with practiced skill. She started to speak, but he held his index finger up. Traffic was picking up as they neared downtown.

He double-parked near the deli and gave her a one hundred dollar bill, name "Delleon."

"Tip them fifteen dollars."

He lit a cigarette. He no longer inhaled, but he still liked the smoke. She was out quickly with the food, but he ignored her when she got in. She sat silent until he flicked the cigarette butt out the window and put the car in gear.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

Delleon didn't really care about the answer. He had bored of this game before Jason went down last night...but she might be useful.

"For not leaving me on the beach..." Her voice quieted. "For not being taken in by me."

"They gave you two meals. A dinner and a smaller lunch. When we get home, serve the lunch on the back patio. I will have a glass of tomato juice and a glass of ice water. You may help yourself as you choose."

She was quiet again. Delleon cared so little for such pathetic mundanities and was grateful for her silence. He hated manipulation, and her expression of gratitude seemed exactly that. Nude gambit declined, vulnerable gratitude defense tried. What the girl needs is hard work and challenge.

He worked in his office, sending out some emails and checking investments. She stood in the doorway, hand poised to knock on the half-open door. He nodded, and when he went out to the patio, she stood away from the table. It was well-laid-out, and he sat, leaving her standing.

She stood still, confused, and he said, "Serve me naked."

She stiffened, and he said, "Now."

She pulled the t-shirt over her head, sniffing, and stepped out of the pants. She looked at him, a silent plea, but he was merely amused. In mere moments she was naked again, sniffing and serving. She stared intently at his plate as she filled it, then stepped back from the table. He ignored her, and she stood silent. The orange juice she had poured for herself stood across the table.

He gestured absently to the seat and said, “Sit, eat, and do not speak.”

She stole only quick glances at him, eating quickly. He lost himself in the flavors of the food, his minor interest in her vanishing. Halfway through he stopped, leaned back, and lit a cigarillo. He turned his chair slightly and contemplated the glittering forest green above. How much effort, to create a natural canopy!

He stubbed the cigarillo out and finished the meal. She was already done and sat quietly, head slightly bowed.

“What do you think of Altair?”

Her eyes narrowed and defocused. She was seeing something else.

“Altair... Alpha Aquilae, the brightest star in the Eagle, but not the brightest star in the sky...”

“And that star is?” he said, interrupting her.

She smiled shyly.

“Are you serious? Sirius, of course.”

He relaxed and made eye contact—some cleverness here perhaps.

“I thought it was the sun...” he replied, but his body language was more relaxed, and she smiled back. A gentle pause, and both were somewhat more at ease. A minute or two went by, and she spoke again.

“Your Altair... you seem to be redesigning the home, making it more efficient...rather than the pastiche of modern houses.” Another pause, and she continued. “But it looks a lot like prototype housing for a space colony.”

He was silent and very far away. He appeared to be only middle-aged, but there were deep wrinkles in deep places. Stamped footprints of time...he could be much older than he seemed. For a moment, she could

see him standing on the deck of a sailing ship looking out over the dark ocean as cold wind cut through him. Journeying to an unknown world, sword at his belt... his voice when he spoke was almost reverent.

“One set of Saturn 5 plans was donated to a Boy Scout paper drive. The last apparently complete set of plans was sent to the Federal Record Archives in Atlanta. My attempts to find them several years ago met with no success: the plans have evidently been “lost”. The fleet has been destroyed. The plans are gone. The eunuchs have won the day.”

“John Lewis—Mining the Sky.” She shrugged. “I was an astronomy major.”

Delleon was surprised but had long ago perfected his poker face and evinced nothing. He took a breath and made the offer. She seemed surprised, which bored him. He gestured to her borrowed clothes, and she smiled at him. They had both forgotten that she was still naked.

Miriam arrived on time as she always did. Delleon envied her consistency while being a bit irritated by it as well. But he was glad to see her—as always. The girl had manners, and welcomed and assisted Miriam, then vanished back to the kitchen. Delleon made to speak, but Miriam smiled as always, and as always he smiled back. A sheepish moment shared by friends at dinner.

The girl served well. The meal was followed by cocktails as late afternoon gave way to a cooler evening. The bubbling stream misted the air now that the sun was down. Little smears of haze hung in the air with austere coolness. Overhead, as the sky deepened from blue to black, the stars shone down.

They drank lightly. The snack tray lasted. Delleon nibbled broccoli and olives. Miriam stayed with cherry tomatoes. Somewhere after sundown, the girl restocked the tray.

Delleon made the suggestion mid-evening. Miriam demurred, but John was persistent. Persuasion is an art form that Delleon had long ago mastered. But it wearied him. In just a few minutes, Miriam was happy with the idea, and an hour later plans were firm to move her in.

By eleven she was exhausted. Delleon helped her up, and the girl assisted her to an upstairs bedroom. The girl came back and sat outside. Neither spoke, a quiet end to the long day. Delleon stumbled slightly,

more with tiredness than alcohol. Again the cool sheets of his bed were a gentle balm.

He woke again late at night. Alcohol—even in small amounts—addled him. He padded silently from his bedroom into the living room where pale moonlight shone in from the deck. A quick glance at a seven segmented clock—3:50 AM. He glided through the sliding door and stood silent on the deck. Eyes closed and he drew air, his hands on the railings. So long ago... he stood a few minutes then padded back to bed.

Over the next weeks, a routine developed. John kept largely to himself. Miriam and the girl spent as much time together as apart. Miriam had started the chemo, and the girl was attentive. On those days and into the following morning, Miriam was exhausted. She stayed at home and the girl close by, many of those days spent on the deck with the umbrella up. They talked little and seemed content to soak up the sun.

Miriam often took a nap in the late afternoon. The girl would sometimes stroll down by the stream and up the little path. A few times she would make a head bob to Delleon in invitation. He would wave but never accompanied her.

Usually, once a week, on Miriam's better days, the three of them would go to lunch and then spend the afternoon in a museum. One week they made a day trip to Disney World. Delleon was always observant of social dynamics. The girl sat in the back, leaning the front seat forward, and clambering in. This was never discussed. He and Miriam would discuss minor matters, and the girl would stay silent. It was very strange—they were almost a family.

One day Miriam skipped the nap and joined the girl on the stream-path. Slowly, her tiredness seemed to be fading. Other days the girl assisted Delleon and he slowly taught her what he knew.

One day she stayed at the deck table while Miriam slept. She wanted to talk.

“Lewis wrote a good book. His introduction was powerfully written. But it wasn't accurate. He took a certain degree of literary license.”

“Go on.”



“He wanted to draw the reader in, so he made a parallel to early Chinese explorations. I have never checked his facts. Let’s assume that he is correct. But the Apollo plans were not deliberately destroyed. They were simply lost to time.”

“Not preserved. But the end result is the same.”

“Yes,” she said, “Similar, but not identical. But even with well-preserved plans, we still would have lost the technology.”

She saw his interest and continued.

“We lost it because we didn’t continue developing it. I read once that the ignition system of the Model T had wooden components. Suppose that you wanted to build a modern replica. Would you build a perform-alike, with modern components, whose actual performance would far outstrip the original? Or would you be true to the original design, and have an ignition system with wooden components?”

He leaned back.

“I see. So you either build a true anachronism, an actual Model T, that has no real place in today’s world, or you build something far better, which is limited by appearing like a Model T.”

“I think even a perfect and complete set of plans would have been lost to time. You can’t really build a Model T anymore; it wouldn’t make sense.”

She became a quiet assistant, taking care to be unobtrusive. He appreciated her discipline, but they became more comfortable in each other’s company, and he became aware of being mildly curious about her. But his attempts to draw her out, to invite her to converse, did not succeed. Her demeanor often seemed that of a young child in a library, overly cautious of noise. Her brash presence of the first day was long gone, replaced with a respectful demeanor.

But one day, she did speak up.

“Miriam asked if I am involved with you.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“She doesn’t usually have to ask those questions. She is quite perceptive.”

“She also said that.” The girl laughed. “But she said that I am as hard to read as you.”

“And what was your answer to her question?”

“Yes,” but the girl was flustered, “I said yes, but of course she meant sexually. I said,” and her voice dropped lower in volume, “that this is much deeper than that.”

He met her eyes, a small smile on his face, and she quickly looked away, still flustered.

She was embarrassed. She had confessed, and he had not reacted. He realized that he had been irritated with her from the first. Not that she had been drunken on the beach but rather that her entire existence had been so aimless that she could have been in such a pointless place. But that was past. His early assessment had been correct, and she had grown in tasks given. The beach was past, and she had earned forgiveness, but a moment ago he had withheld it.

*I learn from you a new thing. I see again my own hardness, how stubborn I can be, and therefore how unforgiving. Miriam has seen and commented on this quality, and I have ducked and covered. You have grown, and I shall, too.*

The girl had tried to be friends, and he had rebuffed her.

“I agree. This is much deeper. You have done well, and should be proud.”

She unexpectedly hugged him. He was surprised and awkward in return. But he pulled her close, and felt in his own grip the strength of his affection. Then he leaned back, swept her hair from her forehead, kissed her forehead and laughed. She was happy and curious, and he said, still holding her, “All my life I have always found such strange and beautiful things on the beach.”

Only later would it occur to him that this was the first time he had touched her since he had carried her in from his car.

“I’m cured, John. No sign of cancer.”

They were sitting at the deck table. It was a glorious day as the sun poured down. She was back from her appointment that morning with the expected good news. And her hair shone red in the brilliant light, as it had not in twenty years or more.

“That’s wonderful news, Miriam—truly wonderful.”

“And nothing to do with you. You still won’t admit anything.”

“I admit that you have been an excellent house-guest and that it has been a pleasure to have you.”

She looked appraisingly at him.

“We all have our little mysteries, Miriam. The reality is smaller and sadder. The scientist is not happier than the poet; he simply has more footnotes. Not all truths need be told.”

He stood up, stepped to her, and offered his hand.

“We need to celebrate this.”

They raced up the seaside highway, the top down, warm salt wind blowing through their hair. They did not talk, the rush of air prevented that; they communicated through gesture and expression as only longtime friends can. He remembered his thoughts on the dark beach the night he first met the girl: a thousand years and still the sun rises. Such a long time!

Miriam nibbled at the remaining roadside fish and chips. She had the carefree smile of someone with no concerns. He had read once that we are all racing, away from something or toward something. He had always been wary of impulse, always careful not to race to an unknown appointment in Samarra. But sometimes it felt good simply to speed down the roadway, neither from nor toward any goal.

They stayed at the same Inn as years ago. John saw on Miriam’s face that she too was concerned about what memories might be stirred. But as they relaxed, talked, and finally shared dinner at the beachside patio, the only memories were happy ones.

In the later evening, the girl spent much of her time in the attic-cum-observatory. Delleon wandered up a few times but rarely stayed. He saw again through his own telescope the rings of Saturn, and, late at night, the seven sisters.

They did not speak. One or another would aim the telescope and invite the other by gesture. Over time he wandered up more and stayed longer until it was a nightly ritual. Some nights she was naked. Delleon never commented.

She would often sit cross-legged on the floor, eyes on a single candle. Delleon tried it once. It was peaceful. Whether naked or clothed, she was often quite exquisite in the candlelight. One night, as he slipped toward the door, she said softly, "Miriam's cancer is cured."

He stopped, and she spoke again.

"You're a bastard, Delleon. The way you sketched me that day." She paused. "The way I am, and the way... I might have been."

He looked at her and said nothing.

"The way I should have been."

"The way you still can be."

She looked up, and tears dropped from her eyes. She hated him in that moment, and the hate guttered out, drowned by tears. She was a strong one, quiet tears, a gentle rain. He sat on the floor, the candle between them. Her head stayed bowed. Her quiet sobs faded away. Finally, she looked up and made challenging eye contact.

"Why am I here?"

"I don't know. You chose to stay."

"Maybe I should leave."

"Do as you will, but with conviction. Do not drift."

They looked at each other, silent.

"Miriam is done with her chemo." She smoothed her hair with her hands. "The doctors can't explain what happened. But she can, John, and I want to know if she is right."

“What are you asking?”

“You know what I am asking. The question is, will you answer?”

He stood, stepped close to her, and reached down. Her hair was softer than the finest fur, and his hand lingered. She was surprised and silent as he bent down, his face intimately close to hers, his hand still in her hair.

“I didn’t sketch you to hurt you. How little you have learned. I hoped to give you hope.”

He straightened.

“Meet me on the deck in a few minutes. We have things to discuss.”

There was no moon and the night was cool. It was late, after one, and dew had settled on the deck. She padded in bare feet. Each step was warm ice. The deck was dark. Had she not spent so much time here in the day, she would be lost at night. She took a seat and waited for Delleon. As her eyes adapted, she realized he was already in his usual seat, stone-still and silent.

Minutes passed as they sat in the darkness and finally he asked, “What do you want to know?”

She thought a moment. She waited. She spoke slowly.

“Miriam’s cancer is not just in remission. She is cured, isn’t she?”

He lit a cigarillo, inhaled deeply, and said simply, “Yes.”

“How much water, John?”

“One drop. A single tear. It evolved with us. Grew up with us. Like mitochondria. Became part of us. A germ and a virus...a dual creature. It can live in any member of phylum Chordata. It still does in some—Galapagos Turtles, and some sharks. There are sharks that are more than a thousand years old...imagine that. But even in those creatures, it lives only imperfectly. Mammals are its true home.”

A long pause and what was once an awkward silence between them had over time become a shared reverie.

“It is the missing part of our metabolism. It keeps cells young, repairs damage, fixes telomeres. But something happened many thousands of years ago. Perhaps a nearby gamma-ray burst... environmental poisons... who knows... but there is a strange irony that the beneficent engine of long life is so very fragile, and mostly died so long ago.”

His voice trailed off. He relaxed in his chair. The coal on his cigarillo glowed redly in the night. Her voice was slow and halting; the words glacially came. His answers would change things.

“Then Miriam is right, and you are who she claims?”

A slow nod in the night.

“You named Florida?”

“This flowery land, yes.” An amused voice in darkness.

“And you were born Juan Ponce de León y Figueroa, and you sailed with Columbus on his second voyage?”

“Do you find that hard to believe?”

A long silence in the night that ended with a quiet “no.”

They sat for a long time then. A new rain began. A light sprinkling of light drops that for brief minutes increased to crescendo then subsided again to mist.

“Re-infection is so small. A single tear, a drop of water, a bead of sweat. Much of what passed for chemotherapy is not. Miriam’s hair was red and is red again.”

She nodded quickly.

“One hundred years ago, there were eight springs. Fifty years ago, there were five. Today, there are two.” A long pause. “I have spent hundreds of years and tens of millions of dollars to find a new home, outside of mammals, and all my efforts have been short-lived.”

“And that is why you live here, why you built the subdivision, why no one can build so much as a newsstand in a two-mile radius without Delleon intervention?”

He nodded in the darkness. “Just so.”

“And now what, John? You have the cure for cancer, but you allow people to die.”

“I am not responsible for the sadness in the world.”

“I’m sorry. That sounded blaming. I didn’t mean it that way.” She took a breath. “What I mean is, you have another purpose, something larger. May I ask what that is?”

“I think you already know.”

“I think I do. We need a bigger stage. We need to go out there, not just to explore but to live. Lewis again, we need to mine the asteroids, build Lunar and Martian cities. Earth is a Europe grown too small. And that is why you are building Altair—your prototype housing—so that we can live out there in space.”

“We should have already gone.”

They sat in cool night. She was strangely sad. So much of him—his actions, his aloofness—could just be loneliness. How sad to watch loved ones age and die, to see the same mistakes again and again, to see young women, again and again, make the mistakes of haughty hurtfulness. *I have always been private—always afraid—and now I am afraid not to...*

“I need you, John. Take it as it is. I ask nothing—just know this: I need you. I would like to stay here. That is why I was angry. Not because you hurt me, but because you could, because I think I love you.” She paused. “I didn’t live until I lived here; I existed; thank you.”

The sketch, the hard work, the hot dogs for orphans at Disney World: his care for Miriam, the cashier’s checks that arrived in Bruce Wilson’s mailbox...how very, very lonely to stand the night watch on the deck of the world, to look alone into the dark future, to choose that lonely watch, simply because someone must. She wept again and tears glistened on her cheeks.

“Please say my name, one time. I will never ask again.” She pled with her eyes.

In an eye blink he was over her, and she took the extended hand and joined him. He led her in an unknown waltz, twirling and whirling in a

dance that was the toast of Spain, circa 1485.

Step, step, pause, dip, and close again, his face near hers.

“Are you as your namesake? Do you see the future?”

Step, pause, step, pause. They smiled as he taught her the dance.

“You are infected, Cassandra. You are going to live a very long time.”

Step, step, close again, smiling broadly in the dark.

“Stay. Love and be loved... you, right now, are the second woman I sketched.”

Step, step, pause, step, twirl. They laughed together.

“I want you to stay—do not leave. I would miss you if you leave. Apollo has fallen from his chariot. We must help him up back up into the sky.”

---

*Bill is an aspiring fiction writer with a background in computer programming. He is still trying to decide what he wants to be when he grows up. Born in Indiana, Bill is a transplanted Hoosier living as a Buckeye by way of Canada and the Netherlands.*



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# **Not Any Earthly Shade of Color**

By DANNY NICHOLAS

*One morning, Henry wakes up with a strange pattern of dots burned into his eyes! What could have caused them, and can he be rid of them before he's driven mad?!*

When the eye-exam was done, the ophthalmologist was just as utterly stumped as the doctor before him.

“Do you know what’s wrong with them?” Henry asked.

“I believe what you are describing are the symptoms of ‘Photo-Bleaching.’”

“Gee, that sounds lovely.”

“It occurs to the cells of your retina. The light-sensitive bits are at the back of your eyes. These cells are full of sensitive pigments. But, if you look into a bright light, or lights, this sends the cells buzzing. And eventually, when the cells relax, these *phantom dots* of light appear.

“Is it permanent?”

The ophthalmologist shook his head. “It should only be temporary. When you stare at a bright light, the photopigment in that particular spot of the retina has been broken down by photons of light hitting it. So, to compensate, it regenerates and your vision returns to normal.”

“That hasn’t happened yet, doc,” Henry said morosely.

The young ophthalmologist rolled a stool from the corner of the exam-room and sat in deep thought. “You claimed you haven’t looked into anything extremely bright, and you haven’t rubbed your eyes with anything. I had a look inside and saw no damages to your eyes. Nothing. Not even an eyelash out of place. But—”

“These damn spots,” Henry countered, blurting. “Five of them, in my eyes, and they won’t go away.”

The *dots* had greeted Henry the previous morning. He saw them before he drew open his eyelids—*They* were already shacking-up with him underneath that shield of darkness.

Five dots of light sprinkled throughout his vision, spaced evenly apart, crooked at the top, hanging over the space of his eyesight. When he blinked, the dots were in front of a shuttering screen of black velvet; when he kept his eyes open, the dots invaded the real world like stage dressing suspended by fishing wire from an unseen catwalk.

Henry could barely see himself brushing his teeth this morning, and driving was unthinkable; he wasn't eager to start toying with death wishes.

He tried to remember; did he stare too long into something bright yesterday?

He remembered nothing.

*That dream*, an urgent voice from the underside of his mind whispered. Impossible, he argued with himself. Dreams can't burn your eyeballs, only something real could: a camera flash, a lamp light. And if he did look at something so extreme yesterday, it was nothing in this five-star pattern. Likewise, just as the doctor explained, if Henry had looked at any intense lights, the afterlife of those specks would have naturally drifted in your eyes for a minute, causing only short-lived madness.

But these dots!

These five lights branded hotly on his vision, their madness was constant.

"Well," the ophthalmologist skated to a cabinet and picked from one of the hand-sized vials stored inside. "I will drop some medicine in your eyes, causing them to dilate, and hopefully, when your eyes have relaxed enough, these lights will be reconfigured out of your vision, all on their own."

The ophthalmologist squirted drops into Henry's eyes. He felt a stinging as his eyes began to inflate inside their sockets, like balloons brushing against a grated surface.

The ophthalmologist produced a Kleenex, and Henry wiped at his leaky eyes. "Now, when your eyes begin to relax again, you're gonna catch a *biggie* of a headache," advised the doctor. "So, lay in bed with the lights completely off. It won't stop the headache, but it might soften it. Have a couple of Tylenol at the ready when you feel it coming on. You aren't driving yourself home, are you?"

"No. I'm taking a cab."

"Good."

"Doctor, when do you think I will be able to go back to work?"

“What do you do, Mr. Ludlow?”

Henry hesitated to answer. Mentally, he prepared for the hammer; the doctor he saw previously had given him a terrible look when he mentioned what he did for a living, and he expected this one would, too. “I’m an air traffic controller.”

The ophthalmologist’s face went colorless. He was momentarily dazed at the devastating future where Henry would mix up a blimp on the radar screen with a blink of the lights in his eyes, thereby sending a careening Boeing 747 cartwheeling through a landing strip in smoky gymnastics.

“I’d say,” he smiled encouragingly, “let’s wait to see what tomorrow brings before we make any crucial decisions. Hopefully, those lights will be here today and gone tomorrow, Mr. Ludlow.”

Henry closed his eyes, wearily said, “I hope so.”

The ophthalmologist was right about the headache and wrong about everything else.

The next few weeks were a whipping carousel of doctor visits, counting away through second opinions, third, fourth, fifth, six—It went around and around, having colorful concoctions dropped, sprayed, rubbed, and splashed into his eyes and not one single moist drop cleared out the lights in his vision. His eyes were throbbing from the irritation of different drugs sucking his eyeballs into dry, wrinkly prunes.

Finally, one doctor recommended something that made Henry lose his patience.

“Perhaps, Mr. Ludlow,” a young doctor said trepidatiously, “your condition may be psychological or even psychosomatic?” Henry stared at the younger man as though he had physically morphed into a donkey. “Would you like me to make an appointment with a psychiatrist for you?”

No more doctor visits after that. Henry just stayed home.

Figuring out the math as best as he could, he realized at this rate, within a very short time, his savings would dwindle into mere pocket-change if he didn’t change course.

Against all of his doctors’ orders, he went back to work.

He told everyone he was: *A-okay!* He almost believed it himself until he bumped into a few chairs on the way to his radar console. His coworkers gave him a wary look, and then swiftly turned away as if trying to ignore someone who had just *broken wind* inside the room.

Henry strapped on his headset, looked at his gridded circle screen. The incoming planes were tiny specks of flat green, what he had in his eyes was bright static lights, evenly spaced in a slightly up-tilted pattern, like a crudely scribbled checkmark. They were easy to tell apart from one another, he encouraged to himself.

If the newspapers ever got a hold of the full story, they would've reported that it could have been one of the worst air traffic disasters in history. Three planes almost collided with each other on the runway, two nearly crashed airborne above the terminal. Hundreds of lives almost ended in an instant.

The canning of Henry Ludlow from the airport was so severe it nearly drilled the man underground up to his chin. His reputation scattered to dust; his credibility, buried in an unmarked grave; and his eyes, *still* speckled with five dots of infernal lights!

In analysis, they exhausted all the possibilities; turned down every avenue; peeked in every sewer. The lights fastened themselves over his vision no matter how many secrets he spilled.

"I want to try a different approach for this session, if I have your permission, Mr. Ludlow?" the psychiatrist asked after Henry had been going to therapy for better than a month.

"Okay," Henry said, cautiously.

"Have you ever been hypnotized before, Mr. Ludlow?"

"I can't say I have."

Moments later, his eyes were closed. He heard the psychiatrist's voice echoing in his ear, but wasn't sure what he was saying in the darkness. Then, Henry realized it—

The darkness.

There weren't any spots of lights in his vision.

Henry laughed ecstatically in the dark. Oh, it's been so long since he laughed—

Then, he heard a snap of fingers in the dark, and there was light—intense light all around him, sizzling his eyeballs to biscuits.

Henry was unceremoniously shoved backwards, and dumped inside his bedroom, landing softly on his mattress while the trespassing light encircled him in a hugging, choking embrace of radiance.

A single blunt shadow poured through the shields of light. A very short, thin-looking man with a fat, bulbous, tear-shaped head that jiggled gelatinously with each step he took forward. His eyes were oblong and black as coffee.

Something metallic was in his hand, almost appeared to be a gun with a toy *View-Master* glued to the nozzle. The thin man shoved it over Henry's eyes, and then it started flashing mercilessly; flashing once, flashing twice, three, four, a fifth and final time.

*Marked.*

There was a clap.

And Henry was awake, back in the therapist office.

"I have great news, Mr. Ludlow. A breakthrough! We have found out why those little lights are in your eyes!" The psychiatrist squirmed with enthusiasm. "It turns out that you were a subject of an alien abduction!"

Wham!

Considering the dots of light obstructing the psychiatrist's face, it was pure luck that Henry found his nose on the first swing.

Aliens! What a quack! Little green men! What a load of crap!

There were torturously lazy days for a long time after. Henry couldn't enjoy any of the flavors of life. Walking? Forget about it. Watching television? Reading an entertaining novel? Heck, scribbling a mind-numbing crossword puzzle? The lights always blocked his view with no way of peeking around them without twisting his head off.

Some days, Henry would lie in bed nearly all day, staring at the ceiling, gazing at the dots. They were little balls of light just hanging there. He would reach up with his hands and try to grab them. All he needed was one gone. He could make do with the remaining four, but five, that was too many to look over. They were completely unreachable; his hands would swipe through the lights fruitlessly for hours.

The next morning, he watched the sun coming through the curtains of the window, counting the hours, waiting for the shape of the light to climb across the floor, stretching, until it could grow no more.

Now, Henry knew the sun was at the highest spot in the sky, at its hottest.

He tripped on his way to the front door, and stumbled over his feet when he made it into his front yard.

Sitting on the lawn, he looked directly into the sun, unblinking, wide-eyed, and waited for the burning to stop.

The outside world for Henry was gone for a very long time, but *They* were still there, brighter than ever because nothing behind them could contrast their presence.

He had tried the one sure way to get rid of them. The sun: *God over the sky; giver of life; cleanser of all*. It denied his prayers to see nothing of this world. Well, perhaps, he did receive his wish? The world was gone for him—but *They*—maybe they weren't from this world? *Little green men. What crap.*

His daily visitors were the lights. Every hour in the darkness they were watching over him. They were there to wish him a good morning and bid him a good night. Henry became so accustomed to the lights he had even graced the five of them with names:

*Gomez, Morticia, Wednesday, Pugsley, and Uncle Fester.*

*Hello, guys,* Henry would welcome them when he woke. The afternoon would inch by. *Are you all still here?* he asked the dots. *Well, have a happy afternoon then!* Night would come to pass, the five lights would loom. *You are still here?* he would ask the last hour in every day. *Okay. Sweet dreams.* When sleep sheltered him from their glowing ogling, he would whisper secretly: *How I hate them. I'd rather be dead than seeing*



*them hovering over me tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that one, and so on, and so forth... I really, really, hate the Addams Family.*

The world returned to Henry one unwrapped bandage at a time.

His vision was bleached with harsh, hazy flares.

Complete whiteout.

Then, his eyes started to focus.

The world came back...

And *They* came back with it, burning holes into everything that was important for him to see.

“What do you see, Mr. Ludlow,” asked the nurse.

“Lights,” Ludlow said. “God damn, lights.”

One night, he got in his head a funny thought: *I would like to see the stars*. Henry had really let himself go. He never cut his hair or shaved since his stay at the hospital. He had eaten a lot more; it was one of the few enjoyments the lights couldn't take away from him, and by the end of the year, he had gained an extra thirty pounds of flabby midsection.

He made the decision that his days were numbered, and before he would *snuff* himself out, he wanted to see real stars again. Not the five that were stuck to his eyeballs. No, he wanted to see billions of them streaked across the night sky and bask in their glowing blue splendor.

He lay in the backyard on a bed of wild weeds that soaked through his pajamas. The humidity stirred his face with warm, pleasant smells. He stretched out over Mother Earth feeling her wet kisses of mud and her thin breath of night wind.

Henry smiled.

In front of his eyes were stars, not just five anymore, no, his whole vision was filled with lights.

He speculated that seeing nothing but stars would have driven him crazier since all he had to look at were five little ones in his every waking

hour. But *They* were gone now, vanished, blended in and scattered through the sky somewhere with their brothers, and Henry only saw them when he turned his head suddenly, breaking the illusion.

The sky was moonless, and the stars glowed clear, sparkling white as Henry rolled his eyes through the fine artistry of the universe.

He played a game with the frozen lights in his eyes. It was a matching game to see if those five awful blimps would sync up with the billions of constellations in the glorious infinity above his gaze. At each end of the sky, he played the game.

*There, no match; here, no match; over there, close, but no match.*

Unbelievably, he had found one. They had lined up perfectly. It matched the crooked pattern in his eyes point-by-point.

We have a *Bingo!*

He moved on to another end of sky and started the game again, but not one constellation matched as perfectly well as the last end of sky did, none screamed: *Bingo*.

Played out, Henry lay there for hours. His arms propped up behind his head, chewing on a straw of grass, soaking in the teeming billions of stars in each eyeful, bathing in night smells, until the sky began to brighten, and the sprawling universe slowly dissolved away like a developing photograph accidentally struck with light; *ruined*.

The aliens arrived. Not a day too late; if they had shown up later, Henry would have surely killed himself without knowing humans were not alone in the universe.

They beamed into his bedroom. The invasion didn't wake him up; Henry rarely slept anymore.

There was a flash of light, then, they were there.

Two creatures: one was a tiny, wimpy, sorry-looking fellow with a bulbous head and big black eyes. The other alien was a brute. An eight-foot-tall, multi-armed monster with the skin of a crab, its armored plating shimmered through the shadows of the bedroom. The tough crab creature shook the tiny, big-headed alien by its collar; it was a schoolyard

scene of a bully demanding lunch money. The two monsters were arguing with each other in a groggy, squishy sounding language at the foot of Henry's bed until, at last, the scrawny alien pointed towards Henry. The monstrous creature pointed at Henry as well, confirming.

Henry started to curl closer to the head of his bed, yanking the covers up to his neck as a small boy would do to protect himself against the Boogeyman.

"Hello," said the crab man, brightly, in broken, guttural bits of English. "I understand that your eyes have been giving you a whole heap of trouble?"

"You damn—" the words stammered in Henry's throat, he lowered the covers from his face. "You damn right, they have!"

"Oh, I am so awfully sorry for your suffering," the crab man slanted his whiskers in a frown. "I would have gotten here sooner if I had the chance. Believe me, I would."

"Is this all a dream?" Henry asked.

"Well, if you want it to be? Then it is. It's not very relative to our visit, anyway."

"What the hell do you want from me?"

"Why," the crab man brought the claws from his upper arms together and clapped. "To help you, of course. You poor, poor unfortunate creature." One of his lower arms pointed to the trembling alien. "You see this maggot over there? Well, he is responsible for your poor, unpleasant grief."

Behind him, the puny black-eyed alien squawked in a humming metallic voice, gesturing accusatorily at Henry. The crab man shouted back in the same metallic tongue, and the measly creature fell silent, quivering.

The crab man turned back to Henry and twisted his whiskers into something resembling a reassured smile.

"Is that so?" Henry nodded at the lowly, shivering alien. "If that's the case, I want to give him a very stern talking to! Perhaps, along with a sharp *knock* on the noggin, by God!"

“No, don’t waste your time with this pathetic fellow. He wouldn’t understand Earthling even if you shouted at him. Please, my good sir, stave off all violence. Leave that filthy work to me.”

“All right.”

“Good. Unfortunately, my gentle fellow, you have, unknowingly, been pulled into some nasty galactic business you never asked to be a part of. Sadly, this quaking, dung slosh of jelly is a fugitive from the outbound zones of the universe. He stole a map to the hidden treasures of Alpha Alioth. But, alas, my dear, sorry fellow,” the giant crab brought his lower arms into a regrettable shrug. “Before the map was returned to me, like the worthless worm of Izar he is, my associate zapped the coordinates of the treasure upon your eyeballs, leaving me with a useless map that told me nothing.”

“I don’t understand, how could my eyes—”

“Quite right, my poor friend, how could you understand? I am very sorry for all the weirdness. You see,” the crab man tried to slow down his speech to sound clearer. Instead, it came out as rolling thunder. “Those five dots on your vision are the outlining stars of the course one must take to retrieve the lost treasure. What you have in your eyes is one of the most prized possessions in the whole universe.”

“Yeah?” Henry hollered at the humongous creature. “Well, your *most prized* thing in the universe has been a never-ending hell for me! Go ahead! Take your damn lights back!”

“Well,” the crab-thing shuffled on crinkling feet. “That’s when we run into a problem, my good gentleman. Don’t let the sized of my confidant’s head fool you. He is quite dumb. The halfwit set the Graphing Gun to *Scorch*. You are unlucky, my poor-stricken friend, those coordinates could never be peeled off from your retinas no matter how long we place them in the Extract Bath.”

“No, no, no, you are *aliens from outer space*! You can figure out how to take these lights out of my eyes, somehow!”

“We simply cannot,” the crab man shook his head gravely. “Just like the unfortunate business of knocking one’s funny-bone against something hard, you’d think we would have grown past doing such a silly

thing by now, but, just like your eyes, my good chap, it is simply beyond our means.”

“This is stupid. Absolutely stupid! It’s all nonsense!” Henry said, more to himself than to the aliens at the foot of his bed.

“Quite right. You and I, my dear fellow, are in the same league of agreement. However, I can offer a few options to lessen your plight.”

“All right,” Henry crossed his arms. “Let’s hear it, big guy.”

“You could come with us and accompany our trip towards the treasure using your eyes to stay on course?”

“I’m not going anywhere with you. I’m staying here, on planet Earth.”

The crab started to talk, then hesitated, debated a thought, and then said, “Jolly good choice. I don’t blame you, my friend. It’s a treacherous piece of galaxy to fly through. I wouldn’t risk it if I didn’t already have to.” The crab’s whiskers twitched as if it caught a smell it didn’t like. “Then... Would you have any objections with me taking your eyes away with us, instead?”

“What do you mean, exactly? Do you mean you want to pluck my eyes out of my head so you can take it up to space with you?” Henry scowled.

“Why, yes,” the crab man said earnestly.

“Where were you a month ago, *my good fellow, my fine chap*, when I was driven crazy enough to dig them out of my own skull for you? You’ve missed your chance. *No*. That is out of the question, *my dear friend*. I want to be normal. I want to look and see and gaze, stare, and gawk with my eyes once more!”

The crab man’s whiskers drooped, sadly; one of his arms went up and stroked one of his nine chins. “Very good, my little friend, I wouldn’t give up my peepers, either—Well, there was that one time, but that was over a drinking game and it sorted itself out—Anyway, that leaves us with our third and final option, which is to replace your scorched eyes with unmarked ones.”

“No deal,” Henry said. “My mother gave me these eyes.”

The crab man approached Henry from the side of his bed, displaying his crustaceous appendages that also doubled as a pick, a sword, a club, and a guillotine. "I'm sorry, my poor fellow, but those are the options you have. One way or another, your eyes are coming with me, no matter if you're attached to them or not. If I were you, I would take the third choice. The human eyeball has such primitive optical functions, anyway."

Henry swallowed, staring at the claws that were the size of his own head. "Well," he breathed. "Will I get to see again? No more stars in the eyes?"

"You will get to see *better* than new, my young Earth friend. Those pesky dots blocking your vision? Presto, they will be gone! And since you have been graciously understanding with this whole mess, I will screw in new *advance* eyes to replace those useless ones of yours. Not to worry, I knew who your new eyes belonged to. Nice fellow. I used to do his bookkeeping for him."

"Now, wait!" Henry shot up his hands, and the claws halted in front of his face. "What about this treasure of yours? Don't I get a cut of it in some amount?"

The eyes that stood on the stalks above the crab man's head blinked twice, befuddled. "Why, I am sorry old chap. Boy, do I hate to be in a regrettable mood, but the treasures of Alpha Alioth are valueless in terms of Earth currency. As a matter of fact, if mankind would ever catch sight of it, I believe they'd try to eat it. Alioth jewelry looks so yummy."

"Oh," Henry's voice tapered off. "I see."

"Yes, you will see! That's the spirit! Righty-oh, then! Now, sit perfectly still, please. The eye swapping operation is, well, relatively painless."

There was a sound of drilling.

Was it a dream? Henry wasn't sure. Were there aliens? Were they in his bedroom? Rubbish, *my fine fellow*.

Was he still dreaming? He had to be. He was lying on his bed, but he was now outside. The sky was open above him. He saw a tiny plane soaring through the clouds, leaving a brisk air trail behind it. It was a jet

from *Pan-Am*, a five-hundred-seater. It was all so clear. Henry blinked his eyes in his dream; a moment of total darkness.

It was clean.

No more spots, no more dots, no more blotches or burns. The bullet holes were filled in with oily tar. He was staring at a wide screen of black.

No more stars twinkled. Not one, nor two, three, four, nor five. The "*Addams family*" had been kicked off of his eyeballs.

When Henry opened his eyes again, his ceiling hung above him. The view was unobscured.

Henry sat up off his bed, touching his eyes, rubbing them. His vision blurred and then cleared. No lights were blocking the world. He started to walk. By God, he could walk without tripping over himself! He guessed: he could drive; he could watch TV; he could read again. Crossword puzzles, here I come!

Relief washed over him, and he nearly tripped, not because of starry dots, but because of *joy*—the joys of life came trampling through him. He was so overwhelmed, he thought he couldn't see the ground under his feet; it was nothing but a death fall into molten lava pools through the Earth's crust.

Blink.

And it was linoleum again. He had to crouch down to gain his footing. Then, bounce—he was up again, laughing.

He danced into the bathroom, triggered the faucet, waited for the water to warm up. A spurt of toothpaste caked his brush. He rinsed it with water. And as Henry went to brush his teeth, he looked into the mirror of the medicine cabinet and saw—

A skeleton staring back at him; white bones, no decaying, nothing out of a horror movie. It was a pristine skeleton. It, too, was holding a toothbrush ready to scrub into its mouth.

Henry blinked, and the entire wall was gone. He saw into the neighbor's house. An old man was weighing himself on a scale in another bathroom twenty feet away.

Henry blinked.

It was normal again. A wall was there. The water was running. The toothbrush was in his hand. He was looking at himself in the mirror. But his eyes, they weren't the same color they used to be. The green he inherited from his father had been replaced with ...

*It definitely wasn't any Earthly shade of color.*

He blinked once more. The skeleton was in his reflection again.

As Henry said, "Dammit," the skeleton's jaw flapped up and down as it said the word with him.

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*Danny writes, particularly, stuff involving ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties. When he isn't writing or reading, Danny spends his time painting, drawing, and making comics. He lives in the small, quiet town of Kraemer, Louisiana, just outside the city of Thibodaux.*





# **In the Bowels of the Theatre**

By MATT SPENCER

*There is magic in the theatre, ancient and powerful—not just of the stage, but an elder and mighty god.... One which Sucunde would see freed and restored!*

Sucunde danced slowly across the bare boards backstage, as though floating through water. To the untrained eye, he would look tranquil, except for the gleaming, curved, razor-edged short-sword in his left fist, which fanned around him like an extension of himself. The painted backdrops depicted a peaceful forest glade, bathed in golden sunlight, etched in such luminous detail that the lamplit theatre might dissolve away around it. Even with his eyes closed, he could almost feel the afternoon summer breeze of such a place rippling against his skin.

He paused and breathed steadily. His eyes fluttered open and adjusted to the hanging oil lamps. Someone watched him from the shadows.

“Enjoying the show, Prima?” he said.

His cousin Prima stepped into the light, right as he turned towards her. This early in the day, with hours yet before greeting the public, she wore simple britches and a soft tunic, her pale hair hanging about her shoulders in a scraggly tangle. She shook her head. “I don’t like to watch men masturbate.”

“Except for your brother, on stage here every night, I guess.”

“Awfully bold, for a stagehand. You’re lucky he’s not around to hear you say that.”

“No, wouldn’t want to anger *Bathshire himself*, would we now?”

“You’ll never play Bathshire or any of the other great roles the Sacred Thespians embody within these walls, if that’s what you’re on about again.”

“Neither will you.” He studied her bright eyes. “Would you like to?”

“*Is that a real sword?* You’d...better put it back, wherever you got it.”

He picked up the scabbard from where he’d set it aside and sheathed the blade. “That would take some doing. I brought it with me from the countryside.”

“Who let you into the city-state with a weapon like that?”

He grinned. "A magician never reveals how he does his tricks. I was hoping you'd happen along and witness me practicing."

She sighed for patience. "Look, Sucunde, I already told you, I'm not interested."

"I'm not talking about getting up your skirts. I'm talking about what we both *really* want."

"Maybe you'd better stop right there." She peered closer. "What would you know, anyway, about what I *really* want?"

"All the glory before the crowds that the Sacred Imperial Mandates around here won't give you. Am I wrong?"

"You're speaking blasphemy is what you're doing."

"I used to run a little theatre of my own, you know, back home. To hear it told around here, we spoke fluent blasphemy nightly, to the crowd's delight. You didn't answer the question."

"You're not out in the countryside anymore. It's high time you stopped pissing all over the generosity you've been granted, thanks to the employment and lodgings I've secured for you here."

To hear her tell it, you'd think she'd been the one to pull the strings within the Spirelight Empire to have him and his two little siblings relocated here, out of the surrounding countryside. Many Spirelight pioneer families with ties to those within the city-state had done the same, as the conflicts with the Schomites got worse. To be fair, once she learned of his arrival, she *had* used that distant family connection to get him this high-tier theatre job, though his lower-born blood prevented him from making the most of it, according to the sacred ordinances. She never let him forget it. In return, he never let her forget which genetics she and her brother Tertza had or hadn't inherited from which ancestors...according to the priests upon their birth. Not like she ever could, though she'd long since learned to accept her place with graceful dignity...except whenever Sucunde jabbed at her about it.

"You didn't answer my question," he repeated. "What we both want is more out of the magic that lives in this theatre. We're both *good enough* to get more out of it. I've watched you on stage in the little roles they give you, while they cycle through the same old tired productions. You'd make

a better Bathshire than that anemic brother of yours, by far...or better yet, some other leading role, tailored anew to your own unique gifts.”

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts. “In a play spun by you, I suppose, from that bardic blasphemy you learned from those Schomite people you lived among out there.”

“Something like that.”

“Are you listening to yourself? Do you want to tempt the wrath of the gods themselves—of Priest King Krathusha himself, after everything that’s—”

“From what I hear, Priest King Krathusha can’t stop shitting himself long enough to get out of bed these days, let alone visit the theatre. As for the Spirah Pantheon, they may rule the rest of Trescha...but within the theatre, other gods hold sway. This theatre, in particular.” He grinned at how she perked up. “Like you said, I spent time living among Schomites.”

She rolled her eyes and waved a hand. “Let me guess, you’ve *become blood-brothers with the bandit-chief Rorkaster himself*, or some taller tale.”

“Not him, no, but a few guys and gals who are pretty fun in their own right. You learn a lot from Schomites, about the rich history of these lands we live on...of the lands on which this city-state is built, of what still dwells beneath our feet, what was here before us and will be here after us. There’s a reason this theatre—this temple of stories brought to life by its own kind of priests—was built on this spot. The people who built it didn’t know that...not consciously. And lucky me, here I am, thanks to you. Maybe that’s why I’m offering you this opportunity. My way of saying thanks.”

“What in the eight winds are you talking about?”

“When you’re a little man like me in an establishment like this...you’d be amazed how much you can explore, without anyone thinking twice about your comings and goings. Do you know how deep into the bowels of the city-state this building’s cellars run? If you poke around long enough, deep enough, you find the secret passageways that go down even deeper than the cellars. Even I haven’t ventured as deep as I could...but I’ll tell you this much. There’s something down there.

Something asleep, waiting to be awoken, something the priests don't want us to know about. But I do, and soon, so will you. Something that will make both our dreams come true. Once it does, none of them out there will be able to stop us...because the true god of the theatre will once again rule within these walls."

"So you're telling me that only you know how to find this sleeping devil, and if we go down there and stoke it up, and we sell our souls to it—"

"Not *sell our souls*. Just accept...a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship."

"And it'll make me the leading lady in productions of blasphemous tales penned by you, the crowds will worship us like gods for it, and neither the gods outside these walls nor their enforcers will be able to do a damn thing to stop us, so its ripple effects will leave this place with everyone who just experienced it, out into the rest of Trescha, to ripple through the rest of the populace, causing...who knows what upheaval?"

"You wouldn't approve?"

She drew closer and spoke softer. "Perhaps I would, more than you'd know, believe it or not. You've only lived in Trescha for a year or so. I've been here since I was four. You have no idea what it's like, trapped your whole life in this gilded cage."

"So you're in."

"I would be if I didn't think you're just crazier than a drunk spine-rat."

"There's one way to find out."

"How's that?"

"Meet me by the third-tier stage-door tonight, at two hours past midnight. Where we go from there...You might want to bring along something sharp, in case you feel the need to defend yourself."

"I'm well-schooled in handling a blade, in case you haven't actually paid attention to what I can do on stage."

"Yes, of course. You're amazing at stage fighting."

She rolled her eyes. "As you're pretty good at those half-asleep sword-dances I guess you learned from the Schomites, or maybe the Lepods."

Fine, then. Tonight it is, unless you're just another fool full of hot air."

## II

Prima stood within the short tunnel down on the third tier, leading out from the stage door, from which the last of the lower-born employees had exited several hours ago...those who didn't sleep in the theatre, that was. She peeked out into the empty streets beneath the fattening moon, against the nearly starless sky, all while trying to make her heart quit hammering. It was at least twenty minutes after two. Where the hell was Sucunde?

A stray noise caused her to shrink back into the narrow enclosure. She was clad from head to toe in form-fitting black, the only speck of brightness being the glittering clamshell hilt of the rapier she wore on her belt. She'd tied her hair into a single tight, whip-like braid that hung just past her shoulders.

Maybe Sucunde had thought her ignorant of the form she'd witnessed him practicing today...No. He'd known damn well what he was doing to her, from the beginning, the bastard. The form through which he'd moved was a primitive sword-dance that looked serene in practice, but at full speed would be deadly. *He thinks I'm useless in a scrape, except for stage-fighting*, she told herself. There was a lot he didn't know about her, it was true...but she knew even less about him. He loved to reminisce about how he'd *lived among Schomite bandits, learning their lore and craft*. Didn't he realize that wasn't something to brag about around here? Especially not these days, with the whole city-state on high alert. By the gods, their Priest King had been attacked, by a traitorous Police Captain, now at large in the countryside, rumored to be in league with the Bandit Chief Rorkaster himself, and Sucunde still couldn't get over his mad, jilted pride, over the lot the gods and his birth had dealt him—*robbed him of his wild glory days among farmers and Schomites*, as he saw it.

The door lurched open behind her. She spun, drew her rapier with a sharp chime, and backed out of the corridor into the deserted street.

A voice echoed, "Why so jumpy, cousin? Sorry I'm late."

She stepped backwards off the sidewalk, her blade still pointed forward. "*Klesh?* He's here!"

Sucunde stepped into the light, clad in the same black stagehand garb as Prima. He squinted at her. "Klesh?"

"That's right," said the man who stepped out of the nearby alcove, clad in the plain gray of a patrolman's uniform. He knocked a bolt into a caster and leveled it. "Look, Sucunde, brother, this doesn't have to end badly. Just unhitch that illegal blade, set it on the ground, step out into the light, and walk towards me, slowly."

Sucunde followed instructions, then lifted his hands. "Hi, Klesh. Man, ain't you risen far since we both came from the same place."

"I mean it, man, don't make this worse for yourself. Prima told me everything."

"I doubt it."

Sucunde approached Klesh with such an air of polite surrender that Klesh didn't even notice him closing the distance 'til it was too late. He slapped Klesh's wrist, so the cord twanged and the bolt launched. It went right through Klesh's boot. Klesh opened his mouth to howl, but Sucunde clamped a hand over it, yanked the man close, pulled a small knife from the rear waistband of his trousers, and jerked the edge through Klesh's throat. Klesh convulsed and gurgled, his windpipe whistling wetly as he fought to draw breath. Sucunde dragged him into the dark passageway, settled him against the wall, and left him there to bleed out. Prima stood frozen, her rapier stretched out in front of her.

Sucunde calmly retrieved his own sword, buckled it back to his belt, and said, "You'll want to put that away unless you plan to try your luck like he just did." He gave the seeping corpse a little kick.

Prima steadied her hands long enough to sheathe her sword, then stepped into the shadows. "He...just wanted to help you. Please, Sucunde, you're not right in the head..."

"You're right about that second part, I guess."

"That man was your brother-in-arms, out there, in the countryside. He..."

"Wrong again. Before he was recalled here to street duty, he killed some of my *real* brothers. Some sisters, too. Did he ever tell you about



all the Schomite village women he raped? Little girls, too. Of course, you don't see those things in the plays here, of the heroic Spirelight taming of the savage frontier."

"You'll never get away with this."

"You mean *we'll* never get away with this. You're an accessory to this murder now." He leaned sideways and clapped Klesh's damp, cooling shoulder. "So you've got two choices. You can go running down the street, shouting your pretty little head off, so we can see how the Tribunal looks at it. Or we stick to our original plan, where you follow me down to the true heart of this theatre we both call home...to the kind of knowledge and power that *their* morality and fables have always tried to scare us away from. They've *always* been more scared of us than they've convinced us to be of them. Not just the priests, but the gods, too. If you just follow me now, you'll find out why."

He didn't wait for her answer, just turned and strode off into the darkness. She felt the lake of Klesh's blood pool around her shoes. She turned from it and hurried after Sucunde.

### III

It was pitch black once the door swung shut behind her, but Prima knew these back passages of the theatre well enough. All she had to do was follow the soft pad of Sucunde's footsteps...even once he led her down a narrow, steep flight of wooden stairs. The air grew thicker and mustier, the lower they went. Once they reached the bottom, he lit a lantern, the glow of which spilled through the thickly swirling dust. Musty old costumes hung from the walls, of gods and devils from a thousand old productions, some forgotten since before either of them were born, now looming over them on either side like accusing, hollow-eyed sentinels.

In the lantern's glare, Sucunde's eyes were oddly soft. "I guess you've never seen anyone actually die before, I mean other than on stage, with fake blood."

She swallowed hard but didn't look away. "You're acting like that was a stage-murder you just committed."

“You’re the one who brought Klesh into it.”

“So you’re saying it’s my fault a man’s dead?”

“Depends on how you look at it.” He turned away and ran his free hand along a stack of crates against the left wall, feeling his way through the gloom, as though he only half-remembered where he was going or what he was looking for, as though the tactile sensation was slowly but surely leading his body and memories back to something long-buried within his own mind. “If you seriously, genuinely want nothing more out of life than what the gods, the priests, and their enforcers tell you to accept, within their parameters, with the odds stacked against you...then I guess it’s my fault for inviting you in the first place.”

She edged up closer behind him as he shuffled about. “So humanoid lives mean less to you than your mad ambitions.”

“The ones to whom keeping me in my place, down in the shit with them, means more than letting me carve out my own destiny? Yes.”

She watched him scoot into the tight space. Her jaw quivered. The rapier on her belt felt heavier in its scabbard.

“...Just like you should go ahead and draw that blade right now and stab me in the back while I’m down here at a disadvantage,” he continued. “If living on in this *gilded cage* we call life in the Spirah Empire is worth some *greater good* you think you’d be serving...Oh, right, I forgot. Actual murder is too foreign to your stage-fighting hand.”

Her breath deepened as her quivering fingers drifted towards the rapier.

“Ah, here it is, found it!” said Sucunde.

He wrenched something wet and rotted away from the wall. A small black space showed between the bricks. He set the lantern on top of some crates, ducked down, and slid himself feet first through the hole in the wall. Prima crouched and peered in after him.

“Are you coming or not?” his voice echoed out. “Be careful. There’s a steep drop right after you slide in.”

She came forward breathlessly.

When she reached for the lantern, he said, “No, leave it. We’ll be making our way down through pitch blackness for a little while. You’ll just have to get used to it.”

She lowered herself and scooted her feet through the hole. A smooth, steadily descending sandstone surface met her. She slid in easily over it until all but her head and shoulders were through. The ground dropped off beneath her feet, and she shot all the way into the darkness, as though yanked forward by some invisible force. A pair of strong, narrow hands caught her by the waist.

“There, steady, that’s it, I’ve got you.”

He lowered her slowly ’til her feet settled on solid ground. She fell against him and clutched at his corded shoulders ’til she found her footing. As her breathing steadied, she shoved him away.

“Easy there! We have to go carefully. There’ll be light again soon enough...and I really don’t know how the oil that makes the flame of that lamp would react to the air that feeds the natural lighting down there.”

“Natural lighting? This far underground?”

“Not *underground*. Under the city-state.”

He hadn’t been kidding about the steep climb. For the first half of it, she let him hold her hand and lead the way. After that, she got the hang of it, pulled free, and made the rest of the descent on her own. The air tasted damper the lower they went. Almost before she realized it, she began to see the faint outlines of her surroundings. Their cavernous surroundings widened, ’til she could no longer stretch out her arms and touch both walls. The light that shone from below came in hues of bright yellow, purple, and blue, with traces of crimson and emerald. The walls had given way to craggy, upward-jutting outcroppings of rock, which little by little revealed the rolling landscape into which they headed.

She gasped and blinked, her eyes unable to decide just what sort of image they were taking in. It was impossible, yet undeniable: they weren’t underground anymore. Instead, they stood before an expanse of rolling plains and forests, full of furry trees and glistening, pod-speckled bushes. The landscape was bright as high noon, yet it was a starry night sky that looked down over everything. No, she realized, those weren’t stars, but rather a dangling tangle of little glowing pods, sprouting and

falling from vines that crisscrossed the rocky ceiling high above. This was no stage-dressing, but they weren't outdoors, either. They'd stepped into *a world inside the world*.

"How does no one up there know about all this?" she asked.

"There you go again with your misplaced faith. They know. The ones who pull our strings, anyway. They'd just prefer to forget about it. They sleep better at night thinking everyone else is too stupid to discover it for themselves."

"Are there alarms down here we have to worry about? I don't want to get arrested for—"

"None that I've ever bumbled across," said Sucunde. "Come on, we're almost to her."

They stepped off the sandstone descent, onto a soft meadow overgrown with wild corkscrew flora, then climbed a hill into a cluster of trees. All around, she saw plant life she recognized only faintly from paintings or descriptions in the scrolls, some native to only Valaka or as far as the Ghestru continents, or so she'd thought 'til tonight. Through the bushes and furry, hanging moss, there came the scuttles and gibbers of creatures she'd neither seen nor heard of, in the Treschan territories or elsewhere; things that moved like frogs or lizards, except with silky fur like cats or rodents, creeping mercurially on insectile legs, the evolutionary products of this world the city-state she called home had shut away from the sun.

Prima's hand slipped towards her rapier.

"I wouldn't do that," said Sucunde. "They won't react to us as a threat unless we present one. Besides, I'd rather we save our strength for where we're going."

Finally, the forest dropped away, so they came out onto the grassy ridge of a small, bare-earth natural amphitheater, at the center of which arose a smooth, rectangular, monolithic slab. Atop the slab lay a stone sculpture of what looked like some kind of sleeping reptile. As they descended into the amphitheater, Prima noticed how the smooth stone beneath their feet was etched in labyrinthine lines, all converging around the monolith. The sculpture was wrapped in ropes or vines that glowed like white-hot metal.

“What is that?” gasped Prima.

“You wouldn’t have heard of her...except in some legends of a demon, one who was subdued and bound by a pair of swordsman mages...long ago, at the birth of Trescha. Some say those swordsmen were students of Bathshire himself.”

Prima shook her head and backed away. “You’re saying that’s the Demon Telente...”

“Not a demon. Something closer to a dragon, really. A spirit of tale and song. Her power still feeds the tales we bring to life in the theatre above...except on their terms, not hers. Tonight, we’re going to change that.”

“We?”

He grinned. “Two sorcerer-swordsmen bound her here. Two shall set her free. That’s often the nature of spirits of tales and songs.”

“But...we’re not sorcerers.”

“Oh, but we are. Haven’t you been listening to what I’ve said, about the spirit of the theatre? We’re steeped in that magic, surely as the Priests in their dome at the top of the city-state are steeped in their sorcery. Come now, draw your sword and strike away the first of the cords that bind her. I’ll be right beside you, striking away the rest.”

She ripped out her rapier and pointed it at him. “There, I’ve drawn my sword. One way or the other, this madness of yours stops now!”

“Are you...seriously threatening me?” He tried to sound amused, but she heard the nervousness in his voice. It put steel in her spine.

“I’m sorry.” She stepped towards him, the blade leveled on his chest.

“Prima, this is stupid. You’re a stage-fighter, not a—”

Her sword’s tip poked his chest. “You’re the one who said you needed a *fellow swordsman*. So your plan’s fucked either way because I won’t play the role you’ve cast me in.”

“Yeah, you will. Poke me again with your blade and see what happens.”

“If you don’t want me to stop you, you’re just gonna have to draw your own blade and kill me.”

“No, I don’t have to do that, either.”

She lunged at him, the blade thrusting at his heart. He moved one foot behind the other, swaying sideways so her blade plowed past him. As he recovered his balance, he caught her sword wrist and yanked her forward. She stumbled, so her sword’s tip struck the stone sculpture. Sucunde pressed her wrist so the blade scraped down the stone, right through one of the glowing cords. As the rope hissed away beneath her slice, whatever illuminated it from within seemed to shoot out, at either end, through her sword, up through her entire body. She fell to her knees in a shrieking paroxysm, as if the blood in her veins had turned to fire.

*“What have you done to me?”* she shrieked through her teeth.

“Just guided you through the first step. Congratulations. You’ve done great!”

“Then...make...this...pain...stop.”

“I can’t. I can only share it with you, ’til we’ve both finished the work you’ve started.”

With that, his sword sang from its scabbard. He spun away from her and slashed another glowing rope. As the two ends slithered away, the light from within shot through his blade into his whole body. She saw him stagger, teeth clenched to the breaking point. Watching its extraordinary effect, a new level of horror filled her, beholding the full extent of what she must look like now. He glowed all over like a burning coal, the veins bulging in his face, neck, and hands, looking ready to explode.

He splayed his feet wide. His wild grin looked all the more horrible beneath his bulging, bloodshot eyes. “There’s only one way to make this stop, Prima. We have to make our limbs move and cut the ropes away. Once she’s free, we will be too.”

Prima had to force her neck to move through the blaze, just to look down at herself, the blade still in her hand. She heard a whistling chop and looked up. Sucunde had already lashed away two more of the ropes.

“Time’s a-wasting, Prima! It won’t work if we don’t both do our share. If I cut too many more of them than you...she might not let you go.”

*Maybe I should try to kill him one last time.* She lurched to her feet. *It won’t work if one of us is dead, right?* Instead, she found herself stumbling towards the sculpture, lifting her blade. When she sliced the nearest rope away, more of the poison, electric light blasted through her. It hurt worse than before, so she was sure she’d die from it...yet now, it also energized her, so she flung herself into it. Wild laughter echoed through her ears as she went to work. She thought, at first, it was that mad asshole Sucunde, but no, she realized, it was her.

Eventually, her strength gave out, and she fell to her knees. Her skull throbbed so powerfully that it took her a while to notice that the blazing agony had ceased. It was much darker now because she and Sucunde had sliced away the last of the glowing ropes. She looked around through the gloom and saw that he’d also fallen to his knees. His chin had fallen against his chest. He slumped utterly still, like he’d died sitting up.

Then he lifted his head, lurched to his feet, panted, and shouted, “*Prima, darling! That was fun!*”

She looked back and forth, between him and the statue which sat there as stony as ever...still motionless, still just...a statue. That was what she’d played his game of pain for, what Klesh had died for.

She lunged at him. “*You delusional son of a bitch!*”

“Hey, hang on a second, we’re still—”

She stabbed at his heart. Only a reflexive pivot carried him out of the path of her blade, and not far enough. Her tip skewered the bicep of his sword-arm. He howled as the blade slipped from his grip and clattered on the stone between them. He stooped and reached for it, but his fingers weren’t working right thanks to the gash in his shoulder, so they fumbled uselessly against the grip. She stabbed again. This time, he swung fully out of the way, grabbing up his sword in his other hand as he went.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” he shouted.

“Wrong with *me*? Look around, you maniac!”

She swung and thrust over and over. He deflected her chiming strikes as he retreated. He now wielded his blade in his left hand, which wasn't his sword hand, while his other arm bled faster, the more he moved. He was also learning just how big a mistake he'd made, dismissing her as a mere stage-fighter. Even at such a disadvantage, though, he wasn't one to go down easy.

*I don't have to best him, she reminded herself. I just have to outlast him. The way he's bleeding, it can't take much longer.*

That was true, but while they fought and he bled, something else weird was happening out of the corners of her eye. The sliced ropes had stopped glowing, yet that same white-hot glare was still present, getting stronger than ever. As Sucunde danced away from Prima, she realized what was happening. Where his blood had spilled, it had flowed into the cracks and grooves of the stone. It caught fire and flowed straight to the foot of the statue, climbing the base. The statue was moving... sometimes in the shape of a woman, sometimes in the shape of a massive serpent, more often somehow both and neither, all at once. It somehow moved like a solid creature, yet also flowed like liquid from form to form. It spilled off the base, came up behind Sucunde and swallowed him whole, then came straight at Prima and swallowed her.

For a moment, all was oblivion, then she felt herself catch fire again... except this time, it didn't scorch her. No, now she *was* the fire.

*Will you have this?* said the crackle of flames. *Will you be this?*

"Yes!" she screamed.

With that, the fire she'd become exploded through the belly of the beast that had swallowed her. By the time it had consumed the beast, it had consumed her consciousness as well...all but the pure sensation of rolling outward in every direction...*free*.

## IV

She woke up in bed, feeling as bled out as Sucunde had looked. A servant came in, saw that she was awake, and instantly turned and ran back out.



Moments later, her brother Tertza came in, looking thinner and paler than she'd ever seen him. "Oh, thank the gods, you're awake!"

"No thanks to one god I can think of," she muttered.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. How...?"

"You don't remember the fire?"

"What fire?"

"I guess not. It started somewhere in the lower cellars. We managed to put it out, but..." He shook his head. "The damage was extensive, and all the troubles have set us back on repairs by nearly a month. We found you down near the cellars. Sucunde got you out, but...he injured his arm pretty badly somehow. He's mostly recovered by now." As he gazed at her, she noticed the strange sheen over his eyes.

"Wait...How long have I been out?"

"Nearly a month. You both suffered a lot of smoke inhalation. The doctors all said you should be fine physically, but...something they couldn't place had hold of you, kept you delirious. I was starting to worry...not only for the well-being of a sister, but that we may have lost the star of our next production."

"But...Tertza...you're..."

He shook his head. "Dear, you've missed so much. There was...a siege. That turncoat renegade Captain Severen Gris. Somehow he and a band of Schomite outlaws...They broke into the High Temple. Captain Gris and his rabble have seized control of Trescha, and with all that followed, I feared none of us would live to reopen—"

She put a hand to her head. "Tertza, slow down! I just finally came to my senses, we're telling me we're under occupation, and you're still talking about reopening?"

Tertza gulped. "You don't understand. Our...*General* Gris now, he's visited the theatre personally. He's allocated city funds to our restoration. We'll be reopening far earlier than expected."

"That...that's wonderful!"

Tertza still didn't look very excited. "Our city-state's new spiritual leadership has...very different ideas about what's permissible within the arts, in the eyes of the gods. Prima, I don't know how else to say this, so I'll just come right out with it. It's time to keep this theatre fresh, to explore untrodden lore, and...our cousin Sucunde's scroll-scribblings have come to my attention, as well as the General's, and...His skill could take some meeting with his natural ability, but we'll workshop it out in time for our new production. Get used to the idea, Prima. You're to be our new leading lady in *The Tale of the Rise and Fall and Resurrection of the Dragon God Telente*."

---

*Matt Spencer is the author of The Deschembine Trilogy (The Night and the Land, The Trail of the Beast, The Blazing Chief) and the novels Changing of the Guards and The Renegade God, along with numerous novellas and short stories. He lives in Vermont with his wife and two cats.*

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# **An Accumulation of Anguish**

By JAMES LAM

*It's Halloween Night—a time when ghosts, and ghouls, and monsters are afoot! But one young trick-or-treater may learn the hard way that some monsters are real!*

I don't know how I had gotten there. The only recollection I had was of trick-or-treating on Arkney Street in my Frankenstein costume. My face painted a lurid yellow, silver painted bottle caps stickied to my neck, and clothes oversized. I was wearing my dead father's suit. My hair was messy, and like Harry Potter, I had a red crack drawn on my forehead, like my brain had been exposed. At my wrists and my neck, my mom had painted fake stitches with a Sharpie.

As my senses returned, I realized that I had been bound to a chair and gagged with a fetid cloth. I looked around the chamber in which I was so obviously being held captive. I beheld a makeshift operating table with strange steel equipment beside it. As I did so, a creaking door opened somewhere behind me. Rigid in fright, I saw a familiar shape... a man... my family doctor... Dr. Ingolstadt! He didn't say a word. I tried to scream. Wincing, he turned.

"I'm sorry. I have to do this."

My mind raced.

By way of explanation he went on in a now tremulous whisper: "You may have heard. My daughter Caroline is very sick. She's been in and out of school. She has a heart defect."

I was shocked. I had seen her earlier that day, in school. We'd talked about our costumes. She was going to go as an angel.

I struggled in my chair.

When he said, "I had to... take things into my own hands," he picked up a syringe full of fluorescent green liquid and advanced upon me with tears in his craven eyes.

At this, my pulse raced like a horse's being chased by a pack of rabid wolves.

He pulled up the right sleeve of my dead father's jacket. I pleaded at him with my eyes and struggled in my chair.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, the needle jumped from his hands, and he collapsed to the floor.

Caroline, an angel, stood above us holding a metal tray.

“It’s always one thing or another with daddy,” she said. “Something always goes wrong. My lungs. My kidneys. And now my heart. I’ve known too many kids like you.”

As she cut me free with a surgical knife, she went on: “Daddy has to let me go.”

Freed, I fled up the steps and heard her final words.

“You’re wrong, you know. You aren’t dressed up like Frankenstein; you’re dressed like Frankenstein’s Creature.”

And, as I pulled the noxious rag from my mouth, I uttered my pathetic thanks and somehow knew she spoke the truth. For, as she had been hurriedly cutting away my bonds, I’d seen *her* wrists and her neck, free from the long sleeves and bracelets she’d always worn in school. I’d seen her *real* stitches.

---

*James Lam is a convicted student from B.C., Canada. He hopes to drive cars and not hit trees, to learn Spanish and order tacos. He enjoys dystopias and having eaten ice cream. James has orbited Sol 16 times and tweets from its 3rd planet @jameslam321*





# **The Horror of the Hills**

By JUDE REID

***Impatient to be the first to Meall Dearg's summit, a pair of climbers leave their partners behind...failing to return! What became of those who braved the peak?!***

“But just think what it would mean,” Norah Loughton said, leaning across the table, her eyes bright with enthusiasm, “if we were to reach it first.”

The three of us—Norah, Laura Buchanan and I—were in the smoking room of the Pioneer Club on Bruton Street, though as usual Norah was the only one with a cigarette in her hand. It was early in 1894, and while most of the inhabitants of London were concerned with the relentless sleet and the rising Navy estimates, we were already planning our next season’s mountain-climbing.

“Hinxton intends to summit *Meall Dearg* in the spring,” Laura observed. “As soon as the thaw sets in.”

“Which is why we should do it *before* the thaw,” Norah said.

“A winter ascent *and* a first ascent, both at once?”

“And why not? Torridon is hardly the Alps, and we managed those easily enough in October.”

“Yes—with a guide, and perfect weather!” Laura laughed, though she was shaking her head in disbelief. “Besides, even if we were to reach the summit, I imagine whichever *man* comes next—Hinxton or any of the others—would simply deny our achievement and take the laurels for himself.”

“Exactly.” Norah turned to me. “So Hilda will bring that little camera of hers of which she is so fond, and publish an article for her newspaper.”

I blinked at Norah. “Will I?”

“Of course you will!” Norah wore an expression of puckish delight. “Three women first at the summit of *Meall Dearg*, the legendary unclaimed peak of *Liathach*—surely that’s newsworthy, even to your little paper. And who would argue with us then?”

“You’re quite mad,” Laura said in a tone of admiration.

Norah shrugged. “It’s been said before. So, what do you two say?”

Laura paused for a moment, then shook her head again. “Not this time, Norah. Next summer, I’ll come with you, and we can bag a few peaks.”

“Pity,” Norah said. “What about you, Hilda?”

I thought of the great granite hills looming against greyer skies, all harsh contours and jutting quartzite. Compared to the mountains I had climbed in Europe, the peaks of the Torridon range were dwarves—but there was something ancient and alluring about those glacier-scoured peaks that drew me to them far more than to the graceful Alpine heights. “Yes. I’ll come.”

“Then a toast to the three intrepid explorers—you, me, and the Box Brownie.” Norah raised her glass, and Laura looked down at her lap, teeth worrying at her lower lip. I think she had expected me to refuse as well, and now found herself occupying the awkward position of the odd woman out.

“Do be careful,” she said at last.

“I’m always careful,” I said and smiled at her.

“Yes, but *she* isn’t.” Laura helped herself to a Turkish cigarette from the box on the table, and rolled it, unlit, between her fingers.

“*That*,” Norah said, with what seemed to me like unnecessary satisfaction, “is how I get things done.”

The next few weeks passed in a blur of preparation. Norah travelled north ahead of me to make the relevant local arrangements, swearing me to secrecy all the while. If Hinxton, or any of the ambitious male climbers of our acquaintance, should get wind of the fact that we intended to cheat him out of the first ascent of Liathach’s unclaimed peak, then the ridge would be crawling with mountaineers by the time we arrived. For that reason, she arranged to collect most of our equipment in Wester Ross, and I planned to join her there at the start of March.

The first part of my journey—the sideways rattle of the sleeper to Edinburgh Waverley—went smoothly enough, but the Inverness line was obstructed by a landslip, and my connecting train delayed by a good eight hours while the rails were cleared. Rather than risk arriving in the dark, I sent a telegram ahead of me and arranged a room in the Station Hotel for the night, resolving to continue my journey the next day. When I arrived in Inverness, I was greeted by a smiling porter with a message

for “the lady climber,” who informed me that my companion had gone on the day before to Achnashellach Station, and that I was to meet her at the coaching inn through the pass to the north. I could well imagine Norah’s impatience as news of my delay reached her. No doubt there had been a few moments of restlessness while she decided on a course of action, and then implemented it by the most direct route.

Rain was falling in the way that only Scottish rain can by the time I disembarked in the tiny station. I took a rickety coach from there to the Torridon Inn, a picturesque half-timbered building that seemed to have been drawn straight from a novel by Sir Walter Scott. I should not have been surprised to see a highwayman riding into the courtyard, complete with bucket-top boots and tricorne hat, but inside the decor seemed modern and comfortable enough. The lady of the house greeted me warmly and showed me to a neat little bedroom, before suggesting that I might like to take my supper along with the other guests. In the parlour a merry fire was crackling, a pair of elderly locals were leaning by the bar, each with a glass of whiskey that I guessed was not the first of the evening, and a red-haired young man in a threadbare tweed suit was sitting in a wing chair by the window.

“I was to meet a friend here,” I said to the landlady, and for the first time her cheerful composure seemed to falter. “Another climber?”

It was the young man by the fire who answered. “If you’re here to meet the other woman, you’re a day late.”

“Yes, I’m perfectly aware of that. My train was delayed at Waverley.”

He shrugged one rangy shoulder. I guessed him to be Glaswegian, having spent enough of my childhood in Glasgow to recognise the harsh, flat vowels of the working-class accent. “Billy Mathieson,” he said, rising and offering me a hand to shake. I took it, feeling the rough calluses of a manual labourer, though he could be no older than I. By contrast, my hand felt soft and useless, like a silk slipper.

“Hilda Roxburgh,” I said. It would have seemed gauche to use my title, and I kept it to myself.

“And you’re here to climb *Liathach*, Miss Roxburgh?” he asked me. He pronounced the mountain’s name correctly—*Leah-goch*—though I was confident he was not a native Gaelic speaker.

“I might ask the same of you,” I replied, gesturing to the serviceable-looking pair of hiking boots poking out from beneath his tweedy hems. He laughed at that, a short, dry snort that I rather liked.

“It seems we’re a pair of wallflowers, then. My climbing partner and yours are up the hills ahead of us.” He gestured to the window, where the snow-topped bulk of the mountain loomed overhead.

“When?”

“First thing today, I hear. I came this afternoon with the mail coach—delayed, of course—only to find Peter Connick had gone up without me, and with a woman, no less.” He was smiling, but I could hear the tight note of frustration in his voice.

“And you didn’t think to follow?”

“Too much of the day already gone,” he said. “I’ve missed my chance at *Meall Dearg*.”

Outside, the light was fading. The year was yet to turn from the dark Highland winter to the endless days of summer light, and I judged that it would be dark before very much longer.

“Well then, Mr. Mathieson,” I said, forcing brightness into my voice. “It seems you and I have but one course of action ahead of us.”

“And what would that be?” His brow furrowed in an almost comical expression of suspicion.

“To wait here with a good meal and a glass or two of whiskey, the better to prepare ourselves to congratulate the others on their triumphant return from the summit.”

“That,” Mathieson said darkly, though there was the hint of a smile on his face, “will take some bloody effort.”

The evening passed pleasantly enough in Mathieson’s company. He was a dock-worker from Clydeside who spent his meagre earnings and his Sundays striking out for any decent-sized mountain he could reach, often camping the evening before on its slopes and setting off for the summit at first light. Much like Norah’s and mine, his trip to Wester Ross had been planned for some months and at considerable expense.

“I might still have a crack at it,” he said phlegmatically, regarding the inch of golden liquid in his glass. “Just because Connick took it first doesn’t mean it’s going anywhere.”

“Connick and *Loughton*,” I corrected him, and he gave me a quizzical look.

“Funny business for a pair of women to be climbing these sort of hills.” he said. “They’re not just a wee walk in the countryside, you know.”

“I’m perfectly aware of that, Mr. Mathieson,” I told him. “They’re not the Matterhorn, either, and I don’t recall that giving me much trouble.” As it happened, the Matterhorn had given me *considerable* trouble, and it was only with the expertise and mentorship of the redoubtable Lucy Walker that Norah, Laura, and I had reached the summit at all. Still, there was no need for Mathieson to know that.

“The Matterhorn’s no ant-hill,” he said and sipped at his whiskey.

“And nor is *Liathach*. I expect the view is stunning from up there.”

“The other two can tell us when they get down.” Mathieson looked uneasy. Unspoken between us was the awareness that the hour was late and that neither of our companions had as yet returned. “They’ll maybe be bivvying up there,” he said, and got to his feet. “I’d best turn in, Miss Roxburgh. If they’re not back by tomorrow, we should take a wander up there ourselves.”

“With a *woman*, Mr. Mathieson?”

He flashed me a grin. “If you’re game, Miss Roxburgh,” he said, and I wish now I had not been so eager to agree.

When I rose in the grey pre-dawn light, I found Mathieson already scraping a hasty breakfast into himself by the parlour fire, a full pack propped against his chair.

“I had her scramble eggs for the pair of us,” he said, pointing to a second plate, and I dug in with tremendous gratitude.

“No sign of either, I take it?” I asked, and he shook his head. “Perhaps they’ve camped out for the night and we’ll see them on their descent.”

“Maybe so. I’ll be having words with Connick when we do.”

“We might press on for the summit anyway,” I said, and he gave me another sidelong look. “If they’re both well and uninjured, I mean. It seems a shame to have come so far only to turn back now.”

The thought of Norah, injured—or worse—on the jagged quartzite rocks was at the forefront of my mind. I told myself I was being foolish—she was a seasoned mountaineer and would have been the first to tell me to dismiss such unhelpful fancies from my mind. I had no measure of Peter Connick—he was not one of the fashionable hill set so beloved of the London papers—but if the apparent good sense of his partner reflected in any way his own I could be reasonably confident of his abilities.

We left the coaching inn before the sun was fully over the horizon, a pale grey mist clinging to the air and dampening our skin, hair, and equipment. Both of us had two ice-axes secured to our backpacks, and Mathieson had a pair of forefoot grapettes hanging from his belt. I supposed those would be a tolerable alternative to spiked boots, though they looked damnably unwieldy by comparison.

There was no gentle incline to start us on our climb. The gradient was punishing, and we gained height quickly, Mathieson setting a good pace which I matched without too much difficulty. The ground behind us fell away as the sun rose, and I watched the warm gold light spill across the terraced sandstone with a growing sense of wonder. Mathieson drew to a halt, and we regarded the scene for a moment.

“Not a bad view,” he remarked.

“Rather a good one, I would have said.”

Without waiting for a reply, he continued, and I reluctantly turned my back on the heathery lower slopes and turned my face to the looming ridge above. In places the path was so steep I had to use my hands, and as we gained elevation the grey stone was gradually cloaked in a deepening mantle of snow. Mathieson strapped on his grapettes, and I changed my flat-soled boots for hobnails, both of us taking advantage of the break to chew a few mouthfuls of bread and cheese.

“Look there,” I said, pointing to the path ahead of us. “Footprints.”



Two sets of boot-prints, neither fresh enough for the size to be easily apparent, were imprinted in the snow, tracing a path towards *Liathach's* first summit and the great ridge beyond it.

"Heading upwards," he said and frowned.

"They might have come down by another route," I offered. "At the far end of the ridge."

"Or straight off it." It was the first time he had openly expressed fear for our companions, and hearing his unease made mine all the more acute. Much of the rest of that first ascent passed in silence as the low fog around us deepened and the world seemed condensed into a close-walled, muffling grey chamber. We lost our trail of footprints and took it in turns to trace a waving upward path towards a peak that never seemed to get any closer.

I walked into Mathieson's back as he stopped abruptly, nearly propelling us both face-first into the mountainside.

"What? What is it?" I asked, righting myself and rubbing at my jaw where it had connected with the buckle of his rucksack.

"Up there." His voice was soft, and I followed the line of his pointing finger. On the hillside ahead, haloed in the light of the sun at our backs, a colossal figure loomed above us.

"Dear God," I murmured, and raised a hand to my eyes to try to focus my vision. The figure did the same, and I realised that it was nothing more than a conglomerate of our two shadows, cast onto the mist ahead of us by the sun behind.

"A Brocken Spectre," I said, almost giddy with relief. "Nothing more than a trick of the light."

Then a hand touched my shoulder and I screamed, and Mathieson's flailing arm as he turned knocked me flat onto my backside in the snow.

"Peter!" I heard him shout.

As I righted myself, I saw another climber, half a head taller than Mathieson, clapping him on the shoulder, a broad grin of delight spreading across a pale, freckled face. "There you are! I knew you'd come!"

“You’re lucky we did,” Mathieson said dryly, though relief was clearly painted across his features. “What’s your game, setting off without me? You might have bloody waited and not got into half this trouble.”

“I wish we had,” his friend said, with a rueful nod. “I was all for staying back, but Miss Loughton—the woman climber—talked me into making the ascent. Time was of the essence, she said. To hear her talk, you’d think every climber in the Empire was hot on our heels ready to bag that first ascent of *Meall Dearg*.”

A dull jolt of betrayal passed through my gut. Connick’s words had the ring of truth, and while it was loyalty and friendship that always brought me along in Norah’s wake, such lesser considerations paled in the face of her relentless striving ambition. I had been less a partner in this escapade than a necessary piece of equipment, worthy of no more sentiment than my portable camera. I remembered that in my concern to set off early and lightly equipped I had left the camera in my room in the Torridon Inn, and cursed myself for the idiot I was. Even if we did find Norah and reach the summit, I would have no evidence to prove it on our return.

“You must be Miss Roxburgh,” he said and offered me his mittened hand to shake. His grip was firm and the handshake, I fancied, was one that might have passed between peers, not the soft press of a gentleman’s hand to a lady’s. Perhaps the hills truly were making equals of us.

“Hilda,” I said. “And you must be Peter Connick.”

“I am.” He gave me a quick nod, then continued. “The fog rolled in before we reached the first peak, still a good ways off the ridge. We lost ourselves in the whiteout, and by the time we found the way again, the best part of the day was behind us. I was all for heading back, but Miss Loughton was not to be dissuaded.” Connick’s pale eyes were on the heights. “I retraced my steps and hunkered down for the night. I expect she did too, once she returned to her senses.”

“You didn’t think to descend the hill?” I asked, regarding his guileless face carefully. Connick shook his head.

“The visibility was poor by then. It seemed safer to wait until morning. Besides, I didn’t want to leave her up here alone.” He shifted his feet

across the snowy ground, and I saw he was wearing a pair of grapettes that matched Mathieson's. "We should press on—she may be just ahead of us."

"Yes, knowing Norah we'll see her hanging from *Meall Dearg* like a chimpanzee as soon as we reach the ridge," I said. Mathieson rewarded my feeble witticism with another of his dry snorts of laughter, and we positively bounded the last of the ascent to the summit of *Spidean a' Choire Leith*. We broke the cloud level at last and emerged into brilliant sunlight, impossibly bright after so many hours surrounded by gloom.

The sky was a vast, cerulean dome; the air sharp and unnaturally clear, the mountaintops around us rising like islands from a misty sea.

"Not a bad wee inversion," Mathieson remarked laconically, but his eyes were wide with wonder. Ahead of us, the ridge stretched some four miles, but the pinnacles and the far peak looked as though you might reach a hand and touch them, so clear was the air. We stepped out onto the ridge, the two men walking in single file and I a few paces behind, dawdling, I must confess, the better to drink in the majestic vista on all sides. I took one step closer to the edge, lost in the uncanny view of the clouds hanging beneath us and the infinite blue sky above.

"Is that the Isle of Skye to the west, do you think?" I asked, and it was at that precise moment that the snow under my feet let out a sharp crack and gave way. I had a split second to see Mathieson turn and let out a horrified yell, and then I was falling in a blue-white blur down the far side of the ridge, the thunder of falling snow filling my ears, rasping the exposed skin of my face, pushing itself into my eyes and mouth until all the world was a spinning ball of frozen, crystalline light.

I cannot have fallen more than a few hundred feet, but the descent seemed to last forever, ending in an impact that stunned me briefly into insensibility. I recall first the sensation of an intense bone-deep cold, and then the dawning realisation that the white light that surrounded me was not some nurturing supernatural cocoon, but instead, the vivid mountain sunlight filtering through the snow that had buried me alive. I opened my mouth to shout and came a hair's-breadth from inhaling a lungful of snow, a mistake that I am sure would have been fatal. Instead, I raised a careful hand and compressed the snow around my nose and mouth to

make a tiny breathing space, the air around me already tasting thin and stale.

If I were to survive, I would have to dig towards the surface, that much I knew. I had heard tell of too many climbers found face down beneath the snow, having seemingly spent their last vital moments digging deeper in their disorientation. Though my mouth was dry, I had bitten my tongue during the fall and managed to disgorge a mouthful of bloody spit and watch the direction it took as it fell away from me. As I had feared, I was face down, and while turning under the pressure bearing down on me was tortuous, I moved my battered limbs with desperate purpose, swimming towards a surface that might have been just out of reach or yards above me. My muscles burned, and my bare skin froze. I had lost a glove in the descent and was losing all sensation in my left hand. And yet—was the whiteness around me brightening, or was it simply my imagination? I tried to shout again, but the only sound that escaped my lips was a panicky squawk, too soft to attract a rescuer's attention even if they were directly overhead. The others might still be on the ridge, I realised with a sudden stab of panic—Mathieson and Connick owed me no loyalty, and what arrogance was it to expect either to risk his life for the sake of mine? For all they knew, I might already be dead, and in a few minutes they would be correct.

Hot tears filled my eyes and dropped sideways in defiance of gravity. My thoughts were foggy, now, and it took me a moment to realise that I had lost my bearings and had been tunneling laterally through my frozen grave. I made one last, desperate turn towards the light, and as I did so, a dark shape swam into my vision, like a great fish approaching through murky water. I reached out, expecting to encounter the rough canvas of my backpack, but instead, I felt my gloved hand tangle in what seemed to be fine thread-like filaments. I compacted the snow to buy myself a few more inches of vision, and this time my fingers met something smooth, solid and cold, and I found myself looking into the glassy open eyes of Norah Loughton.

I think I screamed. My arm thrashed involuntarily away, and with a surge of relief, I felt my hand move through empty air. Perhaps Norah had been killed outright by the same fall I had survived, or perhaps she had dug this close to the surface only to succumb to the cold and despair. I imagined her breathing her last in this icy sepulchre, and the

image gave me a final burst of panicked strength, enough to breach the snow and drag myself, trembling and gasping, onto its churned surface.

The air that filled my lungs was sweet and cold, like a long draught of iced water on a scalding day. I sucked at it gratefully, unable to do anything but lie there until the snow melted from my ears, and the hammering of my heart slowed. I raised myself first to hands and knees, and then unsteadily upright, flailing my arms overhead to try to attract the attention of my companions.

The sun was high; squinting into its dazzling brightness, I saw I had fallen only a hundred feet or so down the ridge, my downward progress arrested by a narrow plateau. Up on the crest I could see two silhouettes, one close to where the crust had given way, the second a little distance towards the pinnacles, taller and haloed in a concentric rainbow of light. A third figure, suspended on a rope, was making slow progress down the cliff towards me. I waved again and shouted, and Mathieson let out a delighted yell that echoed down the slope towards me. When I looked back at the ridge, the figure nearer the pinnacles was gone.

“She’s alive!” Mathieson shouted, and my relief slowly subsided into sorrow as I remembered that he was only half correct.

By the time he reached me, I had uncovered Norah’s body and laid her out on the snow beside me. She had been dead for hours, and her limbs were stiff, bent at ungainly angles. Her neck, I was fairly sure, was broken, and I forced myself to look away from the dreadful wound above her left eye, where a sharp impact had shattered her skull. Her backpack was gone, as was mine, but her yellow knitted mittens were still attached by a string that ran through the sleeve of her jacket. I worked them free and put them on, a visible reminder that I still had need of such things as warmth and comfort while she did not. Her bare hands were yellow-white against the vivid red of her coat.

“You must have the luck of the devil himself,” Mathieson called, picking his way carefully through the knee-deep snow towards me. I looked up at him in time to observe the precise moment that his eye fell on Norah’s body, and watch the furrowing of his brow, the slow crumple of his mouth. “You’ve found her, then,” he said in a voice so soft I could barely

hear it. I nodded. “She must have lost her footing where you did. Last night, maybe?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps.”

Mathieson had a second rope over his shoulder, and for a moment I tormented myself with the thought of the pair of us dragging Norah’s body back up the mountainside to the ridge and down to the coaching inn on the other side.

“Do you suppose,” I asked, “we could carry her between us?”

Mathieson grimaced. “It was hard enough to get down here on my own. I think...” He swallowed. “I don’t like leaving her any more than you do, but if we try, we’ll likely both fall.”

I looked down at the corpse.

“She would have wanted us to get safe off the hill,” he said. “I know I would if it was me. Once the snow’s gone we can come back for the body, when it’s safe.”

I knew what the thaw, the crows and the foxes would do to her body, but he was right.

The climb back up to the ridge was silent and miserable. Mathieson roped us together and gave me one of his ice-axes, and we took turns to cut rough steps into snow that threatened to give way at the slightest pressure. At first, I thought the drifting flakes of ice around us were simply stirred from the disturbed surface in the breeze, but as I hauled my exhausted body back onto the ridge, I realised that a light snow was falling. By the time we rejoined Connick, Norah was already half-buried.

“We found Miss Loughton’s body,” Mathieson said dully, as Connick reached a hand to steady him. “She must have gone off the edge close to the same point.”

Connick’s pale blue eyes creased at the edges. “How did she die?” he asked.

“I would have thought that was obvious.”

“No—I only wondered if she died in the fall, or if—” He faltered, and I felt sorry for my sharp words. “I don’t like to think of her lying there

suffering while I was safe up here.”

“In the fall, I think,” I said. “Instantly, or certainly not long after.”

“I hope so,” he said.

Mathieson was testing the snow underfoot, kicking it with his grapettes and scowling. “I don’t much like the ground the way we came,” he said, gesturing to the deep furrow in the snow where the crust had given way under me. “We can’t risk another fall like that.”

I looked down the precipitous side of the mountain. There was no possibility of a safe descent from here, not even in summer conditions. To attempt it would be suicide.

“We’ll have to push on,” Connick said. “Past the pinnacles to *Mullach an Rathain*, and down from there.” He was looking at the pinnacles, rising from the snow like jagged grey teeth. I thought I saw something of Norah’s hunger in his eyes. To come so close to claiming the elusive peak, only to be denied it now—even I felt some of his frustration. Mathieson was staring blankly at Connick’s back, his brows furrowed as if in thought. Then he shook himself and took a step forward.

“Nothing for it, then,” he said. “You lead on, Peter, and we’ll follow.”

Mathieson and I stayed roped together and followed Connick across the thick snow on the ridge, making sure to stay well clear of the edge. The earlier clear sky was succumbing to a cold, heavy haze, snow falling in flurries as we walked. Every time I set my foot down, I was convinced the mountain would give way under my weight. More than once, the topmost snow shifted and crumbled, but the layer beneath held.

“The wound on your friend’s head,” Mathieson murmured, moving close so his lips were almost at my ear. “What did you make of it?”

“Make of it?” I spoke too loudly, and Mathieson jerked away. Ahead of us, Connick seemed not to have noticed our conversation.

“I’ve seen men’s skulls crushed in accidents in the docks. Some of them fell from a height, some of them caught under falling girders. None of them looked like that.”

I cast my mind back to the awful sight of Norah’s frozen corpse, the left side of her forehead caved in like a smashed boiled egg.

“I don’t understand your meaning,” I said.

“A cracked skull is one thing. But the skin was broken—not like a tear or a graze, but a proper wound, a sharp one. Like something had hit her head and gone through the skin before it hit bone.”

“A rock?”

“Maybe.”

“What else could it have been?”

He drew a deep breath, evidently choosing his words with care. “It put me in mind of the hole an ice-axe makes in the snow.”

I slipped on a patch of ice and almost fell, but he reached an arm to steady me, and together we recovered our balance.

“An ice-axe?” I said, incredulous.

“I don’t know.” His face was twisted with worry. “Maybe they squabbled. Maybe she went for him, I’ve no idea.”

“Norah? Attack another mountaineer?”

“I said I don’t know.”

“He’s *your* friend,” I reminded him. “Surely you can’t believe him guilty of such a thing?”

“I don’t know the man well,” he said. “We’ve climbed together a few times, that’s all. That doesn’t make you the best of friends.”

I remembered how Norah, Laura Buchanan and I had gulped champagne straight from the bottle on the Matterhorn, Lucy Walker watching with benign, matriarchal amusement, and felt a sudden pang of loss.

“All I’m saying,” Mathieson added, “is be careful.”

Up ahead Connick had come to a halt, and I wondered what he had overheard. Mathieson’s suspicions had seemed absurd, but they were enough to plant the seed of doubt in my mind. It seemed Connick was oblivious, staring up at a huge peak looming out of the cloud, and I realised that in the gathering fog we must have deviated from the main line of the ridge.



“*Meall Dearg*,” Mathieson said, with something like wonder in his voice. “You’ve taken us the wrong way, Peter. This won’t get us off the ridge.”

Connick’s eyes were fixed on the peak. Ahead, a shadowy form was cast onto the cloud as though standing on the summit.

“Another spectre,” I said. “There was one up on the ridge, I saw after I fell. The conditions must be perfect for them today.”

Mathieson shook his head. “That can’t be right. The sun wasn’t behind you—you were on the wrong side of the ridge and too low anyway.”

“I’m telling you, I saw it.”

He shrugged. “You’d just survived an avalanche and dug yourself free. I imagine I’d be seeing things too.”

“Did you see that?” Connick said. His voice had taken on an odd, strangled quality.

“See what?” I asked.

“It moved,” he said. “It moved its hand, and stepped forward.”

“It’s just a shadow,” Mathieson said. “If you move, it moves as well.”

I looked towards where Connick was staring. The shadow had passed, leaving only the gathering grey fog in its place. Not for the first time, I marvelled at how quickly the weather could change at these heights. A moment ago everything had been fresh and clear, but now the light was a dull, threatening grey, the visibility reduced to yards. In the gathering grey fog, *Meall Dearg* loomed over us, heavy with menace. I found myself unable to take my eyes off it.

“If we retrace our steps we’ll be back on the ridge before too much longer,” Mathieson said.

“It’s just there,” Connick said without turning. “We could still climb it. Still be the first.”

Mathieson snorted. “Are you drunk, man? After a day like today?”

I knew the hunger in Connick’s eyes—I had seen it often enough in Norah’s—but there was something terrifying in its intensity as he took a

step closer to the uneven rocks of the peak.

“Why not? We might as well salvage something from this ghastly affair.”

“Even if we were to, which of us should be first?” I said, and I saw Mathieson smile for the first time in hours.

“All of this, and *that’s* your first concern?”

“Well, why not?” Connick’s hand was already on the rockface. “It’s there for the taking. I’ll lead.”

Mathieson’s smile turned to disgust. “Yours by right, is it? And what if I want the honour of claiming it first, or Hilda does?”

“I don’t,” I said, and I meant it. If I could have been standing on the platform of Achnashellach station at that moment in time, I would have bid farewell to *Liathach* without a backward glance, all thoughts of glory on the hills gone from my mind.

“That’s not the point,” Mathieson said, with some heat. Connick shrugged, maintaining his indifferent air with what I thought was some difficulty.

“Follow or not, then,” he said and started to climb.

Fog was clinging to the quartzite spire in heavy coils, dull-white snowflakes tumbling around it in eddies. It seemed that darkness rather than sunlight was gathering overhead, as though the sun had set, but that was impossible. We had set off before dawn, and despite our ordeal there were surely many hours of daylight left. I tore my eyes away from the summit, instead watching Connick to see where he was placing his hands and feet as he made steady progress towards the top. The route led him in a wide spiral towards the top—the traverse looked challenging but far from impossible, though on a clear day the exposure would have been extreme. I glanced at Mathieson, saw the question in his eyes, and shook my head. “Not today.”

He nodded, and I think he was relieved that by refusing the ascent, I had tacitly given him permission to do the same.

Connick had drawn his ice-axe and was using it for purchase, and I noticed a dark stain on the grip. There was what at first I thought was a

fine crack at the base of the axe's head—a crack, or perhaps a strand of dark hair. As I watched, he let out a sound that was halfway between a moan and a cry, and thought for one terrible moment he was about to fall. Instead, he was clinging to the rock with one hand, the other reaching for the summit, where a shadowy figure loomed over him. By reflex, I glanced behind me, expecting to see the sun that was casting the Brocken Spectre on the fog above, but the sky was dark.

“It’s her,” Connick shouted, his voice muffled by the fog and damp.

“It’s a trick of the light, man,” Mathieson answered, but Connick shook his head with such violence that I feared he would knock himself from the rock entirely.

“She’s following us!”

“Of course she is. She’s roped to me, you know this—”

“Not her!” Connick flailed behind himself. “Not her, the other one, Loughton!”

“Norah’s dead,” I said. “Remember?”

“I know that!” He half-turned so he was facing away from the rock. “The woman was a danger to herself, it was only a matter of time—I didn’t—I only meant to—”

The shadow took a step closer, as though it were advancing down the mountain towards us.

“You killed Norah, didn’t you?”

“It was dangerous. She insisted she was going on, she was going to be the first up *Meall Dearg*—she wouldn’t see sense!” His voice put me in mind of a schoolboy receiving a scolding for some trifling misdemeanour, whining at the injustice of being held to account. “I told her we could try again tomorrow, but she laughed at me, she said that even if *I* was a coward she wasn’t going to let that cheat her of the glory—” I looked at the ice-axe in his hand, the tip embedded in the frozen rock just as it must have been in my friend’s skull. I wondered how it would have felt as he tugged it free, and if she had been alive as she began that terrible descent down the slope. “The thought of being so close, of losing the first ascent to a *woman*—and I lost my temper.”

Mathieson took a few halting footsteps towards the looming stone buttress. “Peter—for God’s sake—” Despite his earlier suspicions, it seemed he was aghast at Connick’s bare-faced admission of murder.

“And now—and now—look!”

Even from below, I could see the awful ashen colour of his skin. Connick seemed unable to tear his gaze from the lowering shade above him. It seemed to be condensing out of the fog, its form now unmistakably human. I heard my breath rasping quick in my ears as I stood pinned by terror and disbelief.

“Norah?” I whispered.

Mathieson gasped. Coalescing, still shrouded in wisps of fog, the spectre lunged towards Connick. Light spilled across us as the sun broke through the fog at last, but rather than dismissing the shade, it seemed to lend it solidity, a terrible apparition cast against the brightness of the sky. I watched in horror as Connick recoiled, lost his grip on the stone, and fell. He screamed, his arms pinwheeling, and then he was gone into empty air, and the spectre gone with him.

“What...” Mathieson began, then fell silent.

I found myself wondering despite my horror what Peter Connick had seen to make him lose his grip on the rock and plummet to his doom.

“We must get off this accursed hill,” I said, but my voice was abruptly silenced as a colossal slab of ice, destabilised, no doubt, by Connick’s fall, gave way on the pinnacle and tumbled toward us. I threw myself back, landing heavily just far enough away to see the avalanche strike Mathieson full in the chest, burying him in a tide of sparkling ice. The rope between us unfurled and went taut, and I felt myself tugged towards the edge, only just keeping enough composure to slam my ice-axe hard into the ground at my side to try to slow our headlong passage towards death. As the roar of falling ice subsided, I managed to get enough purchase with my axe and the nails of my boots to draw to a halt, awkwardly spreadeagled mere yards from the cliff edge. Mathieson was dangling from the rope over empty air, face bloodied, his eyes closed, unconscious or worse.

I shouted his name, but there was no answer. The ice-axe acting as my one secure point of attachment, I tried to drag him back to solid

ground, but the effort was beyond me. The rope around my waist was biting tight enough to drive what breath remained from my body, and I knew with grim certainty the nature of my only chance of survival. Clumsy and left-handed, I pulled the clasp-knife from the pouch on my belt and began to saw through the rope.

When the work was almost complete, I looked down and saw that Mathieson's eyes were open. He blinked, his gaze at first unfocused, then comprehension dawned as he saw the ice-covered ridge, the peak above and the fraying rope that held him suspended over a three thousand foot drop.

His eyes met mine.

"Hilda—"

"I'm sorry," I whispered, and the last strand of the rope gave way.

I have no conception of how I lived through that descent. I spent the hours that followed stumbling across the ridge to *Mullach an Rathain*, half the time on my feet, and the other half crawling on hands and knees. My progress downwards became an unsteady slither until at last wet snow gave way to heather and rock that I could have kissed with gratitude. The sun was setting over the western peak, turning the grey sandstone terraces the colour of blood, and all the while, I could feel the watchful gaze of the Brocken Spectre upon me. I looked back only once, but that which I saw ensured I did not do so again.

Norah's remains were recovered from the mountainside once the thaw had set in. Hinxton, Rennie and Douglas conquered *Meall Dearg* later that same year, cementing their place forever in mountaineering history, while Norah, Mathieson, and Connick's deaths earned them a narrow column in the Glasgow Herald. The identity of the fourth climber who had survived that awful day on *Liathach's* peaks remained blessedly unknown to the wider public.

I met Laura at Norah's funeral, newly married and now visibly pregnant, and we spoke of returning to the hills together the following year, though it was clear neither of us had any intention of doing so. Laura was ready for a different adventure, while for me, the lure of the

heights had been replaced with a terror that seemed to hang above my head like a mantle of clouds, the relentless guilt of my days broken only by the torment of my nights.

But it was not my fall, nor the sight of Norah's frozen corpse, nor Connick's confession, nor even the dreadful moment where I let Billy Mathieson drop three thousand feet to his death that woke me every night, sheets soaked with sweat, trembling hard enough to rattle the bedstead. Instead, it was the shade that followed me down the rocky slope towards the blessed safety of sea level. Like Orpheus, I knew that I must not turn, but I seemed powerless to resist the urge to do so, and saw the Brocken Spectre for the final time, silhouetted against the sunlit mountain, its limbs grotesquely elongated, a bone-deep cold rippling from it in waves so intense they were almost visible—and the face—dear God, the face!

I will not climb *Liathach* again. It is there, waiting for my return, waxing strong on my guilt and fear and sorrow, ready for the reckoning just as it waited for Peter Connick.

The memory of that face is seared onto my soul, twisted in desperation and panic and guilt; bruised, tear-streaked and dishevelled, as it must have appeared to Billy Mathieson in the final, terrible seconds of his life.

The face the Brocken Spectre wore was my own.

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*Jude lives in Glasgow and writes horror stories in her non-existent free time. She likes climbing inadvisably large mountains, running from zombies and drinking coffee.*





# **SHANE PLAYS GEEK TALK**

**is a journey into  
the things we love!**

**D&D | RPGs | OSR**

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**Star Trek | Star Wars | Doctor Who**

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**Retrogaming | Retrocomputing**

**...AND MORE!**



# **SHANE PLAYS GEEK TALK**

**RADIO SHOW: Saturdays @ 1 PM  
Central on 101.1 FM in Little Rock!**

**PODCAST: Anytime!**

**GEEK TALK RADIO & PODCAST!**







# **Notes From the Nest**

What crazy crazy times! 2020 has been a nutso year for us, as it has been for everybody else.

Misha Burnett's *Endless Summer* should be coming out in November in all formats on Amazon, if you missed our Kickstarter.

For those who haven't, be sure to pick up our fully illustrated collection of Jim Breyfogle's Mongoose and Meerkat adventures, *Pursuit Without Asking*. For those who have, please leave it a review! For fans who are waiting for what's next, *Hunt of the Mine Worm* will be appearing in the Winter issue coming out this December. After that, we plan to run one Mongoose and Meerkat adventure per issue until we've run the entire series.

We have some other big stuff on the horizon for next year. We'll be serializing Michael Tierney's new *Wild Stars* novel, *The Artomique Paradigm*. The Artomiques have been nursing their wounds since the Earth / Brothan conflict—by biding their time and making all of the right plays with captured *Wild Stars* technology, they've become one of the dominant factions on earth and a political force to be reckoned with as Terra prepares to take its place in a new united league of worlds.

If you haven't already caught up on Michael Tierney's *Wild Stars*, we definitely recommend doing so before our next Spring issue.

We'll also be serializing Paul O'Conner's classic sword and sorcery comic, *Badaxe*, next year. This is new ground for us—we've never published any comics before! So, we hope you'll all check it out and support us.

***“Alex” P. Alexander, Ed.***



# Notes

[←1]

"Speckle" and "Dark-Eyes"

[←2]

Here the faKhormo habit of expressing numbers as primes and exponents seemed to be central to the story-Tr.

[←3](#)

See The Wooing of Etroklos, in *Cirsova Volume 1, Issue # 3, Fall 2016! Ed.*