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# DEEP MAGIC

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## January 2006

Happy New Year and welcome everyone to 2006! We are delighted that the *Chronicles of Narnia* has made it to the big screen, and we hope the success of the film might inspire future tellings. In such a wild world, we all could use a little Deep Magic to keep us going.

We have had record numbers of downloads in recent months, mostly due to the interviews we secured with George R.R. Martin and Robert Jordan. We hope to impress you in the future with even more. As a staff, we have certainly noticed a difference in the volume and quality of submissions since we started paying our authors. Your generous contributions made this possible in 2005. Thank you! For those that have contributed, we hope you enjoy the upcoming special issue based on many authors' renditions of a single cover art. We hope to create more special content like this in the future to offer a special perk to those readers who support us financially.

As we start off the New Year, we welcome back Margo Lerwill, who has graced our pages before. This time, she brings us a stunning story called *Earth and Sky*. We also invite back Deep Magic alumnus Sean T.M. Stiennon with another adventure of Jalazar Flinteye in *Flinteye and the Crystal Spear*. And finally, we debut in our pages Rebecca W. Day with her story *Triumph of Reason*. Each is an excellent addition to the e-zine and a great way to start off the year.

Our cover artist this month hails from the Czech Republic. We were impressed with the work of Jana Souflová and are pleased to present you with "Magic Tree." The attention to detail in this piece amazed us, and the fairy-tale quality fits very well.

Are there any authors you would like to see published in 2006? Drop us an e-mail and make a request. Most authors are flattered when readers clamor for their work. Help us draw in those authors you have enjoyed the most in the past. Let's get creative in 2006 so that we can draw the best talent around to grace our pages.

Happy New Year!  
The Editors

**Safe Places for Minds to Wander**

## Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. All are welcome to participate. We select a small number of submissions each month for publication (we don't offer compensation for challenges).

To submit a challenge, go to our [submissions system](#). You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date.

### January 2006 Writing Challenge Entries due Feb 10, 2006

A vow is one of the most compelling and forceful promises one can make, and they make for good motivations in literature. Whether it be a vow of poverty or a vow of revenge, nothing can sway a person from that chosen path. The challenge this month is to present a character who has taken a vow of some sort. Tell us what led that character to take the vow, show us the vow in action, or let us know how it came to be that your character broke his or her vow. Some sample vows to use include: poverty, loyalty, revenge, peace, love, rebellion. Keep your scene or story to 1000 words or less.

### Selections from the November 2005 Challenge

*Alberin*

*Excerpt from the Pixie Pickyune*

The above stories were selected from the November challenge, which was to take an event from your life and write about it in a fantasy/scifi setting.

### Don't forget the December challenge due Jan 10:

*The year is coming to an end, and time remaining in 2005 is short. With that as our inspiration, here is your writing challenge. Make a list of things done in small units of time, like naming a pet or a child, breaking up with someone, washing the dishes, playing a game, going to a party, etc. Now, develop a short story of under 1000 words and stay within the confines of that time, making sure it fits within a science fiction or fantasy setting. Amaze us with your attention to detail, but more importantly, with your attention to time.*

# Alberin

By Jaime L. Hathaway

“Alberin,” came a quiet voice from the doorway, “perhaps you should consider going home.”

Alberin turned at the sound of Silva’s voice and, rising from his knees, regarded her for a moment before speaking. “The negotiations are proceeding at their smoothest pace in a fortnight. Were I to leave now, all hope for a treaty might leave with me.” He closed his eyes against the weariness that had become his constant companion these past months. “I am well, Silva. You need not worry.”

“You can barely walk half a league without needing to rest!”

Opening his eyes, he favored her with a tired smile. “Thank the Goddess, then, for horses.”

Silva started to protest, but Alberin raised his hand to stay her dissent. “We will not discuss this further.” He turned back to the altar at which he had just been kneeling. “I have a meeting with the Elders in a few moments, and I would like to be alone until then.”

He heard the door close softly and then sank into a low chair with a sigh. Silva could not have known that, just before she walked in, he’d been entertaining the very thing she was suggesting.

*Give me strength,* he prayed. *I don’t know how long I can endure.*

The adjoining kingdoms of Shansor and Arnon had been at unofficial war in their border regions for years, with no hope of an end to be found. So when Arnon had unexpectedly invited a delegation from Shansor to treat for peace, King Leander had sent Alberin with a small retinue and instructions to do all he could to secure a treaty. Barely a fortnight into the negotiations, Alberin had fallen ill with a disease no healer could tell—or remedy: a disease that sapped him of his strength and made even the simplest of exertions seem insurmountable.

He wanted to return to Shansor more than anything—there were days when he had strength to do little more than weep—but each time he entertained the thought, the image of his king supplanted the notion. How could he betray Leander’s trust? And what excuse for failure could he possibly offer to those in the border regions? That he was sick?

Alberin shook his head. A daily battle it was, this inner struggle, but one that always brought him to the same conclusion: he must stay.

“Give me strength,” he whispered, kneeling once more before the altar. He rested his forehead against the cool stone and closed his eyes. He wanted nothing more than to sleep, but such a luxury would have to wait.

Rising from his knees, he felt the tiniest bit of energy flow through his veins, felt his eyelids grow less heavy. It wasn’t much, but it was enough.

Enough for the day, and the day was enough for Alberin.

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# Excerpt from the Pixie Pickyune

By A.M. Stickel: That's Moe Lykit!

*Special report from your agent-at-large, Moe (Always Watching from the Thicket) Lykit, formerly of the Faerie Court under Chief P.D., Wee Kirk:*

Ah-Hah City's cat herders have gone on strike. Union spokespixie, Sally Petty, states that, if AH—C.H.U.'s demands are not met soon, cats will be released to revert to their wild ways. Besides paucity of public transportation via catback and cat-drawn coach, all sorts of havoc will happen: pixie porches purloined of dairy deliveries, the laceration of laundry left on lines, and the gouging of gardens for pussy privies. No pixie poppet will be safe in our streets once cats exhaust the regular rodent supply, according to Ms. Petty.

Fur factories are going on shorter shifts in anticipation of shrinking supplies. AH—C.H.U.'s action could conceivably cancel our Merry Midwinter carnival.

The Crown's response, via Queen's Representative, Lord Lister Snootbilk, is that the escalating expense of herder healthcare, particularly for slash scars and the constant dispelling of wheezes and sneezes, is, unfortunately, no longer supportable. Salaries were not part of either the union's proposal or the Crown's counter. Neither were pensions an issue, since surviving herders hurry on to other occupations long before reaching retirement.

A mediator, Stinking Steven the Sorcerer, has been called in. Steven states that he was chosen because, as a Court Champion of Mice, neither disputer doubts his neutrality. Also, according to the Mice, neither side can stand Steven, which will work to encourage a quicker compromise.

When questioned about the strike, most members of the pixie public are angry, anxious and absolutely appalled. Some, especially dog drivers, are secretly supportive of the pixie picketers. As the strike progresses, however, expect to see fewer P.M. picketers, the night being a feral feline's favorite time to tour.

Security for the strikers and for the Crown is being provided by the Pixie Police and paid for by the pixie public. Steven, always in arrears for past due debts, is mediating for a miniscule amount in addition to the dismissal of his debts. Should he succeed in reconciling both sides, he will also be awarded a sack of soaps and a key to the city showers...

# Earth to Sky

By Margo Lerwill

There was no rain, and the cities burned.

Early in the afternoon, the lady working alongside Laila in the fields finally broke. She sank to her knees on the hard-baked soil and clenched unrelenting clods in her fists while tears left clean streaks on her dust-coated cheeks. She was the third that day to succumb, which was a good day overall. They didn't do so well out here in the heat and the dust, these noble ladies used to bubbling fountains in shaded courtyards, these people who had been so-and-so once, done such-and-such once. Former farmers and weathered fishermen fared the best and street orphans, like Laila, near as well. But sooner or later, merchant or beggar, priest or thief, they all ended up in these bone-dry fields trying just to feed themselves—let alone pay taxes for the king's new capital.

Laila paused to watch men carry the grieving woman away. The lady was one of the more recent arrivals from the south, from the burning cities. More cities burned now, people said, than during the war when neighboring Timiru sent her armies to ravage their capitals and sacred groves. Why the armies left so soon was a frequent topic in the fields of the makeshift refugee camps, but everyone knew it was when the droughts began, when the Sky Father turned a deaf ear to the Earth Mother's pleas for rain. Some said that they felt a curse descend upon the land and people of Neridia as soon as the last holy cedar crumbled to ash in the last ritual grove.

Muttering and grumbling erupted around Laila. Everyone from the field was starting to hurry toward the camp of patched canvas tents. The dun-colored peaks stretched out like jagged foothills barren of cattle or wheat.

Laila turned to see a line of dust smudging the horizon, following in the wake of a caravan. Because she had nothing to trade, owned not even the long man's tunic given to her to wear as a dress by the camp priests, she did not hurry. She turned her rough hoe upside down and used it as a walking stick and imagined she was someone very regal. Priestess Laila, patron saint of orphaned children—Neridia was filled with saints, even child saints. She lifted her dirty chin a little higher and walked down the hill against a warm breeze, blessing make-believe flowers as she went. It hurt her much less to pretend to be something she never dared hope for than it pained those who had something to remember losing.

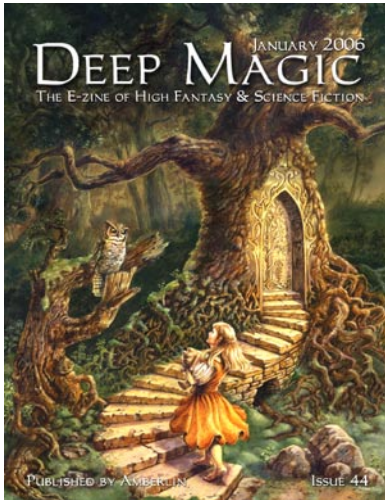
When Laila arrived at the caravan, refugees were already turning back, clutching close various bundles of family treasures they were now desperate to trade for seeds or basic supplies. This was no trade caravan, this, painted red and blue with trim painted like ocean waves of gold. They flew the pennants of a gold ship on a blue field. This was an envoy from far Manu, the

**Why the armies left so soon was a frequent topic in the fields of the makeshift refugee camps, but everyone knew it was when the droughts began, when the Sky Father turned a deaf ear to the Earth Mother's pleas for rain.**

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## Featured Artist

### Jana Souflová



**Age:** 30

**Residence:** Prague

**Marital Status:** Single

**Children:** None

**Hobbies:** Celtic harp, Painting, Sea sailing

**Favorite Book or Author:** Ellis Peters, James Herriot, J.R.R. Tolkien and Paulo Coelho's *Alchemist*.

**Professional and Educational Information:** Web designer, but I have no art education. I attended the school of life, as I was lucky to meet the right people at the right time and I was still learning, so gently, through time, I reached a professional level without official education. Now I have official documents, which can be used as a diploma. It's possible to reach it when you have reached more than 7 years successfully in business. I do illustration as a side job and do

only very limited work during the year to keep up quality, and mainly to keep myself entertained by painting.

**Started Painting In:** Oh, I don't remember! When I was able to hold a pencil?

**Artist Most Inspired By:** Brian Froud, Alan Lee, Bilibin, Pre-Raphaelites, Leonardo da Vinci, Arthur Rackham and Alfons Mucha.

**Media You Work In:** I have a bit different technique of aquarel, with very light acrylic underpainting, that allows me to create "oil-like" effects and paint from dark to light.

**Schools Attended:** Business Academy

**Other Training:** Atelier of Mrs. Vera Stefflova - Old Master's technique (oil) - 1 year; One semester of Act drawing on UMPRUM - Prague Art school

**Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed:**

Mostly on book covers edited by Czech publishing houses like Triton, Najada, Tallpress, Magnet-Press, Straky na vrbe and so on; also CD covers, covers of sci-fi magazines, *Nemesis* and *Ikarie*, and during Exhibitions

**Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You**

**Professionally:** I don't sell originals except at special events, but I can do quality prints up to A3 size (29x42 cm) and send them via regular mail. I have to admit that I'm still searching for some easy way to sell online, because Czech post offices and banks have trouble, especially to the USA. You can contact me through my webpage. As web designer, I am online most of the day.

**Website URL:** [www.maffet.cz](http://www.maffet.cz)



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**Q: How did you come to be an artist?**

A: This is a long story. I've always painted something. Later, I started to illustrate my own stories. It was hard to see me without pencil and paper. But I wasn't lucky with art school—my parents preferred business school. Finally, somebody noticed me and gave me my first job. I was very young, and I was so happy that my pictures were printed in magazines. I was doing plenty of work and was excited about that. But it didn't work out so well. Soon I found that I needed to completely learn the craft first and then do work; I needed education and more practice. So I took a break. I left for 3 years, canceled all jobs, and learned on my own, developing my own technique. I also attended some courses and did plenty of personal research, then I slowly returned to the world of illustration. That break was risky, because editors forget you easily, but I found it very useful and necessary. It took time before editors rediscovered me, and I currently have work booked for the next half year, but I'm still learning, as there is so much I need to improve. Plenty of work till the end of my life. :-)

**Q: How would you describe your work?**

A: I don't try to be too realistic—at first I knew that photo-realistic style, ala Vallejo, was not what I would be strong in. When I do fantasy or historical, I like heavy colors, fairy-tale topics, gentle sense of humour, and my great madness is decorating. It's probably because I lived all my life under heavy Mucha's influence. Here in Prague, you see his work and art deco at every step. The second are my "eastern" influences. I paint in this way mainly for fun and to meditate and rest from heavy colors. People often don't recognize that it's my work, because it looks so different.

**Q: Where do you find your inspiration?**

A: Mother Nature is a great inspiration—trees, grass in the wind, sun in leaves, foggy hills, all are great inspiration. I simply look at the landscape and, in my imagination, see thousands of things that other people don't see. Another source is music. I listen to plenty of music during painting and also when I am tired after a long time sitting at my desk. I take my harp and play with my eyes closed. It brings my energy back. I can understand why the harp is part of some programs in hospitals.

**Q: What inspired this piece (our cover art)? (Tell us its story...)**

A: This picture was inspired by a fairy tale, which was something like Alice behind the mirror, but the gate was a magical door inside an old tree. However, I always add something of my own. I love trees, and trees play a main role in my imagination. There exists something like a father of all trees inhabited by many lovely creatures with roots so deep that they are going through time and space, and when I paint some tree, I try to add this idea. That's why my trees are so giant, twisted, and with such heavy roots.

**Q: What do you consider your influences?**

A: As I said, I was very influenced by Mucha's decorative style. Also by Arthur Rackham and Russian illustrator Bilibin. I had their books as a child and loved them. Later, I discovered Alan Lee and Brian Froud, which I think they continued in Rackham's line—even now they have their own style. I also love medieval architecture and half-timbered houses. I traveled with friends over all the UK and France to visit abbeys, medieval towns and cathedrals, and these are so deep inside me that I can't help it—it always enters into my pictures.

**Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?**

A: Greatest? I don't know if it was my greatest success, but it was my greatest project. I was asked to paint a mural wall with a dragon—4m high and 6m wide. All other artists said, "No!" because they were scared of such a big space. I said "Yes," even though I had no idea how to do it and I was scared to the bone. I spent months sketching, preparing material, learning about techniques, doing test works—which was all greatest FUN. Finally, it took me half a year, because I could paint only one day for 4 hours and during evenings for two hours when the cafe was open (so all the guests were there), and I hated myself that I did it so detailed and complicated. The dragon is still there and became so famous that people come to the cafe just to see it. They have meetings under the dragon, and it's often used in photos.

**Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?**

A: I can't talk about styles, but I see one trend that makes me a bit sad, because old craft is disappearing. A lot of artists are painting only on computers. I have seen unbelievable master pictures painted that way. It's so realistic and wonderful. I think a lot of professionals will go that way, because it's so fast, clear, and editors will like it, since it eliminates scanning and they will have a clear print file. It's also easy for the artist because you have great tools, which makes it easy—you can always go back, repair, copy your reference photo to layers and paint over, change details until the result is perfect. This is the future of illustration. But I have to say that I am not enchanted with this trend. With real media, you have to know what you want, and once you do something, you can't fix it or remove it—you have to have a sure hand. You have only your brush and paper and nothing more, and people who can do magic with only these are the ones for me. I will stay true to traditional media and to the scent of colors.



# Flinteye and the Crystal Spear

By Sean T. M. Stiennon

The spear rested on cushions of red flitter-silk in a case of transparent awxite. It was two meters long with a glow that flickered between bright red and deep orange. The spear was one of the most valuable objects on the planet—and I had been hired to guard it.

I looked at it from behind a railing ten feet back, with two rifle-carrying Yaoshin on either side. Axten hung back a few steps, ion rifle cocked over one chromeel shoulder, red photoreceptors staring intently. Lord Jinzi stood next to the spear, one arm extended lovingly over it. The heat sensors on the case were activated, so he didn't touch it, even though he looked like he sincerely wanted to. Jinzi was very similar to the standard human, but his hair was a shade of blue that was entirely natural for his race and his hands had small black claws.

He looked up at me, eyes moving over my gold fur, black vest and pants, and head that combined leonine with canine while replacing the normal eyes with black orbs.

"You see it, Flinteye. Amoshi's Spear. The heart of my power."

I nodded. "Ten thousand SEUs is a lot to spend on a pair of guards for a month. Even for that thing."

Jinzi smiled faintly, more at the spear than at me. "You don't understand. When my new containment facility is complete, only a few organic guards will be necessary—the rest will be on the shoulders of security bots and automated systems. But, until that time, I cannot allow the spear's safety to be jeopardized. I have...enemies, ones who want the spear's prestige for themselves. You see..." he trailed off. "Have I told you this before?"

I nodded. "Twice."

The smile vanished. "Oh. My apologies. It is just that...well, I cannot speak of it too much. Such a beautiful thing."

I growled. "How many guards will there be? Including Axten and I."

It took him several seconds to look up from the spear and answer my question. "In this room? Three."

"Three? Day and night?"

"No, just the night. My Yaoshin warriors will keep watch during the day. But at night...well, I preferred to have mercenaries. Trustworthy ones. You are trustworthy, aren't you? Your Grid file seemed to say so."

"I wouldn't tell you otherwise if I wasn't, would I?"

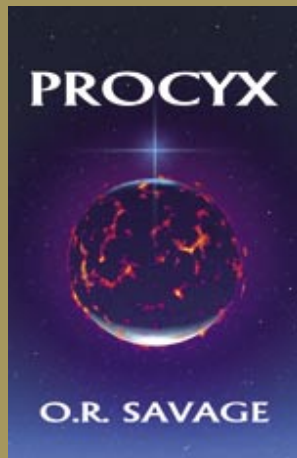
"Hmm...well, I suppose not."

He irritated me already. "Alright. There's Axten and I. Who's the third?"

**You don't understand. When my new containment facility is complete, only a few organic guards will be necessary—the rest will be on the shoulders of security bots and automated systems. But, until that time, I cannot allow the spear's safety to be jeopardized.**

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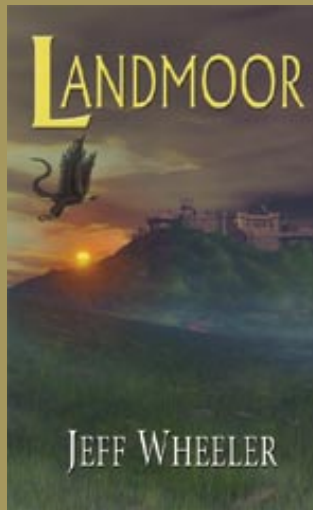
**Procyx** appeared at the edge of the Galaxy, just as ancient Mhyrnian texts had predicted. To scientists it was a fascinating anomaly, for it seemed to be a star that shone in only one color—a single frequency of pure, blue light. But then nearby worlds began to crumble, spinning into fiery deaths while their suns exploded or smothered out in a dreadful finality called Hypermotility. Humanity’s only hope lay in the Vanguards, mythical vessels of irresistible power. Yet it seemed these wondrous ships of light were only myths. Meanwhile, centuries passed. More and more star systems died and nothing could be done to stop the spread of Procyx’s cancerous ruin . . . unless the Mhyrnians had an answer for this too . . .

Cover Price: \$14.95 Trade Paperback (three books in one!)

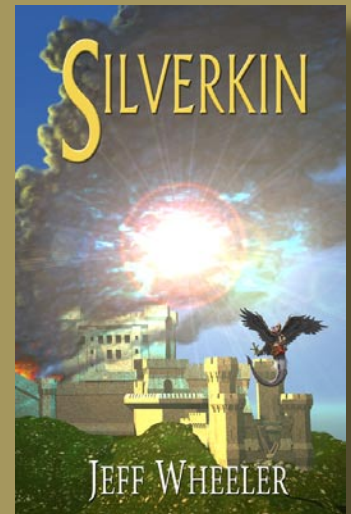
## Landmoor & Silverkin

Buried in the catacombs beneath the fortress of Landmoor lies the Silverkin, an ancient talisman that can overcome any Forbidden Magic. Thealos Quickfellow has the right to claim the Silverkin but knows little about the deadly consequences befalling those who wield it. Before he can lay claim to it, however, he must first slip beyond the web of Sorian, who have beset Landmoor and battle amongst themselves for supremacy. Meanwhile, Exeres Tallin, a druid priest from Isherwood, has followed his dreams and mission to Landmoor. While there, he learns the truth of the evil Sorian as he is compelled to serve them. On his journey, Thealos will learn personally of the sacrifices required to become a Sleepwalker and how to use the Silverkin to save his people. But will using it destroy him?

Cover Prices: \$9.95 Trade Paperback (Landmoor)  
\$9.95 Trade Paperback (Silverkin)



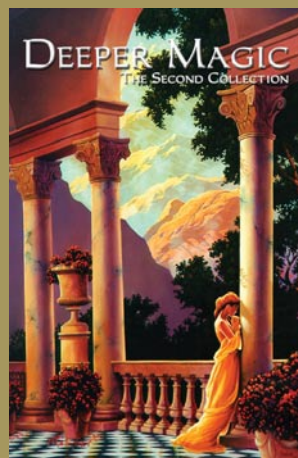
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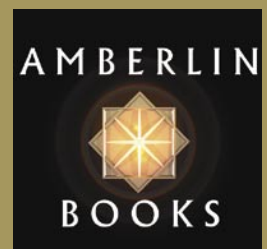
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## Deeper Magic Vol 1 & 2

These anthologies contain the best stories published by Deep Magic during the first two years of publication.

Cover Prices:

\$12.95 Vol 2  
\$14.95 Vol 1  
Trade Paperback



# The Triumph of Reason

By R. W. Day

In my life I have played many parts. I've been 'that brat Davy', Friar Thomas, Master Kempe, Clerk. And now prisoner. But not traitor. Never that, no matter what they say, these New Men all prickly with logic who not only refuse to give proper due to God and the Fey, but deny their very existence. To be a traitor is to be false to one's oaths, and I have kept mine in my own way, as I keep the Hours in private, tolling out the silent bells of matins and laud and compline in my mind, for there are no proper church bells in their new world.

I was making my prayers when the cell's heavy door rasped on its hinges, letting in a stream of ragged light from the torches in the corridor. The man who entered bore the classic hallmarks of a man of Reason—scraggly, unkempt hair, pockmarked skin, squinting eyes and a frame that could stand a season or two of good hard work. In my day, we read and studied, yes, but interspersed our studies with the discipline of manual labor. Balance brings joy to the soul. But this man looked as though he would suck every last farthing of joy from your soul, if his kind would even admit that such things as souls existed.

"I am Doctor Carey, here to record your testimony. Please state your name and occupation." His voice was brusque, admitting no hint of social pleasantries.

I considered giving him my true name, the name I took upon my Profession, but it was not in my nature to antagonize without cause. "I am Davy Kempe, sir, and until recently, I was a clerk in the service of John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland."

"Clerk. An odd word for 'traitor.'"

"I am a loyal subject of Her Majesty Queen Mary, God save her."

The doctor smiled at me as though I were a half-wit child. "The rightful monarch of this realm, by the will of the late King Edward, is Queen Jane. You condemn yourself by your own words."

I sat straighter. I'd faced the Lady's Sacrifice—I could stand up to this little man. "The realm does not belong to the King—it is not a bauble that can be handed along to any passing fancy. The sacred bond to the land flows only through the royal bloodline."

"And so it does, so it does," he chuckled. "Through our late King Henry's sister, Mary, and her daughter Frances, to our sovereign Jane." He laid it all out like a child's game, one piece atop another, building a framework of logic for his blasphemy. My faith taught me that the proper role of logic is in service to truth. To Dr. Carey and his ilk, logic *was* truth.

He pulled parchment and quill from within his robes and sat down opposite me at the small table provided for my cold comfort. "I am bound by my duty to caution you, Master Kempe, that you face charges of High Treason, murder and inciting rebellion against the Queen's Grace, and by sweet Reason, your neck will stretch for it if it be proven."

**The man who entered bore the classic hallmarks of a man of Reason—scraggly, unkempt hair, pockmarked skin, squinting eyes and a frame that could stand a season or two of good hard work.**

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## Page Turners Deep Magic Looks at Books

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### Editor's Choice: Classic Fantasy The Pendragon Cycle (*Taliesin, Arthur, Merlin*) By Steve Lawhead



I must confess: I'm an Arthurian geek. In college, as an undergraduate, I took every Arthurian lit class I could. I wrote my senior thesis on a key Arthurian text. In grad school, I continued to take every Arthurian seminar I could. My two oldest children have Arthurian middle names. To put it mildly, I'm in love with the Arthurian legends, the matter of Britain. And it all started when I read Lawhead's Pendragon cycle.

Originally conceived as a trilogy (it has since expanded to five—maybe six—installments, but I will only be discussing the original three books), the Pendragon cycle tells the story of Arthur in the most epic proportions I've ever seen (and I've read a lot).

The first book of the trilogy is *Taliesin*, and it tells the story of the parents of Merlin. The title character is the legendary bard of Wales, who is found as an infant in a salmon weir by Elphin ap Gwyddno, the most unlucky son of a chieftain. Taliesin soon grows up, exhibiting not only great bardic skills, but great druidic wisdom and powers. At the same time, the great continent of Atlantis

is experiencing its death throes, both geologically and politically. Charis is daughter of the great king Avallach and has grown up in relative peace and prosperity until political unrest disrupts all that. She commits herself to a nihilistic lifestyle, joining the bull dancers, who daily put their lives on the line to bring entertainment to the Atlantean masses. When Atlantis sinks, Charis and her family manage to escape and make their way to Britain, where they become the fair folk of legend.

Taliesin and Charis soon meet and fall in love, but their path is marred by the jealousy of Charis' half-sister, Morgian, who eventually brings about the destruction of Taliesin and Charis' life together, but not before the birth of their only son, Merlin.

*Merlin*, the second book in the trilogy, picks up the story a few years after the close of *Taliesin* and traces the development of Merlin from a youth as precocious as his father at the druidic and bardic arts to the wizened (and wise) sage, who works to create the Summer Realm of Arthur. The novel is divided into three books, each looking at a successive part of Merlin's life. In the first book, Merlin grows to become a king in his own right, marrying Ganieda. The second book traces how Merlin's joy, like that of his parents, is destroyed along with those whom he loves most. At first despondent, Merlin learns to turn his bitterness into a force for bringing about his vision of a realm of peace where people don't have to suffer like he and his parents have. The third book is about how Merlin maneuvers to bring about that kingdom, ending with Merlin driving a certain sword into a stone and prophesying about the one who will come to draw it out.

*Arthur*, the final book in the original trilogy, tells the story of how the Summer Realm is established and, ultimately, how it falls. In short, it tells the whole story of the reign of Arthur.

Lawhead's *Pendragon Cycle* has always distinguished itself with its epic scope, a scope that hasn't been matched until the recent (and ongoing) series by Jack Whyte. Two-thirds of the trilogy are the build-up to the reign of Arthur. Indeed, there is even question in the first two novels about who the Pendragon actually is. The squeezing of all of Arthur's reign into just one book (out of three) shifts the focus away from Arthur and instead puts him in the context of *why* he had to come and reign, and also why his downfall is so tragic.

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By taking a thousand pages to bring about the Summer Realm, Lawhead makes its arrival all the more glorious and its downfall all the more saddening.

Lawhead's writing style is at its peak in the Pendragon Cycle. The tour de force of the trilogy is the middle book, *Merlin*, written in the first person. The character of Merlin is so vividly drawn that one is almost disappointed when the final book turns toward Arthur.

The downside to the trilogy is that Lawhead has always shown an inability to end a story well. Although he almost achieves a good ending with the final story arc in *Arthur*, he doesn't quite make it complete, and so the reader is left unsatisfied. After the original trilogy, Lawhead's publisher asked for more, and he obliged; thus, the somewhat tight ending of *Arthur* was diminished by two further books, *Pendragon* and *Grail*, both of which are far inferior to the original trilogy.

But if you are looking for a great retelling of the Arthurian mythos, I can't recommend the original trilogy highly enough. Forget the fourth and fifth books, but read the original three and be prepared to be carried back to post-Roman Britain.

*Possible objectionable material: not much. There's some 'off stage' sex and some graphic scenes of violence, but they are handled very well and are not excessive.*

*(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)*

### Book Review: Fantasy **First Rider's Call** By Kristen Britain



In *Green Rider*, Karigan G'ladheon, the daughter of a wealthy merchant in the kingdom of Sacordia, found herself caught up in a rebellion against King Zachary, even while sorcerous evils began to plague the land. The D'yer wall, a magical barrier protecting Sacordia from the evil Blackveil Forest, was cracked by an evil sorcerer known as the Grey One, and dark magical forces began to enter the land. With Karigan's help, the Grey One and

the rebellion were defeated.

In *First Rider's Call*, Karigan accepts a permanent place in the Green Riders, the elite messenger service directly under the command of the King. However, all is not well in the land of Sacordia—hordes of groundmites wander the borderlands, and refugees from the affected areas are causing many problems for the northern provinces. In addition, Blackveil Forest still lurks behind the D'yer wall, and Clan D'yer has forgotten the magic necessary to repair the wall. Wild magic, leaking through the cracked barrier, is wreaking havoc upon Sacordia, and the evil sentience behind the wall is stirring. In addition, King Zachary's support amongst the nobles of Sacordia is eroding, and the Green Riders dwindle further with every passing year.

Karigan herself is haunted by visions of Lil Ambriodhe, the fierce warrior woman who founded the Green Riders a thousand years ago, and she has strange visions of the Long War, a conflict against the evil sorcerer Mornhavon the Black, in which the first Green Riders played a critical role. Mornhavon may not be entirely gone, and one of his darkest servants has risen from the grave to menace Sacordia once more.

Overall, *First Rider's Call* was reasonably entertaining, but not particularly satisfying or well-plotted. It struck me as more of a bridge between *Green Rider* and whatever the next novel will be rather than a self-contained novel. The level of conflict never got high enough to justify the book's six hundred pages, and many plot-threads were resolved without any real tension or difficulty on the part of the heroes.

Lengthy sections were devoted to filling in the history of Sacordia, mainly through journal entries from Mornhavon's second-in-command, Hadriax el Fex, and episodes where Karigan travels through time with some help from Lil Ambriodhe (yes, time travel). These weren't dull, but again, they served to fill in background rather than advance a strong plot in the present.

If you enjoyed *Green Rider*, you'll probably want to read *First Rider's Call*, if only to be prepared for the third book in the series. Otherwise, I can't particularly recommend it, although I do like Ms. Britain's writing.

*Possible Objectionable Material: Some sexual references*

*(Reviewed by Sean T. M. Stiennon)*

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smallest neighbor, the least ally of Neridia.

Tall guards in blue turbans herded the crowd back from one cart door, just as a lady of Manu pulled back the curtains and peered out. With the lady's long braid of fine hair, the rings on all of her fingers, the symbols painted in gold on her hands and at her temples, Laila thought this must be a princess. The lady came forth, trailing gauzy pink veils and robe trains like clouds.

A guard announced her. "The Princess Kari of Southern Manu Province."

"Has Manu brought us seeds, Princess?" one man cried out in a tone at once eager and demanding. "Have you brought us supplies?"

"I'm sorry, we have not," the princess answered, her voice calm and steady despite the desperate press surrounding her. "We travel to your new capital to lend our support to your king."

"Support?" Someone in the crowd snorted. "We need water and food. You bring us fancy court rituals."

One of the guards started toward the voice, but the lady motioned him back. "I understand your frustration. Certainly we are remiss in not offering you what we can. Guards, open the casks and distribute the wine we carry."

Wine. No one had tasted wine in weeks, some even months. Laila nodded from the crowd; it was a good distraction. Angry voices soon turned to excited whispers, and people clustered around the wagons where guards pulled back dusty tarps to reveal dark wood casks. Laila did not rush forward. She knew she'd get her portion from the dregs, if at all. Such was the reality of her caste, and she made it a habit not to hope for more.

Instead Laila stood back watching the princess from Manu, two of the boys from the camp lingering with her. What Laila did not expect was to find the princess settling down into a cushioned chair beneath a deep blue awning—watching them. Princess Kari tilted her dark head a moment, and then whispered with a guard. With a gentle motion of her smooth hand, the color of cinnamon, she waved the three children forward.

"Two strong young men," the lady said as they approached. She smiled at Laila with shell-pink lips. "And a fine young lady with her walking staff." Laila felt herself blush when Princess Kari guessed her game. But the princess kept smiling, a twinkle in her eye that made Laila wonder if she had ever played such games. The thought dulled Laila's shame.

"You do not rush to share the wine," the princess continued. "Perhaps you'd like to share a drink with me."

The guard had ducked into a cart and returned now with a small wooden chest. Inside sat several enameled cups and a flask, all cushioned in red velvet. The man set these upon a small folding traveling table before the lady. When he uncorked the flask, Laila smelled honey, a scent so sweet, so dearly missed, that her mouth flooded with anticipation.

While the guard poured honey-wine into four cups, Princess Kari leaned toward the children. "Do you children know how Neridia and far Manu became allies?" They all shook their heads no, and Laila was suddenly surprised that the priests who had once fed the orphan children in the sacred groves never told her this tale.

The lady nodded, small gems sparkling in her braid, even in the deep blue shade of the awning. "Manu is a very small kingdom, much smaller than Neridia," she explained. "Many hundreds of years ago, an envoy from Neridia arrived in our royal court and offered Manu the protection of our larger neighbor. We understood this to mean that Neridia had decided she should rule Manu, and our counselors were beside themselves trying to think of some way to



prove to Neridia that Manu could be of use to you as an ally rather than a protectorate.”

Laila frowned at the thought of a Neridian envoy bullying the court in Manu. She did not like to think they had been rude to this lady’s people.

“Finally, one advisor decided he would partake of our sacred honey-wine in an attempt to see into the future, to see some moment in time when Neridia might need our aid. This he saw. He foretold of a great disaster that would befall your kingdom and made to strike a bargain with the Neridian envoy. If they left Manu independent, she would come to the aid of Neridia in your most dire moment and bring salvation. Of course, the envoy did not know if they could trust this prophecy, so the advisor offered to let a member of the envoy drink of the sacred honey-wine and see the truth for himself, but none would drink for fear of poison. None but one. When no one else would drink, the young servant boy of one of the Neridians rushed forward and took the honey-wine. He confirmed the prophecy and went on to become a priest and stay many years with us in Manu. Do you know who that boy was?”

Laila broke into an abrupt smile. “The child saint Cheaan!” The priests had told her many of his stories. “And you are here to fulfill the prophecy.”

The princess nodded her approval. “Indeed.”

The tallest of the boys, wiry and narrow-eyed, peered at the princess with a pinched frown. “How can one princess help us now, when the land burns?”

“How many princesses would it take?” the lady asked with a giggle.

“All of them,” the second boy said, and grinned.

“Ah,” she said, “but do not underestimate the value of one small person, one small thing, one small word. Many times the fate of a whole people turns on the smallest of matters.”

Then she turned her attention to the four cups before her. She passed her hand over all of them while saying a prayer of thanks. “Now what do you think, children?” she asked with a conspiratorial smile. “Do you think this is plain honey-wine or the magical sacrament that Cheaan drank?”

“There’s no such thing as magic,” the tall boy said, but his tone was hesitant.

“No?” the princess asked. She motioned to the cup closest to him. “Then drink freely.”

He took a deep breath, then all of a sudden snatched up the cup and drained it dry—a waste of honey-wine, Laila thought, just to prove his bravery. The lad licked a final drop of wine from his lower lip. After a moment, a broad smile spread over his face. He set the cup back down.

“See, no magic,” he said, breathless.

Seeing this, the second boy reached out for the cup closest to him. He took more time, but he too set down his cup with a satisfied smile upon his face. “No magic,” he agreed.

Uncertain, Laila reached out toward the cup set before her, but the princess placed her hand over the cup.

“What do you think, child?” she asked Laila. “Do you believe?”

Her eager tongue set between her parched lips, Laila hesitated. The boys still watched, but she could not lie to the lady of Manu. She nodded and accepted her cup from the princess’s own hands.

Laila closed her eyes as the cool honey-wine flooded her mouth. She had only ever smelled it before when she had slept on a pile of rags behind a tavern in a better part of town. Unlike the boys, she took her time and savored every drop. Even when it was gone, she held the cup under her nose a few moments more, memorizing the heady scent of honey and fermentation.

“Well?” the second, rounder boy said.

Laila opened one eye to glare at him before closing it again. She did not know what to expect. Would she see visions? Hear voices? Would nothing happen at all? She searched the darkness behind her eyelids until she found herself . . . imagining a tree, a tall cedar. She remembered the fresh, minty scent of the sacred cedar groves, the soft rustle of wind moving through the needles.

“What do you see?” the princess whispered.

Laila opened her eyes and set down her cup. “Just a cedar tree like the ones in the sacred groves where the priests would feed and teach us. I miss that,” she admitted. Then she said more quietly, “No magic for me.”

Princess Kari smiled again. “I don’t know. Being reminded of something dear to you. Is this not magic enough?”

And Laila, thinking of it this way, nodded and smiled back at the lady.

\* \* \*

That evening Laila sat on a rug before the priests’ tent and stared up at the stars. She wondered what it would be like to be a princess, or to be a saint. She wondered if she would ever smell cedar groves or taste honey wine again. She wondered if it would ever rain again in Neridia. With her mind racing, Laila found it hard to sleep.

She was still awake when the cries rang out from the caravan. Laila bolted up and looked down the hill at the line of flames that were the Manu carts. People were sacking the caravan.

Laila grabbed up her hoe and ran headlong down the hill. She arrived at the caravan just as someone was pulling the princess from her cart and shoving her to the ground. Swinging her hoe to ward people away, Laila rushed to Princess Kari’s aid, leading her to a cart that was not burning and sitting her down beside it. The lady’s forehead was bleeding, so Laila threw down her hoe and pressed her overlong sleeve to the woman’s brow.

“Bless you, child. So brave,” the lady said as she looked up at Laila. “You. Yes. Yes, I knew there was something about you.”

A guard ran out of the darkness then. “Do not touch the princess!” Laila jumped at his command and stood away from the lady.

“No, no” Princess Kari interrupted. “She is helping me.” The guard unraveled his fine linen sash, and the princess dabbed at her head with it.

“Thank you,” she told the guard. “Now run to my caravan and see if our cargo remains. Bring it to me.”

“But, my lady, it is not safe.”

“No,” she agreed, “it is not. This proves we cannot travel through such desperate territory. It can no longer travel with us.”

Laila crouched by the princess, but leapt up to push away anyone who ventured too near. She waited with the lady for the guard’s return. When he appeared he carried a small velvet bundle. He sat it on the ground and unwrapped a tiny cedar sapling in a ceramic pot.

“Take it, child,” the princess said.

“What?” Laila blinked through the darkness and the inconstant light of the fires around them.

“It is your destiny to help us fulfill our promise to Neridia. Take this sapling and run from here. Take it far away, far from anyone who would take it from you or hurt it, and plant it, child.”

“But how can a little sapling save us now?” she asked, even as the guard was pulling her to her feet and settling the heavy pot into her arms.

“No questions, child. You will know what to do. But remember, plant it before the next sunrise, then keep it safe,” Princess Kari told her. Then to the guard she said, “Give her some food and a waterskin.”

Two more heavy bags ended up slung over her shoulder. The rope ties cut into her flesh.

“Now go!” the lady of Manu commanded, and Laila ran. She ran past flaming carts and crowds of looters. She ran past the priests as they shouted for people to stop the destruction. She ran past her hoe, broken on the ground. And soon, the night swallowed Laila and she could not hear or see the camp anymore.

\* \* \*

Laila ran until she could run no further. Her bare feet were numb and battered, and her arms ached under the weight of the pot and the sloshing waterskin. Still she walked on. She walked all night, over hills and through ditches she hoped would hide her from anyone lingering in the darkness. She walked while her mind wandered, wondering how this one little sapling would fulfill such a mighty prophecy. She walked until she realized all at once that the eastern sky had faded from black to gray. The sun would rise soon.

She stopped on the narrow ridge of earth she had been following for the last couple of hours, overlooking a broad valley backlit in the distance by a line of encroaching flame. Laila frowned at the thought of planting the sapling within sight of the wildfire, even if it raged many miles away. Yet the eastern sky warned her that her time was short. She could not possibly cross the whole valley in the few moments that remained.

As the sky faded to a brilliant violet, Laila set the pot down on the baked soil. She tugged with one gentle hand at the base of the tiny sapling until it pried free of the bowl, its roots still clinging to their plug of earth. Laila set this aside for a moment to dig a hole.

But the ground was too hard to dig by hand, and Laila cursed the loss of her hoe. The first inches of the sun had crested the far eastern hills; her time was running out. Laila searched the ground with her hands for any jagged stone, but there was nothing, no tool to assist her.

In desperation Laila seized the empty ceramic pot and jumped up. With all her strength she hurled it back down against the hard-baked ground, shattering it into many shards. Laila searched through them for one just the right size for her hand and began gouging out a hole in the merciless soil.

Laila was just patting the sapling into place when the sun broke away from its earthly bed and rose into the sky unsupported. She collapsed onto the ground in exhaustion and even lay there as she pried open the mouth of the bag of food and withdrew a generous chunk of bread. Forgetting the water at first, she ate it dry.

Once she'd uncorked the waterskin, she poured all but the last swallow for the sapling. The final mouthful tasted even better than the honey wine. Laila held it in her mouth, wetting her dry tongue, enjoying the tickle of a single drop running from the corner of her lips. The longer she held it in her mouth, though, the guiltier she felt. Finally, she spat it out for the plant.

“You need it more than I do.”

Laila stood watching the sapling. Nothing special happened. Had she done something wrong? Had she planted it too late? Laila didn't know what she was supposed to do now. The

fire still burned so far away, marching across the western horizon. As a precaution, Laila took up her shard of pot and dug a circular firebreak all around the sapling. Then she pulled every weed she could find and carried it beyond her little trench. This done, Laila laid down beside the little sapling and fell into a deep sleep.

\* \* \*

The sun shone bright overhead when the scent of smoke choked Laila awake. She sat up to find a wind had come up from the west and blown the fire toward them, up over them. Laila and the tree were surrounded by flame.

The tree! From morning to afternoon the sapling had sprouted into a tree four or five times Laila's height. Sparks from the flames floated in its boughs, and Laila jumped up to slap them away before they could alight. She couldn't let the tree burn.

Down on the ground, however, it was becoming too hot to bear. Smoke infused Laila's hair and clothing. She tried not to think about the danger to herself, just the tree. She had to save the tree.

*Please, please, please*, she thought. *Mother Earth, Father Sky, don't let me fail. Let me do one important thing in my life.*

When she could not stand the smoke and the heat, Laila began to shimmy up the cedar tree. She climbed as high as she could, until she could catch a breath of hot clean air, when the breeze blew just right. Still, smoke wafted into her face and made her cough, made her eyes tear up.

Because she was alone, with no one else to see, Laila let her fear show through in fat, choking tears. She cried because she knew the tree would burn, because she would burn, because she would die without ever doing anything important, just an orphan child. Tears streaked her sooty face, welling up from her chest in great wracking sobs. She cried until she had soaked her face, and the tears kept coming.

"Please, please," she whispered, though she didn't know to whom. "Don't let me die. Don't let the cedar burn." She kept crying and kept whispering, whispering, praying.

She thought she almost heard the tree whispering with her, needles hissing against needles in the smoky wind. Then the sound became more pronounced, a distant whisper in a voice she could not quite make out. She held her breath and listened. It was coming from the tree.

Laila felt tears on her face again, but she had stopped crying. She put her hand to her cheek. Yes, it was wet. But then she felt the drops on her arms and her knees and her dirty feet. It was sprinkling, and then it was raining, and then pouring. She heard whispering from the rain as well. A conversation she could not understand went on for a long time, while the fire died out, hissing its objection to its demise.

Then finally, a whisper spoke in the language Laila understood.

"The trees are the prayers of earth to sky."

And it said no more, but the whispering went on, and now Laila understood she was actually hearing the discourse between Mother Earth and Father Sky. He finally understood She cried for rain, and He blessed Her with a downpour that left Laila thoroughly clean.

\* \* \*

Thus went the story the priests told orphan children in the sacred groves of Neridia, while they ate their afternoon meal and learned of all the child saints.

## The End

*Margo is a born and raised California native, currently working as a government resource analyst in the sunny Central San Joaquin Valley. Highlights (or at least interesting points) of her life include working as a 911 dispatcher, living in Europe, and attending Viable Paradise 7.*

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“I’ve forgotten his name...but I’m sure he’s good. In fact, he seemed to know you, Flinteye.”

I just hoped it wasn’t Dash Prigs. He had tried to put a knife through my ribs when he was drunk last time I had seen him. Good thing he can’t fight drunk.

I nodded. “Where is he?”

“He was on his way. Ah, here he is now.”

I turned to see the tall double doors at the far end of the room open slowly, bending back towards the columned walls. Behind them stood a wiry figure covered entirely in black. A hood covered his face, and a black cloak hung to his knees.

He advanced with a white-armored Yaoshin guard on either side. I recognized him, halfway across the room, when he raised the hood to show a black mask with raised bubbles over the eyes and a small grill over the mouth. I stepped down from the spear’s dais to meet him. His body was wrapped in black, with a leather girdle covering his torso. He was a little shorter than I was, about Axten’s height. “Chass. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

He nodded and said, “Jalazar Flinteye.” His voice was so flat it could have belonged to a maintenance ‘bot.

“What have you been doing? Gamerl didn’t want you to watch his daughter again, did he?”

“Fortunately not.”

The first time I had seen Chass, he’d been with me as a bodyguard for a young Alliance lady who had tried to elope with a crime lord on Nalkress, one of the worst gang holes in the galaxy. Chass had earned my respect on that job—he was one of the best marksmen and knife fighters I knew.

“Ah, yes, Chass, that was your name,” said Jinzi as we walked up the dais steps together. “Well, I was just explaining your duties to Flinteye...”

Chass bowed low—just like I had seen all the Yaoshin do, with hands clasped at the throat. Jinzi returned the gesture nervously. The guards frowned. They were an austere bunch.

Axten came up and grabbed one of Chass’ hands, then shook it vigorously and said, “If you’ve got a spare moment, Chass, I’d like to see if you can outshoot me. That chandelier—do you think that you can hit those bulbs?”

Jinzi cut in before Chass could answer. “So...as I was saying...you’ll keep watch during the night. It’s...let me see...ten standard hours long during this season. Daylight is about twelve. During that time, you will prevent any beings—except for me—from approaching the spear. Of course...guards with a red seal, like these ones on their shoulder pads, are also allowed. They will speak the code word ‘Karokai’, which means ‘fire-crystal’ in Yaoshiv. That’s what the spear is made of. So...sleeping rolls, food, and latrines will be brought. During the night hours, you may do whatever you like among yourselves as long as you guard the spear attentively. My guards will be outside the doors, but...they don’t like being near the spear at night. There’s a superstition that it’s dangerous at night.”

His expression became desperate, and his face glowed warmer in my infrared vision. “Please. You must protect it. There are lords...Lord Mutofi especially...who want it desperately, and know they will not be able to get it after my new facility is built. He might try...well, that’s why I hired you.”

I grimaced. I had a feeling this job wasn’t going to be pleasant. Even if there was no attempt at theft, he’d stop by us every hour, shaking from worry and demanding detailed reports.

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\* \* \*

Our first shift began shortly after he left. He had talked for almost an hour, mostly worrying about various ways thieves could break in. I listened to them all, but counted on Axten to remember them. Each one had seemed more impossible than the last.

He finally left, and after some servants installed a portable latrine and set up a food cooler and three sleeping rolls, we were left alone.

“Three rolls,” said Axten. “You need two, Jalazar?”

I ignored him. Axten shut himself down either standing or hunched against a wall.

“Right. What’ve you got, Chass?” I said.

“The same as I had last time. Two Ramshell pistols, fifteen chambers each, with ammunition, and my daggers.”

“I’ve got a repeater rifle, heavy plasma pistols, dagger, Ima-han sword, and grenades.”

Axten said, “Ion rifle, a very good one, slug pistol, two blades in my wrists, and a slug gun in the index finger of my right hand. I didn’t bring my sword. Jalazar’s more anachronistic than I am.”

“Right,” I said. “We’ll sleep during the day, and then all three stay up through the night. No objections?”

Chass didn’t say anything. He simply sat down on the top step of the dais and began to examine one of his pistols. I nodded and started being bored.

\* \* \*

I slept six hours—all I needed—when the night ended, and about a half-hour after I woke there was some excitement. “Lord Mutofi is coming!” shrieked Jinzi, spraying me with spit. “Be on your guard—he is a dangerous man. He wants to...steal it. I’m sure of it.”

“Then why let him in?” asked Axten.

“Because...because any Yaoshin lord has the right to request a viewing of the spear at any time. He will be here in half an hour...so...well, be ready. Twenty guards will be stationed in this room during his visit, but I want you here as well.”

Then he left, sweat staining the fabric of his silk robes.

“Why is this spear so crucial to his power?” asked Chass. He was moving his glassy daggers from hand to hand in an exercise I couldn’t begin to comprehend.

I sat down next to him. “You’re better at this than I am, Axten. Tell him.”

“I’ll make it shorter than Jinzi’s story, if you don’t mind.”

“Good.”

Axten remained standing while he spoke. “Yaos is an Alliance territory, ruled by several lords who have been here for about two hundred years. Before that, it was an industrial world controlled by the Yaoshin—a warlike people who did not accept Alliance rulers readily. The turning point in subjugating them was the capture of the most precious Yaoshin artifact—that spear, the largest chunk of fire crystal ever found.

“Yaoshin crystal is unique to this planet. It’s an excellent conductor, and a cut from a crystal blade can cause numbness and even paralysis. But Yaoshin crystal is normally blue. Red fire crystal is immensely valuable even in small quantities. Also, that weapon is said to have belonged to Amoshi, the greatest hero of Yaoshin legend. With its psychological power,

the Alliance invaders quickly gained dominance, and two hundred years have cemented their rule. Since the conquest, it's been a custom of the lords that whoever holds the spear is the 'first-among-equals', and holds the highest place in the Yaos Council.

"Of course, it's always been a tradition that the lords will try to steal the spear from each other, under certain rules. They might have allowed Jinzi to keep the spear for a while, but now that he's building a specialized containment facility—well, they don't appreciate that, and some of the lords are on the verge of declaring outright war against him."

"And he hired three guards for this?" said Chass.

I shrugged. "It's hard to find good ones for a reasonable price. He could have gone to a crime hole and rounded up a hundred killers for fifty SEUs each, but they'd probably have ended up getting drunk, chasing after any female they saw, and killing each other."

"So why are you here, Jalazar?"

"It looked interesting. And Axten picked it."

Chass nodded with his masked head. "I saw your name on it. If this job turns out like the last one, I don't think I'll be bored."

I shook my head. "Not all my jobs get me bullet holes through my lungs."

The monolithic doors at the front of the room crashed open. Jinzi and six Yaoshin guards came in first with a tall man of Jinzi's race right behind. He had a narrow beard and a flowing mustache, which was braided into his sideburns. His blue hair was braided into his beard, which was knotted into the lower reaches of the mustache. It was one of the more absurd styles I had seen, and I had seen a lot. I struggled not to laugh.

Chass stood next to the case while Axten and I took positions on either side of the steps. A phalanx of Jinzi's Yaoshin followed the lords into the room, taking up positions around the hall and the dais. Mutofi seemed to have only three guards—black-robed Yaoshin with sheathed swords and slug rifles over their backs. They advanced slowly up the carpeted path.

"Those Yaoshin look different from Jinzi's," I said, quietly enough so that only Axten—and maybe Chass—could hear.

"Jinzi's guards are drawn from the natives who have served the Alliances since the conquest. Mutofi prefers rougher beings, recruited from the native strongholds in the mountains."

Before I could ask anything else, Mutofi called out, "So these are your mighty off-world guards, Jinzi? A cat wearing clothes, a 'bot, and...what is that thing? A leper?"

He was at the foot of the steps, a few meters away from me, but I could've taken his throat out in a few seconds if the Yaoshin didn't interfere. Or I could've just shot him if they did.

I thought Mutofi was going to spit on me as he passed. "I'm no cat," I growled in his ear, low enough so that Jinzi couldn't hear me. I made sure Mutofi saw my fangs.

He smiled. I really wanted to shoot him.

"So this is where you keep the spear, Jinzi," Mutofi said. "It seems more beautiful every time I see it. Your ownership doesn't seem to have done it any harm..."

I could see Chass gripping his pistols. As far as I could tell, he kept his eyes on Mutofi's warriors. Hoods shadowed their knobby yellow faces. I half-drew one of my plasma pistols, silently. I noticed Axten cocking his finger gun.

Mutofi reached toward the case. One of the guards blocked him, and Jinzi said, "It's...well, it's equipped with heat sensors. Alarms will go off if you touch the case."

Mutofi's smile broadened. "Ah. One of your modern defenses. I imagine that I'll be



immolated as well.”

“No...just alarms.”

“Ah, yes. That’s what your guards are for. You, Blackie. Why the mask? Afraid to show us what you look like? Or are you another of cat-boy’s ‘bots?”

He turned when he heard the sound I made in the back of my throat. “You—what are you going to do, shoot me? Is that what Jinzi hired you for?”

One of Jinzi’s Yaoshin spoke before anything could happen. “Lord Mutofi, do not impugn Lord Jinzi’s honor.”

Mutofi’s smile turned to a grin. “Far be it from me to do that. I was merely...ensuring my safety.”

He turned to Jinzi. “You are indeed fearful, my lord. Perhaps one with a spine as weak as yours isn’t worthy to hold Amoshi’s blade.”

“It’s...mine, Mutofi,” said Jinzi. “You can view it...but you can’t question my ownership.”

“Can’t I? Well, then, I’ll be gone.”

He turned and strode back towards the door. His three guards and several of Jinzi’s followed. Jinzi was almost frantic when he turned to us. “You see? You see? He’ll...he’ll try to take it from me! His tribal Yaoshin are...well...very skilled warriors. And thieves.”

Jinzi started to descend from the dais, but before he reached the bottom, he said, “It’s daytime now...my Yaoshin will watch the spear. Sleep, play games, eat...whatever you wish, until night. Be alert...kill them, if anyone tries to take it. Alarm buttons are located behind all the pillars...press them, and all my guards will come. Be careful.”

\* \* \*

We slept. I got my six hours, Axten shut down for two, and Chass took eight. I didn’t know what Axten did in the hours when I was asleep—when I asked him, he usually said something cryptic.

I broke out a pack of cards for the rest of the day, and Chass joined in. The images on them could be modified to represent several of the numerous decks found in the galaxy. Chass knew a few games, Axten knew almost all of them, and I was somewhere in between. We played mostly six card Sword-Edge, making petty bets with SEU coins. Chass played conservatively, but he often won when he put his money in. I was glad to have the third player, though—it was never very exciting when Axten and I played cards, because it didn’t really matter who kept the money.

We cycled through a few other games, talking sometimes, and waited for night. I couldn’t quite tell whether I wanted the spear stolen or not—it would certainly make this job less like sitting around in space.

Five minutes before our time came, I glanced up to see the Yaoshin still at their posts—six of them stationed around the spear, at that hour. We played two more hands. Then, I looked up to see them all dead and bleeding. The spear was gone. Three beings in black cloaks were already halfway across the hall. Two had blue crystal sabers and slug pistols in their hands. The third had the spear.

I roared, throwing down my cards, and unslung the repeater rifle from around my shoulders. We were halfway up the steps of the dais, several meters away from the thieves.

It didn’t take my partners long to see what I had roared at. Chass’ pistols came out and

each fired a shot before I could put my finger around my rifle's trigger. Chunks of carpet flew where his bullets hit, but he missed the thieves. They scattered. The one with the spear broke for the door, weaving back and forth, and the other two thieves spread out on either side of him. I sprayed bullets at them and was sure that some of my shots hit. The beings kept running. Either they were phantoms or they had good armor.

Even good armor didn't stop plasma. I threw the rifle away, drew my pistols, and leapt the rest of the way down the steps to get level with them. I hit the carpeted floor, let my legs collapse under the shock, and rolled with the momentum. I came up firing. Violet orbs sprayed towards them. I clipped the corner of one Yaoshin's cloak, burning a chunk of the fabric off. He kept running.

"Chass, get the alarm! Axten, on me!"

I ran after them, still firing. One dropped with his back blown open, and Axten smashed another's head with an ion stream. Then the one with the spear tossed it in a glowing arc to a group of three more black-cloaked beings. One of them caught it easily just as I shot the thrower. The new group vanished through the door. I grabbed a small plasma grenade in two fingers, primed it with my teeth, and threw it at the doors, trying to get it through before they closed entirely. I missed, but the grenade blasted a hole in the left door. I leapt through it and into the hallway a few seconds later, scraping one shoulder against a shard of wood. Axten followed a moment later. Alarms had sounded, loud and shrill, and beyond them I heard the pounding of Chass' boots as he ran after us.

The corridor contrasted sharply with the spear room—rich, dark wood covered the walls, but the carpet was simple and there were no carvings, gold ornaments, or silk hangings. I looked in each direction. Black figures ran in both directions—I couldn't tell which group had the spear.

"Axten, go left. Keep your comm on. Chass, on me," I said, then ran to the right. No sign of Jinzi's guards, although four should have been stationed outside the spear room. Had they been killed too? I didn't see any bodies.

Chass was a better runner than I was, even though his legs were shorter. I had to strain to keep up, and even then he pulled ahead. I shot a few plasma bolts, but the Yaoshin were slippery and far off. Chass conserved his shots until he could hit them.

The thieves dodged down a side corridor—the first for twenty meters. The long, empty hallways were part of Jinzi's security. The thieves wouldn't have gotten in if the guards had been at their stations—I'd have to beat some discipline into them next time I saw them.

I skidded around the corner to find one of the thieves facing me with a blue crystal scimitar held across my path. It looked sharp enough to slice bone, and I knew that cuts from Yaoshin crystal could induce paralysis.

I fired once, but the shot went into the ceiling over his head. Then he lunged, slashing for my neck, and the most I could do was hurl myself against the wall. My arm slammed into the hard wood and erupted with pain. I heard a loud clang and turned to see Chass with both curved daggers out, blocking a downward sweep from the scimitar. I couldn't shoot—they were too close together, and their black clothing looked similar—so I dropped one pistol, reached over my shoulder, and grabbed the hilt of my Ima-han sword. Ima-han was a sword-fighting discipline that I practiced along with Axten, which emphasized bodily movement and used a meter-long, slightly curved slashing blade. I drew it and charged at the Yaoshin's back. Pale fluorescent lamps lit the corridors at night, and the blade flashed in their light. Chass knocked the scimitar away and whirled his daggers around for an offensive swipe. At the same time, I swung my

blade down at the Yaoshin's head.

The scimitar came up to block my sword while the Yaoshin ducked. Chass managed to stop his blades before they gouged my eyes out. The scimitar jerked away from my sword, but I had relaxed pressure on my blade enough not to send it through Chass' skull. I threw myself against the wall again to avoid another slash. Chass attacked, leaping through the air.

He clipped the Yaoshin's shoulder, drawing a splatter of red that stained the wall. The thief lunged again—right into the path of a plasma ball from my pistol. It went through the left side of his chest, burning a hole as big as my fist. He stumbled forward a couple steps, sword falling from his grip, and died without a sound. I picked up his scimitar. “You want it?” I asked Chass.

He shook his head. I looked at it a moment longer, then said, “I'll pick it up on the way back. Let's move.”

The other Yaoshin had vanished down a blank corridor that turned off ours at a right angle. There was a fork.

“Jalazar,” said Chass, “you have a map of the mansion, correct?”

I did. And it would have stayed forgotten if he hadn't mentioned it. I reached into my vest and hit the power button on my computer. I had the map loaded onto the main screen.

I looked at it as we ran. “There should be two Yaoshin stationed at every intersection with a tripod weapon and grenades. There should be remotely operated ceiling cannons activated when the alarm goes off. There should be a horde of guards storming everywhere within two minutes of an alarm!”

I searched for an appropriate curse and found one in Blakrack. I almost thought I could see Chass wince behind his mask.

We reached the intersection. “Do we split up?” said Chass, glancing in both directions.

He took a step forward and barely missed having his mask shattered by a slug that went a centimeter past his eye bubbles. I turned and put three plasma bolts in the direction that it had come from, where I saw three warm blurs in infrared. One of them went down in a flash of heat, and I dodged back behind the corner with Chass an instant behind.

“How many of these thieves are there?” I snarled. “And where are Jinzi's guards?”

The two remaining thieves kept firing, pinning us down.

“You have infrared in that mask?” I asked.

“A little.”

“Good.”

I stepped back far enough to see a few of the light panels in the cross-corridor, raised my pistol, and shot them out. A hail of sparks and plastic fell to the floor. I jumped out into the hallway with my pistol pointed straight ahead. I shot both Yaoshin before they could target me in the darkness, using their heat signatures to aim.

“Come on,” I said.

I started to run forward. Chass reached up, clapped a hand on my shoulder, and said, “Wait. The one with the spear would have gone the other way. The gunmen wanted us to go their way—a deception, you see.”

I frowned for a moment, then decided that it was as good a choice as any. I followed him at a jog, looking at my computer.

“One more intersection, and then we're into the mansion's main wing. There's a guard barracks just outside the spear sector, but I'm guessing we'll find it empty.”

Chass nodded. “That path Axten took—where does it lead?”

I traced the route. “Same place. Hopefully, he’ll have the spear.”

“Possibly,” said Chass. “Or one of the Yaoshin might have destroyed him. I’m sure they watched both paths.”

I snorted. “Not Axten. I don’t think guns like they’re using could get past his carapace.”

“The blades could. Yaoshin crystal is one of the best cutting substances known in the galaxy.”

I didn’t like to think about that.

There were no more surprises until we came to the exit hall, a vast room hung with paintings and gilt ornaments. Pillars of red stone supported its broad roof. The room should have been full of guards, but we just found another black-clad Yaoshin corpse—I recognized an ion wound from Axten’s rifle in his chest. Ahead, I heard the crackle of the same rifle.

Chass put on a new burst of speed and outdistanced me easily, careening towards the entrance to the next room. He went through the door with a pistol in one hand and a black dagger in the other. I followed, ready to shoot anything that wasn’t Axten or Chass.

I made out the ‘bot’s silver gleam in a beam of moonlight coming through one of the windows. His rifle was pointed up and firing into the shadowy rafters of the hall. I could see a blur of heat moving away from him. Something faintly red rested in its hands.

“Axten!” I shouted.

He didn’t look away as he aimed another shot up at the hot form. It was almost out of the room and into the next through an opening that connected the two five meters off the floor. I snapped off a pair of plasma bolts and heard Chass’ pistol fire, but we didn’t do more than damage the woodwork. The Yaoshin thief fled into the next room.

“Why did Jinzi feel a need to install catwalks as rafters?” sighed Axten as the three of us ran towards the next room.

“I’ve already got a few things to say to him,” I growled.

I rammed through the door, nearly wrenching it off its hinges, and saw the Yaoshin thief almost halfway across the room. I fired only to see him easily drift across a gap and onto the parallel rafter.

“Jalazar. Throw me,” said Chass, suddenly.

It took me a moment to comprehend what he had said, and I wasn’t sure I had heard him right. I turned around, frowning.

“You and Axten. Throw me up.”

Axten wrapped his arms around Chass’ waist and lifted. “He’s light, Jalazar. We can do it.”

I holstered my pistol and pocketed my computer. “Right. You take his legs.”

I moved around to clutch Chass’ shoulders and hooked my hands beneath the joints while Axten gripped his ankles and heaved him off the floor. Axten was right—he couldn’t weigh more than fifty kilos, probably less.

“One!” Axten shouted.

I matched him. We counted to three swinging Chass between us, and then released after the third backswing. He went straight up, mask shimmering in the moonlight, and caught himself on one of the rafter beams. He was up in another second, slithering like water without gravity.

He drew his daggers without a sound and charged after the thief, moving like a hunting

arachnid. He stepped so lightly that I couldn't hear his boots. I saw a flash of white eyes as the fleeing Yaoshin glanced over his shoulder.

I was glad Chass was my friend when I saw how fast he moved. The Yaoshin reached the opening to the next room, leaned down, and threw the spear into it. Then he turned, drawing a crystal scimitar, and gripped it in both hands as he waited for Chass.

I stopped watching at that point. I didn't need to say anything for Axten to fall in at my side as I ran. We went over the carpet, dodged around a couple display cases that blocked our path, and crashed through the door with the sound of clashing blades in our ears.

The next room was almost exactly the same as the previous one: A broad hall full of display cases. Jinzi kept a whole museum in his mansion—and the whole thing was supposed to be swarming with guards. I looked around for the Yaoshin who had caught the spear.

There weren't any. Amoshi's Spear lay on the floor. I ran up and grabbed it before another robed thief could get it and held it up to the moonlight.

It was just simple red glass—I had gotten a lot of time to study the spear during my first watch, and it hadn't looked like this.

"A fake," I snarled to Axten as he came up. I struggled with the urge to shout all the worst curses I knew.

I touched my finger to the edge of the fake blade. It was sharp enough to kill Chass' opponent. I turned and went back and threw the door open with one hand. The other hand gripped the spear's glass shaft.

The two still hammered their blades against each other in the rafters. "Chass, bring him down here!" I roared.

Chass' daggers moved fast, but the Yaoshin had better reach and was managing to hold him off. They moved back and forth fast enough that I couldn't afford to shoot or even throw the spear. I didn't want Chass dead.

Chass dropped onto his back and shot out a booted foot. It caught the Yaoshin on the flat of one heel—hard enough to unbalance him, but not enough to knock him off. Then Chass slithered to his feet and brought both his daggers down at the Yaoshin's chest. He blocked, but the force of Chass' blades knocked him off his feet. The thief fell to the floor with a thud. I leapt at him, holding the spear up to impale him. Axten arrived first. He leapt onto the Yaoshin as he struggled to rise and pinned his arms to the floor. "Wait, Jalazar!" he snapped.

I stopped the spear two centimeters above the thief's throat. "Why?" I growled.

"He'll tell us where they've taken the real spear."

For the first time, I heard the Yaoshin speak. "I will not. I will die first."

"Right. And I'll kill you," I snarled at him, then shifted my attention a few centimeters over to Axten. "We already know Mutofi sent them. We can find his mansion easily."

Axten shook his head. "It won't be at his mansion, and if it is, we won't know where it is within the building."

"A hidden fortress, then. But you heard him; he won't tell us anything. Let's wake Jinzi up, tell him it's been stolen, and then he'll take his troops—that cohort of Stellar Navy marines—and wring it out of Mutofi."

"Two problems, Jalazar. First, there are certain traditions associated with the spear—stealing it and possessing it. If Jinzi attempted to take it back by sheer military force, every lord on the planet would combine to destroy him. Parties of thieves operating under certain rules is the only method by which the spear can change hands, by common agreement of the Yaoshin

lords. There is killing, certainly, but never open war.”

“I’ve never been much good at stealing,” I growled. “What’s the other problem?”

Axten answered me while Chass slid down to the floor on a pillar. “If we try to go after the spear ourselves, we can’t kill a Yaoshin lord without starting something beyond the politics of the spear. If Jinzi’s hirees—that’s us—assassinated Mutofi, civil war would break out. And I doubt we’d survive long once bounties were put out for us, probably by both sides.”

“Alright,” I said. “So we can’t go get the spear ourselves, because we don’t know where it is, we can’t grill Mutofi, and we can’t have Jinzi send his marines. We won’t get paid, and we’ll probably make him fairly angry. I can have the *Flint Shard* airborne in a half hour. How about you, Chass?”

“My ship is fueled and ready to launch. But it won’t be necessary.”

“Why not?”

“Because Jinzi has modern tracking systems installed in his mansion. I believe the thieves arrived in a cloaked vehicle, coming over the outer defenses of the mansion. If we access the records, guessing when the true spear left the mansion, than we may be able to pick up traces of the thieving vehicle. We’ll know where the spear is, and we can go get it, hopefully without harming Mutofi.”

I nodded. “The system would run without guards. And the ground level shield is automated at night, isn’t it? Only Jinzi has the password. Vanished guards couldn’t stop that either. Axten, tie this one up and knock him out. Then let’s find the scanner controls.”

\* \* \*

An hour later, the three of us soared above the ridges beyond Jinzi’s mansion complex in a hovercar, following a map Chass had sketched out of the path to a small stronghold Mutofi apparently kept nearby, hidden by trees in a cavernous valley.

I slipped fresh charges into my pistols and said, “How many soldiers do you think he has there? Too many for us to kill?”

“We won’t need to kill all of them,” said Axten. “Just the ones between us and the spear.”

“What else would they be guarding besides the spear?”

“If they’re too many, Jalazar, we can go back, get our ships, and be in space before Jinzi notices anything is missing.”

“Maybe not. He might decide to check on us in the middle of the night. And I don’t want to abandon a job.”

Axten didn’t say anything.

The stronghold was invisible beneath the trees, but an energy trace from Jinzi’s tracking systems led right to it. The trace was so faint that it might have been mistaken for a hot gust of wind by another observer, but Axten had picked it out and tracked it to its destination.

We set the hovercar down a kilometer away and walked through the trees. It was a warm night, but not hot enough for infrared to be much use. I was almost as crippled in the darkness as an average human. Chass wasn’t an average human; he found a path through the dark foliage that I probably couldn’t have seen even with floodlights scattered around. Axten and I followed, listening for guards. I drew one pistol and kept my finger on the trigger.

The building itself was unadorned, concrete with occasional windows of what looked like reinforced glass. A pair of gun emplacements protruded from turrets on the roof, but neither one

was manned. A hovercar garage opened onto a second-floor terrace.

The ground-level doors were steel, with a series of old-fashioned padlocks holding them shut. Axten and Chass spent a minute debating how to break them before I raised my pistol and shot them all. “Effective,” said Axten, pushing the doors open.

Beyond was a dark corridor that trailed off into blackness. It was at least seven meters long, lit only by moonlight, with another steel door at the end. This one was unlocked. Axten pushed it open and went in while I followed with Chass just behind.

The lights went on suddenly, blinding me. I snarled and threw my hands over my eyes, including the one that held the pistol. That was a bad idea. The next thing I felt was powerful hands tearing it from my grip and removing the other one from its holster before grabbing my arms and holding them tight against my sides. They also took the ten-shot pistol I kept in my vest and my grenades. I growled and tried to tear away, snapping at a dark shape with my fangs, as my captors slipped a pair of cuffs around my hands. One of them punched me in the gut, hard, and I went down on my chest. There was minimal carpeting to cushion my head as it hit the floor. I snarled wordlessly and flopped over onto my back, then felt someone put a heavy, booted foot on my chest.

“So, these are Jinzi’s mighty off-worlders? Titans to defend his prize from any attack?”

The voice sounded familiar. Mutofi. I lifted my head, still blinking against the light, and tried to see around the boot on my chest. He stood about five meters in front of me, dressed in a loose robe of red satin. A Yaoshin warrior stood at his side, holding the real spear, its shaft and blade pulsing with an inner glow. Two white-armored guards—both humans—pointed rifles at us, and two Yaoshin were on top of each of us. The room itself was a rich sitting chamber, with gilded wooden chairs and flowing wall hangings.

I watched as Mutofi sauntered over to a lacquered drink cabinet, opened the doors, and selected a bottle. “This is Hikija brandy from the southern deserts of the Shithor continent. A rich liquor and one of the strongest available in this sector of the galaxy. Very expensive. But, of course, I shall be able to afford it more often with the power that comes from the spear.”

He took out a glass and poured himself three centimeters worth of deep gold liquid. He took a sip, winced, and set the glass down with a clank.

“Don’t make us watch you drink,” I said. “Just kill us.”

He took another sip. “Ah, yes, I was considering that. But then I decided it would create bad feeling. Oh, admittedly, you killed a few of my clansmen, but I removed a group of Jinzi’s troops in return. A most successful heist, wouldn’t you say, Shiro?”

The Yaoshin holding the spear nodded. “Indeed.”

I snorted. “There wasn’t much against you. Jinzi’s guards were all hiding somewhere. Probably drinking in the barracks. It was just the three of us and a few around the spear case.”

That seemed to jolt Mutofi. His glass came down on his little table hard enough to send droplets of brandy flying. “What? Jinzi’s guards, not at their posts? You must be lying. They might have been superstitious about the spear, but I’ve rarely encountered a more disciplined body of men.”

“They were gone.”

Mutofi’s frown deepened. “Is this true, Shiro?”

Shiro didn’t answer—instead, as I watched, he lifted the spear and rammed it through the left side of Mutofi’s chest. The crystal blade slid out, and the lord dropped. His two gun-toting guards went down to broad slashes of the orange crystal before they could squeeze their triggers.

Blood sprayed.

Then I heard another sound—that of a Yaoshin crashing to the carpeted floor a couple meters to my left. I heard Chass' daggers come hissing out of their sheathes—apparently, his guards hadn't thought to remove them. In fact, my Ima-han sword was still sheathed on my back.

I swung my legs around and hit the guard who had his boot on my chest. He fell, and I jumped up to my feet. A pistol almost deafened me by going off centimeters from my ear hole. I turned and slammed my manacled hands into the other Yaoshin's head. He dropped his pistol, going to his knees. He held the pistol up to defend himself and I smashed it aside with my manacles. A third blow, and he dropped with his head gushing blood.

I turned to see Axten removing his wrist blades from the corpse of his second guard. His first was already dead. I guessed Chass had accomplished something similar. His daggers cut through the manacles binding my hands.

"Hmm. You are skilled warriors indeed," said the one holding the spear, Shiro. "It is little surprise to me that you were able to kill so many of my warriors. But more will be here in an hour, a full company of clansmen to take the spear to its place of safe-keeping."

I looked down at Mutofi's corpse, then up at the Yaoshin. "Why did you kill him? He's your master, isn't he?"

Shiro smiled. "No. I served him only to serve my people. For two hundred years, the men of the stars have held dominion over us. But soon, that will end. The ancient clans of Yaos—and, through them, the common people—will rise to overthrow the Alliance lords, fighting with their own weapons. Amoshi's Spear will rally the people. It was the symbol of Yaoshin freedom, long ago, before it became a token of power among the greedy lords. Now it will lead them in revolution. Even Jinzi's guards—traitors—had divided loyalties. They would not help us openly, but all but the most loyal—those Jinzi allowed to guard the spear itself—left their posts on the night of the raid. They too want Yaos to be free."

I reached up and gripped my sword's hilt. "We've been hired to keep the spear from being stolen."

Shiro nodded. "I'm aware of that. I am sorry it's necessary, but I must kill you."

There was a torch burning in a pedestal a few feet away from Mutofi's corpse. It was gas powered, but the flame flickered high. Shiro stretched out the spear and slowly began to feed it through the flames.

"Perhaps you have wondered why it is called 'fire crystal'. The substance is rare, and there are few who know its properties."

The spear caught fire as if it had been soaked in oil—but the flame that covered it seemed amplified. It burned a hot white that hurt my eyes. Shiro's hands gripped it easily. I noticed that he wore heavy gloves.

I drew my sword. The blade flashed in the firelight.

"Your guns have been taken. Now you must fight me as true warriors. Now Amoshi's spear must lift in the cause of Yaos' people," said Shiro, raising the burning weapon.

Then he attacked, swinging the spear back and lunging straight at me. I held my sword up to block as the spear moved in a flaming arc. The impact almost broke my sword and my arm. Sparks scorched my fur with tiny spots of heat. I leapt back, and he followed, charging again.

Chass came in from my left, daggers whirling. Both of them clashed against the haft of the spear as Shiro blocked smoothly. Then he swung the blade around at Chass' neck. My friend



dodged back, and I charged in, thrusting for Shiro's neck. He bent just out of my reach and drove a gloved fist into my stomach. I staggered back. Axten and Chass attacked simultaneously from both sides, but Shiro blocked attacks from both of them and retreated. As he did, quick slashes from the flaming spearhead destroyed the rifles once carried by Mutofi's guards. No chance of using those now.

Then he brought the spear up to point above his head, brushing the room's ceiling, and brought it down quickly in an arc aimed at me. A ball of flame detached itself from the head and flew at me. I barely had time to dodge. It landed in the carpet and lit a fire there.

Shiro came forward again, moving the spear point in slow circles. I saw Chass and Axten on either side of me. Axten had his wrist blades extended, hands folded back, and Chass held his glassy black daggers in a combat stance.

"Think we can kill him?" I asked them.

"Do it first. Then think about it," said Axten.

Suddenly, Shiro lunged forward and threw the spear out in a flying thrust, keeping only one hand on the shaft. The spear point almost skewered my throat, but I managed to slap it away with my sword. It went wide towards Chass, and Axten lunged in while Shiro was open. The Yaoshin dropped to the floor, under Axten's wrist blades, and swept his spear along the carpeting in a strike at Axten's and my feet. I stumbled backward, but Axten leapt over the stroke and came at Shiro with both his wrist blades thrust out to stab. Chass rushed in from the other side, but Shiro rolled, taking the spear with him, and came to his feet two meters away. The spear crashed down on a small table, missing Axten, and shattered it into flaming shards of wood. Some of them hit the carpet. I couldn't spare the time to stomp them out—we'd have to fight in the flames.

I moved back into the fight, adjusting my grip. My ankle flared with pain, twisted. Shiro and Chass traded blows, sending up sparks where their weapons hit—but where was Axten? I saw him on the ground with a scorching slash in his waist. It hadn't hit anything critical, but it had damaged his leg motors. "Kill him for me, Jalazar!" he shouted, clashing his wrist blades together fiercely. Axten could be bloodthirsty.

Then, before I could charge again, Chass took a slash on his left forearm. He didn't make a sound—just held off Shiro's spear with the dagger in his right hand while somehow using his left to tear the flaming piece of cloth from his arm. The wound had been cauterized, but red crystal seemed to have the same paralytic properties as blue. Already, I could see Chass beginning to stiffen in his motions, although the wound didn't stop him from using his arm.

Several fires had erupted on the carpet, and flame was crawling up one of the wall hangings. It was getting dangerous in here, and Shiro was a better fighter than all three of us together. I could have turned and run out the way I had come, maybe dragging Axten with me, but I would never have had peace if I had left Chass behind. I needed to help him, but if I did, I had a feeling I would get that spear through my ribs.

Then I noticed Mutofi's brandy, still resting on the little table with a wet drinking glass next to it. The bottle was almost full.

I glanced up at the spear, wrapped in white fire, then back down at the bottle. It didn't take me long to make the connection. I picked up the bottle—it was open—and waited for the right moment. It came when Shiro made a wide swing at Chass, driving my friend back and leaving the Yaoshin open.

I threw the bottle, hard and fast. Dark glass glittered in the firelight. Shiro saw it in

time to block, but it moved too fast for him to see what it was. It shattered against the shaft of his spear, and the brandy caught fire as it emerged from the broken bottle. Glass shards and gobbets of flaming liquor riddled Shiro's torso, arms, and face. Now, for the first time, he screamed. The spear left his hands as he began slapping at himself, but that only spread the flame and drove the glass deeper. Shiro dropped, howling, and started to roll on the floor, but a sheet of alcohol fire had already spread over much of his clothing. I winced at the sounds he made and looked away. It took him a long time to die.

When the screaming stopped, I looked back to see his corpse covered in flame and slowly burning into ash. Then I heard Chass at my side. "Flinteye, let's go!"

I nodded and said, "Axten."

I sheathed my sword, put my arms under his shoulders, and hauled him up. Axten clamped an arm around my neck. "Good one, Jalazar. I thought you would drink it instead."

I ignored him and hauled him towards the door, having to go around patches of fire. Chass pushed the doors open and held them for Axten and I. I burnt my feet once on the way out, but then I was into the hallway.

I dropped Axten there. "Take him," I told Chass. "I've got to get the spear."

I ran back into the room, jumping over a small column of flames. Heat roasted my fur. The spear, still burning, lay where it had fallen next to Shiro's corpse. How was I going to pick that thing up?

"Jalazar! Get out here!" shouted Axten.

I took off my vest. I could cover my hands with it long enough to get the spear outside.

I had started to move forward when I heard a crack overhead. A shower of masonry and wood crashed down from the ceiling. I jumped back. Dust and smoke forced themselves into my throat, and I retched. A mound of flaming rubble separated me from the spear, possibly burying it, and the flames were growing with every second.

I turned and ran back through the flames, singeing my feet and fur on hot rubble. I got out, through the doors, and into the night beyond with Chass dragging Axten at my side.

\* \* \*

From the safety of the hovercar, we watched Mutofi's fortress burn with Amoshi's spear somewhere inside it. I didn't think it would be damaged—it had been burning for quite a while in Shiro's hands, and Yaoshin crystal was notoriously strong.

"What now, Jalazar?" said Axten, sitting against the railing of the car.

I thought about it for a minute. "I think it would be best if we got back to our ships and got out of the system, fast. Jinzi won't be pleased that we let his spear leave the mansion, and I don't think I want to stay around when Mutofi's death is discovered. We were in the area, and we're the only ones who survived, so the lords would probably blame it on us."

Chass nodded. "As I said, my ship is ready to fly."

"So is the *Flint Shard*. Let's get moving, then—if the guards are still gone, there'll be nothing between us and the ships. Good to see you, Chass—I hope our next job together is more successful."

"Then what should we do about the spear?" asked Chass, sitting down at the hovercar controls.

"Nothing. This job is over. And you remember who's going to be coming here first? Shiro's

Yaoshin natives. I almost wish we didn't have to kill him. He seemed like a good being."

Chass nodded. "A fine warrior, at least. This world will come to war, I expect. The natives will take the spear, and with it they will rally the Yaoshin. The Stellar Navy will not intervene if enough of them rise against the lords."

"Maybe. But I'm just a mercenary. This is beyond me now. I hate to abandon a job, but I did stop that particular set of thieves. That's good enough for me."

Axten said, "I agree, Jalazar, so let's get moving. I don't like being lame. I've got parts aboard the *Shard*, but I'll need you to install them. I don't usually like to operate on myself."

Chass powered up the car and we flew off into the night, with the stars of Yaos glimmering overhead and the light of the burning fortress behind.

## The End

*Sean T. M. Stiennon's work has been published both online and in print. He won second place in the 2004 SFReader.com Short Story Contest and the Storn Cook Razor-Edged Fiction Contest, and a collection of his Flinteye stories is out from Silver Lake Publishing. Visit his author page at [www.sfreader.com/authors/seanstiennon](http://www.sfreader.com/authors/seanstiennon), and send him feedback at [flinteye@gmail.com](mailto:flinteye@gmail.com).*

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I felt at my throat without volition. I had known I was not of such station as to be granted the mercy of the headsman's axe. I would be hung, and likely drawn and quartered as well, a living example to those who dared challenge the bloody Tudor queen.

"Will you die for your false beliefs, Master Kempe, or will you confess and pray mercy, naming your confederates?" His quill hovered over the paper, waiting.

"Would you die for *your* false beliefs, Doctor Carey?" I countered.

As he stared at me stony-faced, a glint of *something* flickered across his face. Deny the soul though these New Men may, its presence within them, as within us all, is undeniable. I had reached him. "Tell me your account of these past nine days, and we shall see what we shall see."

Taking a deep breath and commending my spirit to God and Our Lady, I began to speak.

\* \* \*

I had come promptly when called for, of course. One does, when Dudley calls. Surrounded by doctors and courtiers, my master awaited me in an antechamber off the king's bedroom. "Kempe," he said in hushed tones. "I must have your word on..." he paused. "On your oath to me that nothing you hear or see in this chamber will be repeated."

The traditional oaths would have been to swear 'By the Well' or 'By the Rood' or 'By the Lady.' The more modern swore 'by sweet Reason.' True believers of any faith, even of a false faith, I could respect. But Dudley believed in nothing save his own house and fortune. At present, he holds to Reason because the forces of Reason ride high. If he thought it would profit him, he would believe in Olympian Jove or pixies or the Man in the Moon.

But I had no choice, either in my service or in my oaths, so I swore, knowing full well that prior vows bound me and might force me to break my word.

"How can you trust him, Father? He's a monk." Robert, one of my master's ubiquitous sons, spoke sharp from his place at the table. Near to the head, I noted.

"Oh, Brother Kempe here knows where his loyalty lies, or at least where his bread's buttered. If he'd been one of the principled sort of monks he'd have been swinging from a tree back in 1537." A palpable hit, that was. My master knew me well. I had been young when they sacked my cloister, but that was no excuse. Younger men than I had died martyrs to the True Faith.

I spent the next several hours taking dictation - letters to the Princess Mary, letters to the Lady Bastard and to sundry nobles throughout the countryside. To be a scrivener is in some ways to be a mechanical device—when I am scribing, I am a tool, a living quill who should not react to what is being transcribed. But that night I was a flawed instrument indeed. By the time I was through, my hands were trembling and I stared at the closed door beyond which lay the king's bedroom. A room that would soon no longer be inhabited by a living being, if the letters I was scribing were to be believed.

King Edward's sisters were being called to his deathbed. I dared not ask further details, nor did I need to. The king had been ailing for many months, and it was no surprise that his death was imminent. The true surprise came with the next document. I was asked to make a copy of King Edward's will.

*...that the doctrine of sweet Reason might be perpetuated in this Realme of England beyond Our span of days...do herein disinherit and dispossess that Lady known within our Realm as Princess Mary, natural daughter of our late father...hold her in due esteem, save for her sad devotion to the Pagan and Unnatural practises of Magic and Faith in those Superstitions that*

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*until the Reformation of our late Father held sway in our Realme...Do appoint as Our Heir, the Lady Jane Grey, daughter of Our fair Cousin, Francis Brandon, Duchess of Suffolk.*

I confess that I had been expecting something of this sort. No power on earth would lead our king, raised in error and heresy as he was, to allow the return of truth to this realm in the person of his half-sister, the Princess Mary. But I had expected Elizabeth the Bullen's brat to inherit, not this obscure cousin, undoubtedly another lost soul like King Edward and the Lady Bastard.

I presented the documents to be signed and sealed and dispatched, each to its own destination, and then I dared to ask a question. "My Lord, forgive me, but is there naught the physicians can do for the king?"

Robert Dudley laughed then, a cynical mirthless laugh. "Could even the fabled Physics of Araby heal the dead?" And I knew that although the letters I had written would be sent out under the seal of the king, he had already passed beyond this world and was even now in Hell. I fought down the urge to cross myself and took my leave.

\* \* \*

It shook me to the root, for I had liked the young king, who had ever had a kind word for me, and had hoped fervently that before his death he might be brought back to the comfort of True Religion. Apparently that was not God and the Lady's will, and there was nothing for it but to succor his soul with prayer and pour out an offering to him, that the Lady might incline the Lord to mercy.

Before leaving the palace I changed from my clerk's robes. I think the outward resemblance explains in part my resignation to my new life. Wearing the robes, I could close my eyes and imagine the sound of bells, now stilled forever; and feeling the rough cloth about my bare ankles and the heavy swirl of skirts as I walked brought to mind the gentle chanting of my fellows, now all gone down to dust. The plain breeks and jerkin I wore to the tavern had no such association.

I will not name the tavern. It was not the fault of the innkeeper that rebellion was brewed alongside the beer in his inn. He had no knowledge of it and I will not condemn him. I chose that particular tavern because it was frequented by Joan Strangeways, who had long ago been a Lady of Wendreda's Well near Newmarket, and my only true friend in London. I may name her freely, for she is beyond your reach, God and the Lady assoil her.

Joan, like me, had once borne another name and was well past her prime, prematurely aged by the destruction of her Well House and the loss of her innocence to countless drunken louts. I had not known her in her youth, but I had known a score of well-maidens like her, all lively and lovely, and I could see the ravages of a formidable beauty in her silver-tinged blonde hair and great green eyes.

Though she would gladly have listened to me without cost, I put down my coins to buy an hour of Joan's time, though we would use it in talk and not in loveplay. No, I am not a eunuch, but neither can I disregard my vows. I made them to God and the head of my Order and only they can release me, not the king and council. I am a monk until death, poor excuse for a brother though I may be.

We slipped into the darkness of a corner, furthest from the tavern's hearth, and I told her what I had seen and done in the king's antechamber.

"So they've disinherited the Princess Mary," Joan fumed. "Hasn't that poor woman been

through enough misery in her life?”

How typical of a woman, I thought. As though ill treatment of a lady was the only issue involved. “But Joan, it’s more than that. Think back to lessons we all learned in childhood—the relationship between the land and the king isn’t something to be trifled with. Lady Jane Grey, of royal blood though she may be, is not heir to this realm. The Princess Mary is, and should she pass on without issue, God forbid, the Lady Bastard.”

She drank deep from her wooden tankard. “Aye. I expect the very land to rise up in protest at this new outrage.” She looked around the tavern at the small groups of men huddled quietly over their ale or busy enticing young women into the upstairs chambers through the power of their purses. “Though this lot won’t. Rise up, that is. They’d bestir themselves for naught save a ban on beer and wenching.”

In my mind’s eye, I could see the letter I had penned to the princess, its honeyed phrases designed to entice her to leave the safety of Hunsdon Manor, to lure her to the trap my master had set for her. I, Davy Kempe, once a Franciscan brother, would have brought about the downfall of my rightful queen. It was not to be borne.

My course was clear. “Joan, I mean to save her if it is within my power. Can you get me a horse?”

She stared at me, incredulous. “Davy Kempe, you’ve never in all your life ridden anything but a donkey, I’ll warrant. And now you’re going to take horse clear to East Anglia, and for what cause? You can’t stop this, Davy.” She shook her head slowly.

“Perhaps not, but I have to try to save the life of the queen. She must be warned, persuaded to flee to the Emperor for aid.”

“The Emperor?” Joan scoffed. “Where was he when Fat Henry was divorcing our Good Queen Katherine? He’ll stick his neck out for neither man nor woman.”

“But the Duke of Northumberland is not King Henry, and Queen Mary will have the support of the people. Surely the Emperor will know that,” I replied.

“And there’s another thing,” she said, looking doubtful. “They’d not send a lone courier on a mission of this import. We’d need allies, preferably well-armed allies.”

“We?”

She snorted into her tankard. “Aye, Brother Kempe, ‘we’. Meet me in the stables in half an hour.” She sized me up and down. “At least you’re not decked out in those fool robes. You may not know how to sit a horse, but at least you’ll be able to ride astride properly instead of on a lady’s saddle.”

\* \* \*

The stables of this tavern were like any other, poorly lit and filled to the brim that night with travelers’ horses; from superb mounts fit for princes to drabs a short step away from the knacker’s yard. Joan had been right in her presumption. Raised in the city, sent at twelve to the cloister where we were forbidden by Rule to ride horseback, I was no master of the equestrian art. I was more than a little apprehensive and hoped Joan would have managed to acquire gentle beasts.

A sharp *crack* reverberated behind me and Joan emerged from the shadowed stalls, leading two nondescript looking mares. I did not ask how she had come by them, but humbly let her help me into the saddle, praying forgiveness for breaking my Rule. The beast felt awkward between my thighs, wider than the donkeys the abbey had kept, but the chestnut mare’s gait was

smoother than that of any donkey. I soon got my bearings and followed Joan through the dark London streets.

The taverns were filled to overflowing, noise and light spilling from the frosted windows and from the open doors. I noted that many houses we passed still had the Old Signs on the thresholds, and wondered that the king's men or Cramner's new priests of Reason didn't have them removed and the householders cast into Newgate, confined awaiting execution for sacrilege. Belief in the Fey had been officially declared heresy as part of the First Decrees of Reason back in 1539.

"The old ways die hard," Joan said, noting the way my eyes lingered on the Signs and on the small bowls of cream or beer left out for the pixies.

"Then the city will rejoice and welcome their true queen," I commented. Joan did not respond. I think, looking back on it, that she knew what I could not let myself believe; that the powers of the New Learning would not be so easily dislodged. What the ordinary people cherished in their hearts was one thing, what they would die for was something else entirely.

The passage through the city was uneventful. I had papers attesting to my position in the Lord Protector's household, and wasn't afraid to use them, but it was not necessary. The City Watch paid us no heed as we passed through the postern gate and headed northeast. The courier bearing the Princess Mary's letter was likely well ahead of us by now, and I cursed my poor seat that held us to a snail's pace.

We'd been on the road for an hour or so and all the lights of London had long since faded in the distance when Joan reined in her mare abruptly. The night was encased in Stygian darkness with no moon to illumine our way, and there were no other travelers on the road. Yet I knew, with instincts that had atrophied over the years since King Henry's fiat had driven me from my cloister, that we were not alone. Joan held up her hand for silence, then closed her eyes and sat unnaturally still in a ritual pose well known to me from my monastic days. Oh, how I envied her this communion with the power of the land. I had shut that part of myself off when I left the monastery, would not and could not permit myself even a fraction of that which I, which the entire English world, was now denied. To do otherwise would have been torture too excruciating to describe.

At last she opened her eyes. "The courier is Robert Dudley himself," she said. "With a large party of horses, well-armed."

We were ruined. Against a lone courier, or even half a score with the element of surprise, we might have had a chance. Not against an army led by a man who had held a sword since before he could walk. "Then it's hopeless."

Brilliant emerald eyes bore straight into my soul. "Friar Thomas, brother of Blessed Francis, do you swear that your Princess Mary will truly bring back the Old Ways? That she will reopen the wells and cloisters, that Queen Mab's emissaries will once again be welcomed at Hampton Court?"

"I cannot speak for another, especially not one so high," I replied, choosing my words cautiously, well aware that I was not speaking to Joan, though it was Joan's voice coming from Joan's mouth that had challenged me. "I can only say that the princess is daughter to Spanish Katherine who came to this realm with a love for the Old Ways and embraced our English Fey as her own people. I can say that though Princess Mary may not be able to put all things to right overnight, she will do a sight better for our eldritch cousins than Pretender Jane or My Lady Bastard." With all my heart I longed for those days when magic walked alongside man and hearts were lightened in our daily toil by the gifts of the Fey.

“May it be so,” she answered quietly after a brief silence, and this time it was Joan who spoke. “Very well, we must advance on Dudley at best speed. His party will be somewhat delayed.” Her smile was a death’s head grin. “But still, we dare not tarry.”

We pushed on, faster than before. My rump began to ache from the jolting saddle, but I was comforted by the attendance of our unseen companions. Their presence was unmistakable as it had been in my youth when I’d been given the task of taking the offerings to the Lesser Altar. Almighty God never begrudged the Old People their due; why must this new god of Reason be so jealous?

Two riders traversing over a well-maintained road make some slight noise, but a party of one hundred horses makes far more, so the clanking of armor, the harsh cacophony of cursing voices and the restless whinny of the horses reached us a good half-mile before we were on them. They had stopped. From the sound of it, a fallen log or some other road obstruction delayed them. And not by happenstance, I’d warrant.

We left the vulnerability of the road, slipping into the trees and moving forward by inches, our way lit only by the torches of our adversaries. I was winded and my breath came in gasps. I am a man in my fifties, an age when I should have been enjoying a place by the fire in my home abbey, my time spent in contemplation and prayer, grateful for a life spent in the service of my God. But needs must when the devil drives, and though I had no sword nor would I have known how to use it in any case, I drew my belt knife and advanced, my heart in my throat.

It was over before it began. A surge of white light, a rush of cold wind roared past me and onto the road as the Fey swarmed the road. I heard the ringing of swords and smelled the iron tang of blood and when they had withdrawn, as swiftly and silently as they had come, Robert Dudley was the only man left alive. He was on his knees, disarmed, with blood seeping from a gash in his forehead. He staggered to his feet as I approached.

“So, the monk shows his true colors,” he spat through a bloody mouth. “I told my father not to trust you.”

I held up my knife. Joan stood back, green cloak enfolding her spare body, making her appear a part of the wood. Her role in this had ended when the Faerie host withdrew.

“I had no choice,” I said. “Your father is dispossessing the true queen.”

He struggled to his feet. “What do we care for queens? It’s men who rule the world, you gelded fool! Men like my father aren’t about to give up all they’ve gained so some pathetic old woman can light her candles and leave out offerings to mythical beasts once again. Your time is past!”

Joan whipped forward, her body rigid. “Men?” she hissed. “It’s men like you who filled in my well, who dragged me to the city and made me a drab for any filthy lout with coin! It’s men like you who drove the Fey away, building with shameful iron and steel instead of stone and wood! It’s men like you—” She got no further—she’d come within striking distance of the serpent. Dudley had her then, twirling her body around to shield himself as a knife slithered from a leather sheath.

“You’ll hold your tongue, you foul slattern! Now, monk, if she’s anything to you, you’ll get on that horse and go back to London. Once I’m sure you’re away, I’ll let her go.”

Joan was placid, not struggling against his grip at all. She knew, of course. She had given her oath and would lay down her life as her Lady willed.

“What are you going to do, monk? Force me to kill her? Doesn’t that violate some silly vow?” He was a handsome man, this Robert Dudley. I wondered what sort of mark he would have made on the world.



I had never killed a human being before, though I had butchered animals. It was not much different, in the end, I thought as I cleaned the blood from my knife. I wondered if the New Men who denied the soul and the Bright Lands even had an afterlife to go to. I would never know, though I made the Signs over his body and said a few hasty words of prayer.

Joan's remains I left for the Fey, crossing her arms over her chest in the old way, covering her with her cloak, green for youth, green for mourning. She would be buried in the woods, near a well, I hoped, and her essence would nourish the land. Soul to the heavens, body to the earth. In saecula Saeculorum, Amen.

I took the letters I'd penned and left the remains of Dudley's men for the creatures of the forest; both Fey and mortal would dine well on the flesh of men that night. I forced the images of ravening claws and tearing flesh from my mind as I hurried up the road for Hunsdon and the Princess Mary.

Of course, the rest you know. How Her Grace chose to march towards London heedless of my warning, trusting in the loyalty of the people and the enlightened self-interest of the Fey to bear her to her throne. And you have heard, I'm sure, of the Duke of Northumberland's plan. How he armed his men with cold iron, charring the forests to ash to drive back any allies of the true Queen who might be lying in wait for their chance to return from the shadows into which you had forced them.

So it ended in a blasted grove north of London. I wish I could say I went down fighting, wielding a sword, or at least my belt knife for the True Queen. But of course, I did not, though I tried. Rushing forward to engage one of your men, I slid in the mud and spent the rest of the battle face down in the dirt. When I awoke, I was here.

\* \* \*

I finished speaking and looked up at my interrogator. His quill was traveling rapidly across his parchment, covering the pristine surface with my account of the end of my world. For a long time, the only sounds were the scratching of the quill and the snuffing of mice in the dank corners of my cell.

"You should know, Master Kempe," he said without looking up, "that the bastard pretender Mary was this very morning taken to face the assembled wrath of Parliament and has been condemned to die."

I said nothing. What could I have said? For it was, truly, the end of the world that had nourished and protected us and the genesis of something new. A world without faith, a world without magic, filled only with weary people living weary lives where no child would set out milk for a pixie, or stay the night in a fairy ring or dare the dark mounds to attain the prophetic gifts of the Fey. No bronze bells would peal welcomingly, casting their protection over the land. The new sanctuaries were silent temples of knowledge, built of forbidding metal, ugly places of logic.

My silence apparently discomfited my interrogator. "Don't you wish to know what your own fate is to be?"

Murderer, traitor, twice false monk. As though there was any question about my fate. But I asked politely enough.

Dr. Carey had a thin-lipped tight smile with no mirth in it at all. "By rights you should swing on the gallows. You are a traitor to your master and Queen, as well as a heretic." He shuffled his papers together and tucked them into a leather case, neatly tucked pen and covered inkwell into their places. "But Her Majesty Queen Jane is of a mind to be lenient. As a part of

the celebration of her coronation, she has decided that you - well, not you specifically, mind, but such men as you, are to be allowed to leave England.”

Leave? Exile to the continent was a far sight better end than I'd expected. I'd often considered taking refuge in France or Spain, where the old traditions still held sway. “I have little French, sir, but my Spanish and Latin are adequate.”

The doctor laughed, a discordant hawkish cackle that turned my bones to ice. “Oh, no, Master Kempe, you mistake my meaning. Exile, yes. But not to Europe. Not to the comfortable salons of Paris or the red-tiled convents of Iberia. Her Majesty is desirous of building an empire in the New World to rival the Spanish. Your people, under strict scrutiny of course, are to be the initial colonists. For generations your people pandered gold for your Faerie masters—now you will do it for *us*.” And with a sardonic nod, he was gone.

\* \* \*

And so I find myself at my advanced age, on a small ship, one part of an insignificant flotilla on an infinite sea heading west to claim and hold lands for England. This plague of Reason will spread across the globe, or so they believe. But I comfort myself with the thought that fifteen men, however fanatical and vigilant, cannot easily subjugate two hundred, and that trailing just beyond our sight are coracles and caravels, dragon-ships and triremes filled with exiles of another kind. The Old World is ended, the New is just beginning.

## The End

*R.W. Day has been writing since she figured out which end of the pen was 'up', though has only recently begun to submit her work. She's been published in Lenox Avenue, Kenoma, The Fifth Di... and in the forthcoming Damned Nation anthology.*

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