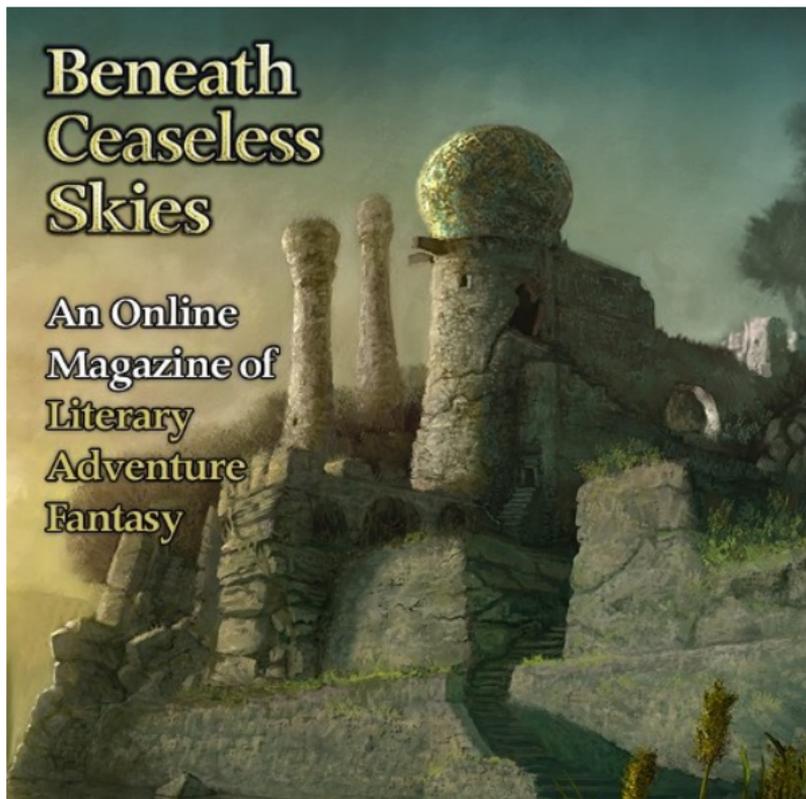


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online
Magazine of
Literary
Adventure
Fantasy



Issue #13 • Mar. 26, 2009

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THE FIVE DAYS OF JUSTICE MERRIWELL

by Stephanie Burgis

I. Portents

My name is Justice Revelation Merriwell, and I begin this record on the blackest day of the year: my sixteenth birthday, and the day of my father's death.

My father, Hallam Merriwell, was first General and High Enforcer for all Albion and then its Lord Protector. I, his second daughter and the youngest of his four children, lie curled on my hard pallet in my cold stone tower room in the fortress where we have lived these past fifteen years, and I listen to the deep bells toll his passing. The sun has not yet risen today; I know not if it ever will again.

My earliest memory is of my father. He was still Enforcer, then, and I less than six years of age. Some might have wondered that he brought so young a child on his work—but my father said we were never too young to witness the Lord's work. My older brothers, Daniel and Oliver, had both fought by his side in the bloodiest days of Albion's history, after all, though they were then but twelve and thirteen. Now, five years after Albion's civil war had finally ended, my father brought me

and my older sister Prudence on his mission to cleanse a nest of heretics.

“Stay still and hold thy tongue throughout, Justice, and be my good little maid as ever,” he said. We rode out through the great gates of the fortress, underneath the sharp spikes of the raised portcullis and the black of the night sky. “And thou, Prue, take heed of what you see here.”

“Yes, Father.” Prudence rode a little behind us, her head drooping in unspoken resentment.

I only nodded in my father’s arms, too overwhelmed to speak my own assent. We rode in the head of a procession of my father’s soldiers, grim-faced all beneath their iron helmets in the dark. I sat safe before my father on his massive white stallion, trembling with pride and fear and holding the box of holy fire balanced on the polished pommel of the saddle with all my infant care.

The call had come to Londinium just as twilight faded. We rode through the darkness into deepest night, and I would surely have slept if I had not been so frightened of losing my precious charge. In later years, I tried to puzzle out where that journey took us, which part of Albion could have stayed so green and fair and wild even in January’s chill. But as a child, all I cared was that I not shame my father’s trust. I no longer remember what signs we passed, or which of the villages we

rode through, rebuilding themselves after the long and painful years of war.

But I remember our destination. I remember riding in my father's arms onto the village green just before dawn, while the dance was still wild on the grass. I remember the colors that scarred themselves into my astonished eyes, the garish whirls of gold and green. I remember the figures that mingled together, the human heretics with the Others. I remember the yellow eyes that flashed in shock as my father's men encircled them, the wings that sparkled iridescence.

"You see?" my father said to me and Prue, as his soldiers took their places. He shook his head, his face stern and pale. "Satan still walks amongst us, despite all our prayers and the spilt blood of the war."

The music did not fade but ended in a sudden splitting wail as my father's soldiers rode into the clearing, and the dancing stopped.

"Justice," my father whispered.

I handed him the iron box I'd carried so faithfully. My hands were shaking. I wonder, now, that I found the strength.

The screams had already begun, by then. Children my own age darted, shrieking, for escape, but the circle of horsemen hemmed them in. Wings fluttered, but could find no space to

take flight in the tight mass. A pair of yellow eyes met mine in panicked appeal. I gripped the pommel of the saddle.

Above me, my father opened the box.

I squeeze my eyes shut, now, and huddle into my pallet. The smell of holy fire fills my senses again as I remember.

Two days after I handed my father the holy fire, I had my first fit.

I was pale, small and sickly, with lank black hair and nervous fits. No proper daughter for the Lord Protector of all Albion, many might have said. While hopeful suitors have always hovered about my sister Prudence, none have ever glanced at me.

But my father always understood. As I shook that first night on the stone floor of my bedroom, bloody froth cooling against my face and my mother's maids shrieking and whispering of devilry, my father took me in his strong arms. He rocked me back and forth, his broad chest shaking with unshed tears, and he whispered into my hair,

“This is no fault but my own.”

I looked into his eyes, but they were wide and glazed and did not see me. They were looking too deep into his own past to let me in. After the mission of a few nights' past, I could guess, for the first time, what he might see there. And I knew, though

no one else has ever guessed, why my father gave me my name, in the bloody height of war.

It was not justice against his enemies he summoned, but justice against himself.

The pallet is hard and thin beneath my shivering body. My father's advisors wait in the great council room below, where he made all his decisions with the grim certainty that Albion needed. There was no space, in that room, for his doubts and private guilt.

But now there is nothing else.

Portents and premonitions haunted the seven nights before his death. Thunderstorms ripped across Albion, uprooting five-hundred-year-old trees and lifting the roofs off churches. Two-headed lambs were born in nearby farms, and devilish laughter like silver bells sounded in the still night air. Two forces fought in those seven nights, and I know not which one of them won.

This morning, on his deathbed, my father Hallam Merriwell made his will, before all his children and the top ministers of the Republic. He chose his successor and started us all on a strange new path in Albion's history.

Today I, Justice Revelation Merriwell, shall be proclaimed Albion's Lord High Protectress, and I am more afraid than I have ever been before in my life.

* * *

II. The First Day

“This is a travesty!” My brother Oliver’s voice rages through the thick wooden door of the council chamber as I approach it. “Our father lost his head at the last. You cannot think to—”

“The Lord Protector was clear in his right mind until the end, as all can attest.” It is the voice of John Parkinson, my father’s chief advisor and the head of his Council of Saints. John sounds grave and calm as ever, despite the force of my brother’s bellows.

I stop still in the stone corridor outside the room, before the helmeted guards who protect it. They gaze back at me, expressionless, and we listen together.

“She’s but a girl. A maudlin, sickly one at that. She has no military, no political experience.”

“Your father trusted you and Daniel to provide the first, and myself and the rest of the Council to give her the second.”

“So you think a sixteen-year-old, inexperienced, *female*—”

“I think the Lord Protector’s wishes were clear. And he did not choose your sister on a whim, but after long and painful considerations and prayer.” John Parkinson pauses. I wish I could see into the room, to glimpse the looks that are exchanged. “Albion,” John says heavily, “is about to suffer a

storm such as none of us have seen since the Civil War. It was your father's true belief that your younger sister was the single person best suited to steer us through that storm."

A cold wind blows through my black cloth gown, lifts my heavy skirts and scrapes my ankles with its teeth. It has ever been fiercely drafty in this fortress. But it is all I can remember. When I was eight years of age, and my father named himself Lord Protector of Albion, everyone expected him to move into one of the palaces left behind by the heretic king and his unholy brood. My father could even have named himself king, and many would have rejoiced in it, my brothers first among them.

"I served my father these past twenty years and more," Oliver says. "I fought his battles. I did his will. What possible—no!" I hear the crash of a fist against thick wood. "I will not lower myself to ask it."

I see again my brothers' grins beneath their iron helmets as my father released the holy fire upon the heretics.

I do not know how to rule Albion. But I know what it is my father expected from me and feared my brothers would not give.

I lift the hem of my plain black gown and sweep past the guards into the council chamber, as commandingly as I can

sweep, thin and shivering. I pray not to be taken by a fit. Not here, not now.

“My Lady Justice,” says John Parkinson, smiling, and he steps forward to meet me. “Are you well and ready to be presented before your people this day?”

The small, diamond-shaped stone chamber is full of watching faces, lit by flickering torches. Oliver turns away from me, his face dark, nursing his fist. I see blood drip from it onto the cold stone floor. My brother Daniel stands beside Oliver and meets my gaze, but I cannot read his face. The other six councilors of my father’s Council of Saints stand behind John Parkinson, smiling and bowing before me. I wonder how many of them would echo my brother’s words.

A storm is coming, I think.

The wind is colder than ever around me.

“Yes,” I say to John Parkinson. “I am ready.”

* * *

III. The Second Day

“Justice,” a voice whispers in my ear. “Justice....”

I twist and turn in my nightmare. The holy fire is burning down our fortress, catching on my father’s body. I see his eyes flash open as the fire sweeps across his close-cropped grey hair and engulfs him.

A scream gathers in my throat. I run toward him, struggling in my heavy skirts. He rises within the fire and turns to look at me. But his eyes shine yellow in the blaze....

“Justice!” Prue’s face looks down into mine as I start up in my cot, panting and shivering. She shakes her head and sits down beside me, taking me in her arms.

I shudder in her embrace, unable to speak. She tucks her chin into my loose hair and holds me, rocking me back and forth. Below us, I hear men’s angry voices and the clank of iron. A brace of candles lights the room. Outside, through the narrow window, the sky is dark.

“The sun still hasn’t come out yet, you know,” Prue says dreamily. “There are some saying now that it never will. That Albion lost its light when the heretic king was murdered, and only our father’s will kept the sun from fleeing until now.”

“No,” I whisper. I shake my head against her soft shoulder, breathing in the scent of lavender water and some other fragrance I cannot recognize. “He carried out God’s will. You know he did. He cleansed Albion of the abominations.”

Even as I speak, I feel a chill of premonition.

We’ve been free of the Others for so long. But now....

“Our father did what he had to do,” I whisper. “He had no choice.”

“I knew he would choose you,” she says. “I always knew. The way he looked at you in his last days. The way his eyes hardened as he looked at our brothers swaggering in their armor. They want to kill you now, you know. It would make everything so much easier.”

I bite my lip. The unfamiliar scent clinging to her skin is stronger now, filling my senses, making me light-headed. Where did she find a new perfume, in these dark days? Our father was wont to chastise Prue for her vanity, her concern with the material world when our republic was building a new Jerusalem. But I have always found her beautiful.

“It will all be well,” she whispers, and she rocks me back and forth. “They’ve told me so.”

“Daniel and Oliver?” I ask, blinking.

She laughs. But I catch a hint of wildness in it, a cracked note of pain.

“Prue?” I ask. I burrow my face into her shoulder, seeking reassurance. “Prue?”

The door bursts open, and we start apart. John Parkinson strides in, flanked by two soldiers.

“My Lord Protectress.” He bows perfunctorily. “I beg pardon for this intrusion, but you are urgently needed. Your brothers have disappeared and taken a third of the soldiers

from our garrison with them. I fear they've gone North to raise troops from your father's lands there."

"I...understand." I draw a deep breath as I rise. The cold wind blows through my thin white nightdress. My bare feet touch stone. I remember riding on Oliver's shoulders as a little girl and clinging to his curling dark hair. I remember Daniel's laugh. *Oh, my brothers...*

I taste fire at the back of my throat. My vision blurs.

No, I tell myself. Not now. I cannot! I am the Lord Protectress.

I force the fit back, though the strength of it makes me stagger. Prue knows the signs of danger, but she is not looking at me. Her gaze is fixed on the narrow window set high in the stone wall, no wider than an arrow, and on the black sky outside. Her body is a pure arc of yearning.

I fist my hands at my side. "I will come to the Council Chamber as soon as I am dressed and ready, sir."

"I fear it cannot wait so long." John Parkinson looks me directly in the eyes, and his voice grows hoarse. "You see, my Lady Justice, it is worse than you think. We've heard—we've been sent warning—"

"Yes?"

He takes a deep breath. For all his age and experience, fear shows plain in his face. "The heretic king's half-breed son

makes ready to cross the waters to us,” he says. “And he brings the sunlight with him.”

I move to step forward. My foot hangs high in the air for what seems a long time as the words repeat themselves over and over in my ears. And then it falls, and I am falling, falling, into a deep pit of flames, and a true fit is upon me.

* * *

The fit lasts only a quarter of an hour, leaving me drained and aching but still grimly capable. I pull myself up from it, assume a mask of calm composure, and walk into the Council chamber downstairs as if nothing has gone amiss.

The news pours in all day, from every corner of the republic, and makes a mockery of all my efforts. I swore an oath to my father, as he lay dying, to protect his country. Now my father’s new Jerusalem is shattering in my hands.

Oliver and Daniel have raised their flag in two counties already, riding at breakneck speed. They spread the story that our father’s true deathbed wishes were twisted by his scheming advisors, who hoped to seize power through my weakness. Albion will be corrupted at its core, they say, if Oliver does not seize its reins. Hundreds of men have already left their homes and farms in righteous anger, answering his cry for justice.

But not everyone flecks to Oliver’s standard. For as every child of the Civil War knows, there have always been the

Others, shadowing our footsteps, bending our dreams to their own blasphemous desires. They have not given up influencing the world of men, even after fifteen years of godly rule.

And in the dark and decadent days before the war, a king of Albion even married one....

I spend the whole day giving orders for my father's burial, gathering the news that flies in faster than we can understand it, making plans for the battle that we cannot avoid. Writing letters begging aid from all my father's old supporters. Telling myself and my soldiers what my father would have said, in my place: *The Lord will provide for us, His shining flock. Those who are righteous shall ever overcome.*

But when I finally fall into bed that night, weak and shivering with exhaustion, the reassurances I've mouthed all taste bitter in my throat.

"He brings the sun," Prue whispers to me.

We share a bed, for I cannot bring myself to sleep alone. I feel my father's accusing eyes on me from every dark corner. *Watching the ruin of all his hopes.* It must be well past midnight by now, but who can tell by reading the sky?

"It is naught but a trick," I whisper back. But my voice scrapes raw against my throat.

It has been black as pitch since my father's death. Near forty-eight hours. When will I see my way clear again?

“A fine trick, to stop the sun from rising in the sky,” Prue says. Her sigh ruffles against my cheek. “Oh, Justice, you must miss it as well. The sun on your face, the warmth of the day....”

“What would you have me do?” I struggle up through the heavy bedcovers to sit upright, despite the chill. “Give up our father’s dream forever? Invite the half-breed prince to enter our fortress at his will? Give up every principle our country fought for and say the losses of the war were all for naught? How could I face our father’s people then?”

By the time I was a child, the Others had lost their power in Albion and been reduced to exile or to fearful secrecy, their unholy rites subject to the holy fire that won the war for us. But I know the stories, passed on by adults—strong men who wept as they remembered the past. They told stories of our churches set aflame with worshippers locked inside, while the rulers who should have protected them made merry playing at masques and enchanted banquets with their murderers. They told stories of children stolen from their families and replaced by malevolent changelings, who bit and clawed and committed atrocities against animals, siblings and even their foster parents, before finally disappearing without warning. No recourse was ever granted to their suffering families, for only the children of the poor were ever stolen; the nobles, petted

and cosseted by the Others, were free from their incursions and only whipped the peasants for their complaints.

Half our generals in the Civil War had lost a child to the Others. One general also lost his right hand, punished by the unholy Queen for daring to publish his family's sorrows to the world in a printed pamphlet.

"Not all the people would hate you for it." Prue's voice is soft and wistful. "Do you not remember the dance we saw, when we were children? The whirl of light across the green?"

My breath stops in my throat. I peer down through the darkness, but I cannot make out my sister's lovely face.

My voice trembles as I speak. "It is heresy to think on it, Prue."

"Then more than half the country must be burned."

"Our father—"

"Our father is dead, and his joy-starved vision of Albion with him."

"You cannot mean that."

Prue sighs. "Good night, Justice."

"Prue...."

But she does not speak again. Eventually, I lie back down and close my eyes beside her. Her even breathing fills my ears.

She is lost and melancholy, nothing more. I tell myself so, nearly sobbing it. She only says those things to shock me. She cannot mean them.

I remember the women on the green. I remember the blaze of holy fire on their gowns. I remember their screams in my ears.

After hours of turmoil, sleep wraps around me like a shroud.

Silvery laughter echoes in my ears. *Dead, dead, dead....*

“No!” I jerk awake, panting. I reach for Prue’s reassuring warmth.

But the mattress beside me is empty, and Prue has disappeared.

* * *

IV. The Third Day

Is this what it felt like inside the heretic king’s grand palace in the last days of the Civil War? This muffled panic, this terror that lurks in corners, shows in the whites of the soldiers’ eyes, and sounds in every voice, every whisper? This knowledge, written plain in the air between us: we cannot win.

My sister is gone. My brothers are gone. And they are not the only ones.

“Two hundred soldiers left during the night,” John Parkinson tells me.

Purple shadows bruise the wrinkled skin beneath his eyes. We stand together in the central guardroom, crowded with soldiers and stinking with rancid sweat. I note, as I look around their pale faces, that only three councilors stand behind John Parkinson now. The others must have fled as well. To Oliver? Or....

My voice is steady. I know not why. This past night's weeping should have shredded and torn it apart forever. "Do we know which way the soldiers have gone?"

"Half to your brother's cause, I think. The others, to the coast."

The coast. Which coast, I need not ask. The half-breed prince has lived across the water these past fifteen years, his fey mother charming the dotard neighbor king.

I turn and start to pace, if only to avoid John Parkinson's steady gaze.

"The Hibernians? Could we muster any help there?"

"Oliver's troops block our path to the North."

"Any foreign powers—"

"Would take too long to answer any call." He snorts. "To say nothing of how long they might then take to leave, if once they were successful on these shores."

“There must be some way,” I say. “There must! We are the only keepers of the holy fire, here in this fortress. Surely—surely!—that must count for something.”

He sighs. “What would you have us do with it? It could have no effect on your brother’s army, unless....” His thick, white eyebrows rise. “If you have reason to suspect your brothers’ own parentage—if you think they, themselves, might secretly be—?”

“No! No, of course not.” I almost laugh, despite the gravity of our situation. How Oliver and Daniel would roar at that suggestion! “But still—”

“Then the holy fire can only aid us against one of the two armies that confronts us. And if we turn it upon the Others, Oliver’s men will have no obstacle. They will sweep over us like a flood.”

I turn and face him. “What can we yet do?”

“Do?” John Parkinson shakes his head slowly. Behind him, the other three councilors look down. None of them will meet my eyes. “Forgive me, my Lord Protectress,” John Parkinson says, and he sinks to his knees on the cold stone floor. “I have failed in my duty to you. I have dishonored my oaths to your father, indeed.”

“No.” Tears clog my throat. Useless tears, here in this room. I move forward and place my hand on his white hair.

This man directed some of my first steps when I was small. Now I help him to his feet. “It is not you who has failed.”

His eyes glisten, too, as he stands. “If you turn yourself over to your brother’s army, you will surely be executed. Oliver will not withstand a rival to his power. Perhaps, if you surrender to the half-breed prince and beg for mercy, a bloodless exile—”

“No,” I say. “That, I cannot do.”

“Then....” He heaves a sigh. “We can hold this fortress for at least a week. There are those in Londinium loyal to your father’s memory, who will supply us with food in these next few hours to store against a siege.”

I cannot hold back the bitter twist of my lips. “And what good would any of that do?”

“What good?” He meets my eyes. “Lady, your father chose you as his successor for a reason. He believed you were the ruler that Albion needed in this troubled time. Surely we can give him the benefit of our trust, for a few more days at least. Much may happen in the space of a week. Will you give up your own life without a struggle?”

I look at him, blinking through my haze of pain and despair.

If—when—Oliver takes us, John Parkinson and the other loyal councilors will be executed along with myself. I know that as well as he, although he has been too kind to say it.

I will not let my despair end their lives any sooner than it must.

My voice sounds thin and choked when I speak. “Let the soldiers choose for themselves,” I say. “Let those who wish to flee leave now, in good faith. I will not have them stay to be murdered for a cause they cannot support. But let food and bandages be stockpiled through the day, and close the gates”—I almost say, *at nightfall*, but it is always night now—“before midnight. We will hold my father’s fortress until the last.”

“My Lord Protectress,” John Parkinson murmurs.

The other councilors bow their heads behind him.

I wonder whether their hidden expressions show more relief or terror.

* * *

V. The Fourth Day

I have lived in this fortress for fifteen years, but it never felt like a prison until now.

Last night I wandered the stone passages, unable to sleep. Seventy-five soldiers remained in the end, from the six hundred who had been quartered here until a few days ago. Guards stood at the end of each corridor, stiff and pale. When I

passed, they bowed before me with a look in their eyes that I found more terrifying than any advancing army.

It was a look of faith. Of trust. Of loyalty.

I am their Lord Protectress. And there is nothing I can do for them.

“Your father chose you for a reason.”

I sit huddled on my cot now, in the middle of another sunless day. There are no noises below my room today. There are too few soldiers left for that. No one shouts or argues. There is no use.

We sit, and we wait. And that is all we can do.

My father chose me for a reason.

I wrap my arms around my knees and rock back and forth. I want Prue by me, with her flowery, wild scent and her soft embrace. I want my father, more than anything else. I want my father, Hallam Merriwell, here to be the Lord Protector, unquestioning and certain and strong.

But my father was never truly certain. And I was the symbol of all his secret fears and doubts.

“Justice,” I whisper to the empty room. “I was supposed to bring Albion justice.”

What justice is there to be brought to a land torn in two jagged parts? Half of it marches to Oliver’s standard, and half looks to the coast, dreaming of unearthly beauty. Harsh

retribution could rule the day, or else gilded corruption and lost faith. My fortress is only one tiny sliver nestled between the two camps—shining with meaning, indeed, to every man who loved my father, but still far too small to be a meaningful force. Unless it could somehow tip the balance...

“Justice,” my father whispered, before he unleashed the holy fire. But two nights later, I felt his sobs.

When the fit comes upon me, for once, I welcome the release. As my limbs lash out around me, my mind floats high above my writhing body and foaming mouth. There are no maids here to help or hold me; they have all fled, with my blessings. One of them left a ring of golden flowers on my pillow—as apology? As prayer?

When I come back to myself, my arms and legs are sprawled at odd angles across the stone floor. Tears dampen my cheeks; a speck of blood marks the floor by my mouth. Every muscle aches. Through the window, I see only darkness.

I pull myself up, though my body is heavy and unwilling. *Broken. Broken, since my youth. Broken, like my father’s country.*

I know what would be easiest to do, if I had not sworn an oath.

I walk up the long, wide steps to the tallest watchtower. Two soldiers stand atop it, looking out into the darkness. They start when they see my wild, disordered appearance.

“My Lord Protectress—”

“My Lady—”

“All is well,” I tell them, through numb lips. “Go now. I wish to be alone.”

They clatter down the steps, reluctant but obedient. From their agitated whispers, I know I haven’t much time. They are sure to alert my chief councilor.

But there is still time enough.

I look out over the darkened land. Shadows of hedgerows and trees mark the fields. The tall buildings of Londinium rise in the distance. To the west lies the coast. To the north, my brother’s army.

Everything would be made so much easier if just one piece of the puzzle was removed. Two equal parties, left to fight each other for power and revenge.

But Albion has had enough of civil war and its aftermath. My father knew that, even if my brothers still do not.

There are times when the act of healing can be the most dangerous choice of all.

John Parkinson must have run all the way. He bursts up onto the tower, his hair disordered, panting for breath.

“My Lady Justice, I beg you, do not—”

“John,” I say. I move forward, through the darkness, and I take his hand. “I have made my decision.”

“My Lady—”

“No.” The sudden power in my voice stops his protest. I draw my shoulders back. I hold my head high. “I am your Lord Protectress, am I not?”

“Yes....” He watches me. In the faint and sickly moonlight, I see both the fear and the sudden spark of desperate hope in his weary face.

“I need you to send a trusted messenger for me, skilled in negotiation,” I say. “I know what it is my father needed me to do.”

* * *

V. The Fifth Day

I wait with my soldiers in the front hall of the fortress. They press around me, fearful but brave. No betrayal of faith will harm me today. Only my own choices rule us now.

I understand, today, as we wait, how terrifying it must have been for my father when he took power for himself. How soul-quaking to take on all responsibility, and bear every ounce of guilt and failure.

The thunder of horses’ hooves sounds through the closed and heavy gate. An army is approaching.

“My Lord Protectress,” John Parkinson says, beside me. He touches my arm and looks at me with respect and fear. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I say, and I raise my voice so that all can hear. “Raise the gates.”

This is not a decision my father could have made. This is not a risk he could have borne to take, after the losses of the war.

But it is the only choice I can make for myself, in memory of him.

Ten soldiers work together to pull back the first set of iron-bound wooden doors. Metal squeals with effort as the heavy portcullis rises beyond them, one labored inch at a time. No speck of iron must be allowed to brush even a single hair on the newcomers’ heads, or all our effort, and days of fraught negotiation, will have been for nothing.

My fortress of soldiers, bulwarked by the power of the title my father left me, forms only a sliver of moral and physical force in comparison to either of the two equal armies that gather around us. But by allying my father’s legacy to one of those armies, I can tip the scales of power in all Albion.

If I have chosen wrongly, I may yet destroy us all.

The portcullis rises, revealing a second set of doors beyond. Soldiers step forward. They push open the doors to let in the fresh air.

Gold and silver flash on the horses of the waiting army. Sunshine floods upon us, and the men around me gasp and step back, blinking. I do not. I cannot let myself react to the light. It has no greater power than the solidity of this fortress, the weight of the land, the stone that supported my father and his people all these years.

One man rides at the head of the army, clad in velvet and jewels. He swings himself down from his prancing horse and steps forward, one hand at his waist, long, dark curls hanging down his back. His eyes meet mine: long-lashed and deep brown, as lovely as a woman's. But I see the glint of yellow hidden in the corner of his left eye, and I know it for the truth: he is anything but human.

In the moment that my eyes meet his, I think: I was mad to ever conceive this plan. My feet start backward, of their own volition.

In the alien yellow of his eye, I see all the stories of the war and the misery that caused it.

If I scream, my own soldiers will leap into action. I may be killed, but so will he—and Oliver's soldiers, sweeping through the wreckage, will turn this country into the harshly purified

land promised to the faithful by the war's commanders, my father foremost among them all.

But a land ripped in half can never be healed or whole again.

I step forward, hands trembling in my plain black skirts. I reach out, and John Parkinson presses a heavy box into my hand.

I am no longer five years old. But this box seems to press just as heavily in my hand now as it did on that night long ago, when I first came to understand my name, and my purpose.

"I bring a gift to you and your people," I say to the half-breed prince, and I pass him the holy fire that won the Civil War. "That you may never again be forced into hiding, oppression and unjust exile."

The yellow-brown eyes widen. The long, pale hands reach toward me to accept the box. I feel every soldier behind me tense as one, all eyes upon our greatest weapon, our most lethal defense, suitable only for an enemy unworthy of mercy or even justice itself.

The half-breed prince looks up from the box. His lips curve into a smile I find hard to read. If he were mortal, I would name it relief, mixed with amusement. If he were mortal...

"My Lord Protectress," he murmurs. "You've kept your bargain. I bear a gift for you, as well."

He passes the box back to his second-in-command, and a sigh of relief ripples through the men behind me. I hold myself still, waiting. The prince snaps his fingers, and one of his soldiers hurries to his side, holding a silken bag. The prince reaches inside, and withdraws a golden circlet.

“Equal measure,” the prince says. “You have my oath upon it. That neither may be allowed to rule alone, and neither be disregarded or afraid.”

“Amen,” I say, as I take the crown.

Albion has never seen believers and Others take hands in faithful partnership. Albion has never seen a queen with the power of a king. But my father taught me to have faith in a force stronger than worldly probabilities, and to believe in more than can ever be seen by the merely material eye.

My name is Justice Revelation Merriwell, and this is the last day of my reign as Lord High Protectress of all Albion.

Tonight, I will become Albion’s queen and Albion’s full and equal co-ruler, ready and able to protect one half of the country against the other, and to ensure justice for all. Together, in partnership, we will build a new Jerusalem.

I am as frightened now as I have ever been. But I take a deep breath, and I step out of my father’s fortress.

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Stephanie Burgis is an American writer who lives in Yorkshire, England with her husband, fellow writer Patrick Samphire, and their crazy-sweet border collie mix, Maya. Her short fiction has appeared in magazines and anthologies, including Strange Horizons and Aeon, and her YA historical fantasy trilogy will be published by Atheneum Books in 2010, 2011, and 2012. To find out more, please visit <http://www.stephanieburgis.com>.

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HAXAN

by Kenneth Mark Hoover

I found the old man nailed to a hackberry tree five miles out of Haxan, New Mexico. They had hammered railroad spikes through his wrists and ankles. He was stripped so the westering sun could peel the flesh from his bones.

He was alive when I found him.

I got down from my horse and went up to him. His twitching features were covered with swarming bluebottles. I swiped them away and pressed the mouth of my canteen to his parched lips. He took a little water and coughed.

“I can cut you down,” I said. “You might have a chance if a doctor—”

He raised his head. His face was the color of burned leather kicked out of a prairie fire. His eyelids were cut away, his eyes seared blind by the sun.

“Won’t do any good, mister. Been two days. The croaker in Haxan is a knife-happy bastard roped on laudanum half the time. And the tooth-puller ain’t much better.” He spoke slow, measuring his remaining strength. He had a thick Swedish accent. “It was the people of Haxan who did this.”

I tried to give him more water but he shook it off. He was dying and didn't want to prolong it. "Why?"

"They're scared. Like children."

"Of what?"

"Me, and what I know about this place. The voices frozen in the rocks and grass." His head drooped onto his naked chest. He was losing strength fast. "What's your name, mister?" he whispered.

"John Marwood." I had other names, but he wouldn't be able to pronounce them. Sometimes even I couldn't remember them all.

"I waited for you, son. I called...but you didn't get here fast enough. This moment...in time...."

I felt as if I were showered with ice.

"Maybe you can help her instead, Marwood, if you've a mind. My daughter, I mean."

"Let me help you."

"Thank you for the water. At least you tried." His head fell back. "Did I tell you it snowed the day she was born?" He gave a long, trembling sigh as if he remembered that day. With a sudden jerk his body slumped forward.

He was dead.

I cut him down and buried him in the shade of the hackberry tree. The sky was purpling in the east when I placed

the last stone on top of his grave. An hour of daylight remained. The stirrup leather creaked when I mounted up. It was the only sound in the desert and it carried like a scream.

* * *

Through an endless sea of time and dust, in places that might never be, or can't *become* until something is set right, there are people destined to travel. Forever.

I am one.

We go where we're needed. We have names and we stand against that which must be faced.

I had been called here by the dead man. I would serve his wish until I was successful or I died. There was no distinction. For me, and others like me, the two were often the same.

* * *

I rode into Haxan, remembering the old man. He was at rest now, but it took a lot of hate to do something like that to another human being.

I knew what that was like, carrying that much hate around until it blew you apart with dry, quiet winds.

Haxan wasn't much of a town. There was a railhead spur, a long front street bordered by weathered saloons and hotels, and several painted store-fronts. The livery stable was across the wide-open plaza where a central stone well had been dug, surrounded by mesquite benches.

There weren't many people around. It was still too hot. I found the mayor's office and went inside. It was cooler here, but only by a couple of degrees.

A blue-eyed man with balding red hair looked up from his paperwork. His hands were split by hard work and fishhooks and his face wasn't much kinder. "Can I help you, stranger?"

"I'm John Marwood. The War Department sent me."

He came from around his desk and we shook. "Glad to meet you, John. Or should I say, U.S. Marshall? My name is Frank Polgar. I half-expected you to come in on the eleven o'clock stage this morning."

"I bought a horse in Las Cruces yesterday and rode in. Wanted to get a feel for the countryside."

"Good idea. How do you like the territory so far?"

"Not much. I found a dead man five miles south of here, nailed to a tree."

Polgar's eyebrows came together. "Who was he?"

"He didn't give his name."

Polgar watched me with studied care. "The Navajo are on reservation and peaceful. Apaches, maybe. They get stirred up by the Army once in a blue moon."

"I don't think so." I fished one of the iron spikes out of my grey duster and tossed it down on Polgar's desk. "Not unless

the Apache have taken to pounding railroad spikes into people. It's been my experience they're more civilized than that."

Polgar picked it up and rolled it thoughtfully between his brown fingers. "What are you trying to say, Marshall?"

"Just this. I've been in Haxan ten minutes and I already have one murder to solve."

* * *

Polgar showed me the Marshall's office down the street. Inside was a desk covered with outdated circulars, a bench under the window, an iron stove in one corner with a rusted coffee pot, and a yellowed map of the county nailed to the wall. The rifle rack was empty, but the cells in back were well-oiled and the keys fit the locks.

"I know it's not much," Polgar apologized, "but as long as you keep your appointment with the War Department you'll have room and board at the Haxan Hotel. Are you hungry? Hew Clay and his wife own the place. Hew serves a good beefsteak."

"Not now." I put my Sharps rifle in the gun rack. It looked lonely there.

"John, the only person who fits your description of a Swede is old Shiner Larsen. Hard to believe he's dead. He had a mesquite shack on the edge of town. Kept mostly to himself...while he was alive."

“Larsen have any family? He mentioned a daughter, but he was out of his head.”

Polgar rapped a hard knuckle against the map rather than answer my question. “Sangre County. Wild and dangerous, all four thousand square miles.” He paused with significance. “You know what Sangre means, don’t you?”

“I do.” Sometimes the very name of a place was strong enough to draw us in.

“John, this county is aptly named. This is a bloody place to live. In Texas, because of the war, cattle are four dollars a head. They can be sold north for twenty. That brings money to Haxan, but it also brings gamblers, drifters and our share of soiled doves.”

“You avoided my question about Larsen’s family, Frank.”

He made a pacifying gesture. “There’s some unhappy history here, and people know that history. It frightens them.”

“Why don’t they leave?”

“Too much money to be had. Twenty years ago Haxan was nothing more than a sun-baked shack in the middle of nowhere.”

“Shiner Larsen’s place.”

“That’s right. Then the railroad built a spur to handle the big cattle drives from El Paso. We get people drifting south

from the Santa Fe trail and others going north. A lot of traffic comes through Haxan and it brings money. It keeps us going.”

“What’s the unhappy history?”

“Shiner Larsen came over from Sweden twenty years ago today. When he settled here he named the place Haxan. Haxan is a Swedish name for witches.”

The long purple shadows inched down the street outside my window. Someone lighted a cooking fire in one of the buildings across the way. I could see black shadows moving around inside, but not much else.

“Was Larsen a witch?”

“People thought so, like our town dentist. Others believed he was just crazy.”

“How so?”

“Larsen held there were places on earth where the spirits were tied in knots and couldn’t move apart. He claimed Haxan was one of the places.”

“If it was so bad why did he settle here?”

“I asked him. He said life was like flipping pages in a book. It was a blur until you stuck your finger out and read what was there. Larsen believed he could read what was in the rocks and water and air. I heard him say it was probable Sangre County didn’t exist in some men’s thoughts, but that it was here now because it *had* to be. And when Haxan needed it the right

spirits would come to protect what was worth protecting. Well, he was always talking nonsense. Like I said, people ignored him.”

“But this time someone didn’t.”

“People are superstitious, John. They’ll do anything that makes ‘em feel better. Even murder.” He sighed. “I want you to be aware of the toes you might step on, that’s all. But I want his killer caught, too. Doesn’t look good if something like this goes unpunished.”

“Larsen’s family?”

“He married a Navajo woman when he came to the territory. They had a daughter. His wife died three years later. Last I heard, the girl was grown and living on the reservation.”

“She have a name?”

“Shiner called her Snowberry. Magra Snowberry.”

* * *

Shiner Larsen’s home wasn’t much more than a broken down hovel with a dirt roof. It was on a small rise where the creek turned through a field of tumbled boulders. There were a few rows of planted maize for the shoat penned behind the house, but not much else in the way of prosperity.

I let my horse stand and walked up on the house. The sun was down and the sky pocked with stars. There were so many of them it made me feel small.

When I stepped on the porch the front door swung open a crack and the twin barrels of a shotgun centered onto my stomach.

“What do you want?”

“My name is John Marwood. I’m a U.S. Marshall. I’m here about your father.”

“My father is dead.”

“Yes, I know. I’m the one who found him.”

“Step back so I can look at you.” She was standing in the half-dark, but there was enough starlight bouncing off the desert floor to make her out. She had long raven hair tied back with a bit of packing string. She wore a heavy Union coat and buckskin skirt that fell below her knees. She was pretty, but only in that hard way the New Mexico desert makes people.

“You must be Magra Snowberry.”

The twin bores of the shotgun never wavered. “And you must be that new lawman they said was coming. Marwood. I heard people talking about you. Said you worked a lot of bad towns up north in the Montana Territory. Killed men, a lot of men.”

“Only when they needed killing.”

“I recognized you right away. Papa said you would be wearing a grey duster and carrying a Colt Dragoon with a yellow-bone handle, holstered crossways.”

This took me aback. “Your father—”

“Papa had visions,” she explained. “I don’t expect you to understand his ways.”

The eastern horizon sparked yellow fire. The moon was rising fast, owning the desert. There was enough light to see she had been crying.

“Maybe I do understand, Magra. More than you think.”

“I doubt that.” She raised the shotgun and parked the heavy stock on her hip. “What are you doing here?”

“I want to find the men who killed your father.”

“What is his life to you?”

“Law says they have to be punished.”

She looked me up and down. “And you’re the law.”

“I am now.”

She thought for a minute before she swung the door open. “All right, come in.”

There wasn’t much room inside. The mesquite walls were more like a cage than a home. She set the shotgun aside and lighted an oil lamp swinging from a rafter hook. The feeble glow cast awkward shadows on our faces and the packed-dirt floor.

“I have coffee.”

“No, thank you. I’d rather talk about your father.”

Her shrug was lost inside the large Union coat with carpetbag patches on the elbows. “Papa was a good man but he had a lot of Old Country superstitions. People didn’t understand what he could see around us, and sometimes when they weren’t laughing, they got scared.” She watched me with her large, dark eyes. “You said you understood. I’m not sure I believe that.”

There was a chair at the rough-hewn table. I pulled it out and sat down. “Magra, it’s hard to explain, but I’ll try.”

She sat on the other side of the table, her hands folded. “I’m listening.”

“Your father was right about some things. This world—and everything you see around you and everything you can’t see—is like a vast sea made up of crests and troughs. Sometimes a wave raises a person high enough and he can see a long way. I think your father was one of those people. Other times, you’re stuck down at the bottom of a wave where the bad things collect. I think that might be Haxan. And through this sea of time and dust, in places that might never be or can’t *become* until something is finally set right, there are people destined to travel. Forever.”

“Papa talked about wandering Norse spirits. The Navajo, my people, believe in skinwalkers.”

“No, I’m talking about real people. Flesh and blood like you and me. They’re taken from places they call home and sent into this stormy sea to help calm the waters. It never ends because it’s the storm itself, the unending conflict, that makes the world we know a reality. Along with all the other worlds that could be.”

I had to give her credit. I suppose she was used to hearing wild talk from her father. Whether she believed it or not was another question.

“Marshall, how was my father killed?”

“Someone nailed him to a tree with railroad spikes.”

She closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them again she looked older. “Why would anyone do that to Papa?”

“If they thought he was a witch, it stands to reason. A witch can be killed with cold iron.”

“Papa wasn’t a witch. He was only different.”

“I know that, but the people who killed him thought otherwise. Did your father have enemies?”

“Not outright. Like I said, people were wary of him, but that’s all.”

“Scared people do bad things, Magra.”

She shook her head. “I can’t think of anyone who would want to kill him.”

“That’s because you were used to his ways.” I stood up. “You can’t stay here. Whoever killed him is likely to come after you next.”

“Why?”

“If they believed Larsen was a witch they’ll think you might have his powers, being his daughter.” *Maybe you can help her instead, Marwood*, I thought, *if you’ve a mind*.

“I was going back to the reservation tomorrow.”

“They’re probably looking for you there now. You can stay in the Haxan House until I run these men down.”

She let out a dry laugh. “Marshall, Hew Clay’s wife won’t let a half-breed sleep under her roof. You don’t know Alma Jean. Anyway, I don’t have any money.”

“Then you can stay in my office. You’ll be safe there.”

“That wouldn’t look right, either. People might talk.”

“Look, I’m not here to make people like me. Tomorrow morning I’m going back to that hackberry tree, see if I can’t cut their trail.”

“You’re going to track them down? Alone?”

“Have to.”

“When you find these men...what are you going to do?”

“Law says they have to be tried. If they’re found guilty they’ll be taken to Santa Fe and hanged.”

“Yes, but what are *you* going to do?” she asked.

“That’s my business. Now take what you need for a couple of days and nothing else.”

“I don’t have a horse.”

“My blue roan can carry us both.” I picked up the break-action shotgun and opened the breech. It was filled with buckshot: killing loads. “You know how to use this?”

“Papa taught me. He never used it for hunting, only protection.”

“Too bad he didn’t have it with him.” I snapped the breech closed and handed it back. “Keep it. You’re likely to need it before this is over.”

* * *

While riding in I asked Magra about her name. “I have a foot in two worlds, Marshall,” she said. “One white, the other Navajo. Papa said I should be proud of both, even if neither one wanted me.”

“He was right, you should be proud.”

“When Papa came from Sweden he had a little money saved. When I got old enough he sent me East to a boarding school. They didn’t want me, either, but I learned how to read and write. Now I teach children on the reservation.”

Her words got me to thinking about my past. What there was to remember. “How did you hear about your father’s

death? I found him a couple of hours before I met you. No one in town could have told you in time.”

“He came to me in a dream two days ago. He wasn’t one for writing letters. So he night-walked sometimes to let me know how he was doing. He told me he was preparing to die. I raced back home to see if I could help but I was too late. The house was empty.” She fell silent for a bit. “Why don’t you ask me what you want to ask, Marshall?”

We rode on for a bit. “All right, I will. What did your father say about me?”

“That one day you would come to Haxan because it was a center of things. Because a man like you had to be here, in one way or another.”

We didn’t talk after that. After a while she rested her chin on my shoulder while we rode back to town.

After getting Magra settled I played a hunch and rode over to the livery stable. The night man told me he had rented out a two-seat buckboard with team three days ago.

“Fellow by the name of Connie Rand picked up the wagon. Had a couple of men with him. I didn’t recognize them, though.”

“You know this man?”

“Yes, sir. Conrad Rand. Tall man with white blond hair. People call him Connie, though he doesn’t like that name much. He done something wrong, Marshall?”

“What does he do, this Rand?”

“Not much. Hires out during the week on the big ranches and drinks his wages on the weekend.”

“And the two men with Rand. Can you describe them?”

“Not so good, Marshall. They kept down the street a ways with the sun behind them. But I can describe their horses. I’ve got an eye for horses, even when the sun’s against me. One rode a bay with three black points. The other was mounted on a sorrel mare.”

I made arrangements to keep my horse for the night and rounded the plaza on foot. It was Tuesday so there wasn’t much doing in the saloons. A little bit of music trickled out of one and played around in the night air with a woman’s laugh before they both died out. I checked the horses out front but didn’t see a bay or a sorrel.

I went to the Haxan House and had supper. Magra was right, Alma Jean Clay had a mean, pinched face. Her husband was a little nicer. He said Magra could sleep in the stock room, behind the kitchen.

“Girl can’t help being what she’s born, Marshall. She can stay long as she pays full price. That’ll keep Alma quiet.”

“Fair enough. Bill my office and I’ll see you get paid.”

After eating I brought back food and water for Magra. I found her asleep on the cot in back. She had turned her Union coat backward and was using it as a blanket. I locked the office tight and walked back to the Haxan House at the end of the road. It had been a long day. I was tired.

“Marshall!”

I turned. A boy, eight or nine, was running up the wooden sidewalk. “Mayor Polgar told me to find you. There’s a fire out at the edge of town. Two men are dead. Says you better get out there fast.”

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Davie Peake. My friends call me Piebald seeing as how I got this marking on my—”

“I want you to run to the livery stable and get my horse. Bring him back to my office.”

“You mean Old Sheriff Cawley’s place? The one by the feed store?”

“That’s right.”

“Won’t take me long, Marshall. I can run a hole in the wind when I have to.”

“Then let’s see you do it.”

“Yes, sir!” He disappeared in the night.

I opened up my office and got Magra up. “A man by the name of Connie Rand killed your father. He’s been at your place tonight. Burned your house to the ground and killed his two accomplices.”

“But, what for?”

“Covering his tracks. A dead witness can’t talk. Here’s your shotgun. I want you awake until I get back.”

“Where are you going?”

“Out to your place. You stay here. I’m giving you the keys so you can lock yourself inside. I’ll be back soon as I can.”

I met Piebald outside with my horse. I mounted up and kicked for Shiner Larsen’s place. When I rounded the bend I saw three men watching the night breeze scatter the remaining embers and sparks through the night. Polgar met me as I drew up, his face creased with worry.

“I heard you brought the girl back to town. Good idea. Whoever did this was looking for her.”

“Where are the dead men?”

“Over in that ravine. Shot through the heart, and their throats cut.”

“You recognize them, Frank?”

Polgar shook his head. “People always drift through Haxan. Sometimes they don’t leave.”

“Who found them?”

An older man and his teenage son stepped forward. “Marshall, we were rounding up a stray calf in Gila Canyon when we saw the fire. We found the two dead men and rode in.”

Polgar studied the smoldering embers. “They trampled the corn and shot Larsen’s pig. Why would a person do a thing like that, John?”

I got off my horse and scraped my boot heel across the parallel lines in the dirt. “Buckboard.” I scrambled down the bank of the ravine. I turned the men over to examine their faces.

“Frank, these men were dead long before they were shot. No blood on their shirts even though their throats are cut. Can the doctor in Haxan do an autopsy?”

“Doc Toland? Have to sober him up first.”

“Then sober him up,” I snapped. “I want to know what killed them.” I was standing over the bodies. There was an unusual yet familiar smell coming from them, but I couldn’t place it because the air was filled with dust and swirling wood smoke that stung my eyes. I frowned.

“What’s wrong, John?”

“These men aren’t hired killers.”

Frank drew up beside me. “How do you mean?”

I pointed to them. “They don’t look like someone who would nail a man to a tree.” My stomach filled with ice. “These men were killed to throw us off the scent, Frank. They were probably in the wrong place at the wrong time and nothing more.”

“What are you saying?”

“I think Connie Rand has Magra.”

* * *

When I got to Haxan I knew the worst had happened. The street was filled with people outside my office. I rode in among them. They watched me with stoic faces.

“What happened?” I asked them.

A man in the crowd answered back. “They took that little boy, Piebald, and held a Barlow to his throat. Said if she didn’t come out they would kill him. She laid down her gun and they took her away.”

“Why didn’t you stop them?” I spun on the crowd. Their bland faces stared back.

“Why should we take a bullet for a half-breed,” someone remarked. “She ain’t kin to any of us.”

I got off my horse and walked up on the man. The crowd pulled away to give us elbow room. He was doing his level best to hold my stare.

“I’m not armed, Marshall.” He swallowed audibly.

“My God,” someone whispered, “look at his eyes.”

I turned my back in disgust. “Which way did they ride?”

“North east, Marshall,” the first man replied, “toward Cottonwood Butte.”

“What’s your name, mister?” He was wearing striped pants and green suspenders.

“Jake Strop.”

“They have a buckboard, Mr. Strop? With two men riding a three-point bay and a sorrel mare?”

“Yes, sir. And well armed, all of them.”

The saddle leather creaked as I mounted up. “Strop, you’ve just been deputized. You pick three men and meet Mayor Polgar. He’s riding in from Shiner Larsen’s place with two dead men. I want Doc Toland to autopsy them. I want it done before I get back.” I leaned forward in the saddle and glared at the rest of the crowd. “Don’t let me down again. Ever.”

Several men and most of the women dropped their eyes. A couple of hard-noses mumbled under their breath, but no one bucked me outright.

“We’ll do as you say, Marshall,” Strop promised.

I knew I wouldn’t make much time at night, but neither would Rand. I rode out into the country and made a cold camp. By early morning I was riding hard and cut their tracks twenty miles south of Cottonwood Butte. The tracks swung north and I

followed them, keeping an eye out for ambush. At the base of the butte the tracks split. The wagon and one set of horse tracks kept going northeast while a single track broke west toward White Sands.

I followed the single track. If I could pick up his horse I would be better mounted to catch the slower buckboard.

By midday I hit White Sands.

It was easy following his tracks through the gypsum drifts. He wasn't riding hard. He wanted me closing up because he thought he could take me.

The pristine, snow-white landscape was shattered here and there by a clump of yucca or tuft of long grass. But he kept heading deeper into the interior, and before long there was nothing but the serried waves of frozen white sand marching off to eternity.

I topped a dune. It was a bad position because I was silhouetted against the sky. The first shot creased my left shoulder. I spun off the saddle, falling in an awkward way with my gun hand caught beneath me. Before I could turn over he was on top of me and crashed his pistol across the back of my head.

* * *

A splash of water in my face brought me back.

He stood with the sun behind him, holding a Barlow knife. His sorrel was standing quietly a good piece away alongside my horse.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“I drew the short straw,” he explained. “We knew you would try for the single man first. Didn’t think it would be this easy to take you, though. Maybe you’re not as good as some say.”

I was hogtied, lying on my side. The white gypsum sand was eerily cool, and I was grateful for how it felt against the side of my face.

He grinned at me. “I woke you up because I wanted you to feel this. Ain’t much sport skinning an unconscious man. Especially when you can’t hear him squeal and beg for you to stop the hurt.” He grinned again. “Except, I don’t ever stop cutting once I start.”

He had done a professional job rendering me helpless. My hands were near the tops of my boots and I was immobile.

“Can I have some water?” I asked.

“I don’t waste water on a dead man,” he answered. The blade reflected silver as he started for me.

I rolled over quick, kicking up a flurry of sand and looking over my shoulder for the target. The little derringer from my

boot barked twice. Both slugs hit him in the stomach. He dropped his knife and crawled off somewhere to die.

I rolled over and over toward the dropped knife. He might be made of sterner stuff and remember his pistol. He was dying, but he wasn't dead. Not yet. I worked the blade on the knots best I could, flaying skin. When I had my hands free I loosened the rope around my ankles and got to my feet.

He had made a big mess in the sand, crawling around a dune to hide himself and die in peace. I found my Colt Dragoon on his horse and walked around the opposite side of the dune. He was hunched up, trying to hold his guts in.

"I ain't armed, mister," he gasped. "You shoot a dying man who's unarmed?"

I went back to my horse and dug through the saddle bag for my hand axe. When I went back to the dune he had crawled farther away, leaving a nasty blood trail. Crimson on snow.

My shadow drew up on him.

When I finished I left it for carrion and put what I wanted in an old flour sack. I caught his horse and mine and started out of White Sands. His bullet had cut me, but the blood was staunch and I didn't have to be sewn up.

It was a long ride out of that white, featureless desert. The pain in my shoulder came in waves, like the dunes of white

sand the horses kicked through. Black clouds gathered above my head, then they were behind me, towering.

It was late afternoon when I emerged from the soundless desolation of White Sands. Looking behind me I saw the sky was black with vultures whirling over the feast I had laid out.

* * *

I rode his horse into the ground, then got on my blue roan and kicked hard for the horizon. I slowed around sunset to let him blow and walk off his lather. When he had cooled I drove him forward again.

I discovered their camp fire as the moon was making its appearance like an orange lamp. It hung so close to the ground you felt you could touch the face of it.

I let my horse stand, pulled my Sharps from its boot and marched off across the scrub waste. I was way out of Sangre County, that much I knew. It didn't look like the hard pan and scrag around here could ever amount to anything.

I circled their camp, coming from the east. I found a knoll two hundred yards away and set up the rifle. It was difficult to make out faces from this distance in that light. There were three figures sitting around the fire. I thought one of them might be Magra, but I couldn't tell.

Time was on my side. They weren't going anywhere. My .50 caliber Sharps would see to that. I settled down and waited

out the night. Before sunrise I made a breakfast of water and hard biscuit.

When a band of red and orange colored the sky behind me I checked the Sharps and raised the sights. The day came on fast. I watched them hitch the wagon while Magra saddled the bay. I recognized her blue coat, but something was wrong. She was taller than before.

I settled down to work. The Sharps roared and the bay dropped. I loaded the single shot action and it roared again. The outside horse on the team collapsed. Another cartridge and the last horse went down, tangled in the traces.

I didn't like killing the horses this way because it might mean we had to walk out. But I wanted to shock Magra's captors beyond the ability to think. To let them know they were under the sights of a killing gun, with a merciless hunter on the other end.

The little figures didn't stand around when this slaughter began. The man wearing Magra's coat grabbed her and jumped behind a raised hummock of turf. The other man tried to use the buckboard as a screen.

I started pouring rounds through the wagon. It was no match for a .50 caliber buffalo gun at two hundred yards. Given enough time and ammunition, I could chop it into kindling.

It takes a lot of nerve to stick under that kind of fire. My victim didn't have that much sand. He broke cover and started running across the prairie, firing his six gun wildly in my direction. I cut him down. He was still thrashing on the ground. I put another slug into him. He stopped moving.

There was a stand of silence. The reverberation of my big gun had stilled the land. I could put Rand under the same withering fire but I didn't want to risk hitting Magra.

I grabbed my flour sack and walked toward their camp, right up in the range of his six. I could see his slitted eyes under the broken brim of his hat and Magra's cowed head under his left hand.

"You take one more step and I put a bullet in this witch's face," he warned. "What happened to Tanner?"

"Was that his name?" I flung the flour sack in Rand's direction. When the mouth of the sack opened up, Tanner's head rolled out and came to a stop on the incline of the hummock, staring at the blue sky.

"What kind of man are you?" Rand asked. There was a waver in his voice. "You shot Silas when he was down. You *murdered* him."

"That's right. I did."

“I don’t want to cross guns with you, Marwood. Let me walk out of here with the girl. I’ll leave her unharmed by that dry wash three miles south.”

“No deal.”

“We were paid one hundred dollars in gold to kidnap her. We could keep or kill her, our choice. The d—,” he stopped, “the man who bought our guns in Haxan said that was the bargain. I’ll give you all the gold double eagles I have. Just let me walk out of here with a whole skin.”

“No.”

He cocked his revolver. “I’ll kill this girl, Marwood. I’ve never killed a woman before, but I’ll do it. Her death will be on your conscience.”

I put my rifle aside. “Stand up, Rand.”

“Marwood, listen to me, I—”

“I said stand.”

He rose to his feet, the gun held to Magra’s head. Her face was bruised and her doeskin dress torn. She had been given an old pair of pants to wear. They hadn’t been gentle with her while they kept her. I didn’t expect they would. These kind of men never were.

“I was doing what I was told, Marwood.” The wind blew through his white blond white hair.

“So am I.”

“I don’t want to pull on you.”

I didn’t say anything.

He watched me for a long time. His face changed in a subtle manner. He was cornered. The only way he would live was if he shot his way out. He already had his gun free while my Colt Dragoon was holstered. All the odds lay on his side.

He was good. His expression never flickered and his eyes remained steady. He flung Magra aside and started to draw a bead on me. My first shot hit him in the head, and the second center-cut his heart.

Magra was standing alone, trembling. Her hands were pressed over her face. I walked up to her and said soft, “It’s over, Magra.”

She removed her grimed fingers from her face. “They said someone in town paid to kill Papa and kidnap me.”

“I know.”

“They never said a name.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I already knew who’d hired them.

“They.... I--” She swallowed hard. “I’m glad you came, John.”

“Can you walk? I’m camped over that next rise.”

“Don’t you want their money? Connie kept it under the seat of that wagon.”

I gave her a sidelong glance. “Why would I want their gold? Unless you want it.”

She had a sick, angry look. “I don’t want anything from them, ever again.”

I took her hand. “Then let’s go home.”

* * *

Two days later we were back in Haxan. We rode in slow because I thought Magra needed the time. At one point she said, “I knew you were coming for me.” The firelight from our campfire looked pretty on her broad face. “Papa came to me last night and said you were nearby, hiding in the dark.”

“Must have been good to have that kind of comfort.”

“It was.” She hugged her knees and rocked back and forth. “I think that’s the last time he’s going to visit me, John. I got the impression he felt, well, it was because you were here that he didn’t need to watch over me anymore.”

“I hope that’s right, Magra.” She gave me her first smile and pulled a blanket over her shoulders. The night closed down around us.

She turned in her blanket. “John...where are you from?”

I smoothed back her hair. “It’s a place you’ll never have to visit, Magra.”

“That sea of time and dust you spoke of?”

“Mostly.”

“He called you here, didn’t he? Papa.”

I looked into the fire. “I never know that, Magra. Sometimes I think I can call myself and that’s why I go where I’m needed. I just don’t know.”

“But you’re here now. And maybe not just for me, but for a lot of other reasons you don’t know.”

I tucked the blanket around her shoulders. “Time to go to sleep. Let yourself heal.”

When we finally arrived I dropped her at the Haxan Hotel and went to meet Doc Toland for the first time.

Frank Polgar was there, waiting. Word had spread fast I had returned with Magra, and he probably figured I would want him around.

“How’s the girl?” Polgar asked.

“It’s going to be a long time before she’s ever right again,” I told him. “They hurt her bad.”

He shook his head with sadness. “I’m sorry to hear that. They had no cause to treat her that way. She never hurt nobody. John, this is Dr. Rex Toland. Doc, this here is our new Marshall, John Marwood.”

Toland was a spindly, narrow-faced man with grey mutton chops and rheumy brown eyes behind a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles. He wore a dust-laden black frock coat. “Glad to

meet you, Marshall. I guess I'll have to remit my autopsy fees through your office?"

"That's right. What did you find?"

"Those men died in a bad way. Poisoned until their kidneys shut down and failed. Their stomachs were full of—"

"Oil of cloves." That was what I had smelled on their bodies that night. They must have been held down and forced to swallow, but some had spilled on their clothes.

"That's right, Marshall." I had impressed him with my deduction. "Nasty way to die. The stuff also has a medical name. Eugenol, it's called."

Polgar looked my way. "John, there's only one man in town who uses that stuff in any kind of quantity."

"I'll go pick him up, mayor."

"You want some help?"

"No, I'll take care of it. It's my job."

I walked outside on the street. The morning sun was hot and there was dust in my throat. A few women and children lounged around the water well in the plaza. I hadn't been back long, but word had gotten around fast. I wouldn't have been surprised to meet him running out the door when I went through it.

I slammed the door behind me. The little wooden plate, with the words “Josiah Hartleby: Dentist” burned into it, rattled against the glass pane with alarm.

I had caught him packing. He had a threadbare carpet bag stuffed half full of odds and ends, along with a few shirts that needed laundering and a pair of striped suspenders.

“Sir, I’m closed for the day. You’ll have to come back another--” He saw me and his face paled.

“You have to answer for Shiner Larsen, tooth-puller.”

He had sense enough not to try and talk his way out of it. He was a smallish man with a long chin and pale, freckled hands.

He drew himself up to his full measure, what there was of it. “And why not? Why shouldn’t I have that crazy old Swede killed? Being a dentist is a hard enough trade. People don’t like dentists much and his slander wasn’t helping me eat. Besides, I was willing to marry that Navajo daughter of his but he wouldn’t have it. Said I was no good, that she didn’t need the likes of me because one day he would call a man out of the dust of time to protect her. He wouldn’t even broach the subject with her. He was crazy, so I made arrangements to have him pushed out of the way. Told the men to teach her a lesson, too, since I couldn’t have her to myself. The way I see it, I did this

town a righteous favor in the name of God. If you know anything about the history of Haxan you know that much.”

“Law says you have to pay, Hartleby. You’ll get a trial. Then you’ll be hanged.”

“I was losing money and respect!”

“You had enough money to hire three cold-blooded killers. Think about that. And I’m not sure you had much respect to begin with, seeing how you wanted Magra treated. No, I think you’re a man who let his hate get away with him. It happens.”

His mouth worked a bit before he spit indignation. “I don’t like your tone, Marshall, or your insinuations about my character.”

“I don’t much care. Come on, I’m taking you in.”

His hand stole for the carpet bag.

“Don’t try it, Hartleby.”

“I won’t hang, Marshall.” He was facing the street. If he fired he might hit someone outside. I had to get him first.

“Don’t pull on me, Hartleby. You’ll never live to see your own hanging if you do.”

He wasn’t hearing me. He was listening to the hate that bellowed in his heart. His hand flashed and our guns roared at the same instant in the cramped room. He slumped against the wall and left a smear of red.

I kicked the smoking Walker from his hand and went outside. Polgar and Doc Toland were there to meet me, blinking in the sun.

“Haxan’s going to need a new dentist,” I told them.

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Kenneth Mark Hoover has sold over thirty short stories and articles. His fiction has appeared in magazines such as Fantastic Stories, Strange Horizons, Challenging Destiny, and Drops of Crimson. His first novel, Fevreblau, was published by Five Star Press in 2005 and sold out its first print run. His story Mr. Hoover currently lives in Dallas, TX but you can reach him, and read more about Haxan and the characters who live there, at <http://kennethmarkhoover.com>.

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Rick Sardinha is a professional illustrator/fine artist living and working on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island. His passion is to create in traditional oil media, however, he is just as comfortable in front of a computer and often uses multiple disciplines in the image creation process. More of his work can be seen at <http://www.battleduck.com>.

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

ISSN: 1946-1046

Published by Firkin Press,
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

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