



Issue #32 - Dec. 17, 2009

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## HIGH MOON

by Kenneth Mark Hoover

I led my horse into Haxan and found Piebald squatting in the black shade of the livery stable. He had constructed a tiny corral out of deadwood and imprisoned a horned toad.

“Hello, Marshall,” he said. “Find the man you were after?” He watched the horned toad, sun-brown arms crossed over his knees.

“My horse picked up a stone bruise. I lost him at the Mexican border.”

Bull Hod was the man in question. He had shot a girl in the Sassy Sage when she wouldn't go upstairs. When a cowboy tried to knock him down Hod pulled a Bowie knife and gutted him. As he backed out of the saloon a bartender went for the shotgun slung under the bar and Hod shot him in the eye. Then he gut-shot a dealer hiding under a faro table just because he was that kind of mean.

“That's a shame, Marshall. Four days' ride wasted. Maybe next time you'll kill him.” The horned toad tried to climb out of its prison. Piebald pushed him down with a dirty forefinger.

“I was trying to catch him, son, not kill him.”

“My daddy says you kill men like a farmer kills hogs.”

“Look after my horse, Piebald. And tell Mr. Wallet to feed him extra grain. He’s been rode hard.”

Piebald scrambled to his feet and knocked dust off his patched jeans. “Don’t you worry, Marshall. I’ll take good care of him.” He took the reins and led my blue roan into the stable.

I hefted my Sharps rifle and turned for my office. I was halfway when I came back to kick down the horned toad’s prison. It scampered under a prickly pear, black eyes gleaming.

*You kill men like a farmer kills hogs.*

I decided not to go to the office after all. I was tired. I strode for the Haxan Hotel, stomping gypsum sand off my boots before I stepped inside the cool dark.

A gaunt man lounged in one of the horsehair chairs, a boot propped on one knee. He was chewing licorice. He had black hair combed with bear grease and a sweaty blue bandanna knotted around his neck. He was spinning the razor-sharp rowel of his spur when he saw me.

“You the U.S. Marshall here?” His teeth were black from the licorice.

“That’s right. John T. Marwood.”

He rose to his feet. He was my height but narrower in the chest and his forearms were matted with hair. He shoved a brown hand at me. “Danny Moth, trail boss for the Circle T.

I've got a herd five miles south of here. Six thousand head. We were driving them to Sante Fe when the water ran short."

"If you want to sell your herd we've got several cattle agents in town."

"No, it ain't that. It's... well, I'm embarrassed to say, but I'm lost." He smiled. He needed a bath and a shave but he had an honest smile.

"As lost as a man can be."

"How do you mean, Mr. Moth?"

"I've made this drive from El Paso to Santa Fe every spring for the past six years. This is the first time I've run into a town called Haxan."

"The West is growing fast."

"Not that fast. And there's something else, Marshall. We drove our herd for three days over country I've never seen before. I didn't think we were going to make it before my scout found a shallow creek south of here."

"That would be Gila Creek."

"Lucky we found that water or I would have lost everything." Moth watched me with mud-brown eyes. "Marshall, what county is this?"

"Sangre."

"Blood County, eh?" He rubbed the back of his neck, caked with dried sweat and hard miles of trail dust. He shook his

head, perplexed. “Marshall, I can’t figure it. How is it this town and this county doesn’t exist on any map I’ve ever seen?”

\* \* \*

Some of us move through time and dust. There are others who walk against the flow. When we meet there’s a violence that must be faced and overcome.

Haxan was such a meeting place.

This world, everything around you and everything you can’t see, is like a vast sea. And within this sea of blood and dust, in places that might never be or can’t *become* until something is set right, there are people destined to travel forever.

People like me.

We’re taken from places we call home and sent into this stormy sea to calm the waters. It’s an eternal war. It never ends because the storm itself, the unending conflict, makes the world you know a reality. Along with all the other worlds that might be waiting to be born, or were born but died like a guttering candle in the eternal night.

Once in a while, someone slips between the hills and hollows and stumbles where they don’t belong. I think Danny Moth was one of those strange men, in this strangest of lands.

\* \* \*

“You believe that, Marshall?”

We sat in a quiet corner of the Quarter Moon, a cold pitcher of beer between us. I'm not saying Moth believed everything I told him. I'm not sure I did, sometimes.

"I remember living a lot of places. If what I remember is real or shadow I can't say. They're mostly fragments. But I hold the memories. The memories are real."

Moth sipped his beer. "Seems a man would know the life he lived, one way or the other."

"Maybe that's the only way he can live. His mind shapes the past into half-remembered shadows because otherwise the weight of eternity would crush him." I spread my hands apart. "I don't claim to understand it all. I just know it's there."

Moth watched me with his flat brown eyes. "The people of Haxan know you think this way?"

"Those few I trust. My deputy, and an Indian maiden whose life I saved once or twice. Most people wouldn't care because it's not something they want to think about."

"Why are you telling me this, Marshall?"

I found myself thinking about that horned toad and how his eyes gleamed when he was set free.

"You're not here by accident, Mr. Moth." This made him start. "Given who I am and what I believe... you wouldn't be in Haxan otherwise."

"You make it sound like a prison."

“Haxan is a lot of things we can’t understand.”

“You sound pretty certain of that.”

“As certain as you are lost.”

He drained his beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “My first inclination in a prison is to break out. But if you say I’m here for a reason then maybe I need to find out why. You ever fought in a war, Marshall?”

I had been in a lot of wars. “Sure.”

“I was at Chickamauga. My point being, a man sees a lot of curious things he can’t explain. I’ve seen my share and it sounds like you have, too. World being what it is, all big and open like, it’s a wonder a man doesn’t see more he can’t explain in one lifetime.”

“You might be right.”

Moth lighted a long cigar wrapped with green leaf. “I have an eye for men who can ride the river. I’ll make a deal with you. Give me the name of a good cattle agent. If he offers a fair price I’ll sell my herd. My riders won’t mind. These last three days shook their nerve and they’ll like as not spend their wages in Haxan as Sante Fe.”

“Haxan girls are pretty.”

Moth laughed. “If you say so.” He flicked ash away. “I don’t have any use for women since my wife died. When you’ve loved

a woman like I loved Charity, well, the others pale in comparison.”

“I think I understand.” I couldn’t imagine my life without Magra Snowberry. She was why I came to Haxan in the first place.

“I’ll hang around after I pay off the men. You intrigue me, Marshall. I like talking philosophy with intelligent people. Don’t get much chance of it on the trail.”

He leaned forward, the cigar dangling between his long fingers. “And maybe we can figure out how I came to be lost in Haxan. And why it was you who found me.”

\* \* \*

Moth paid off his men and became a permanent resident of Haxan. The following day we rode around the countryside hunting quail and jackrabbits. Magra said she would broil the seasoned meat with husks of corn over mesquite coals and we could eat out under the stars.

We were cutting through foothills when a mountain lion scabbled across bare rock and leapt in front of us. I pulled my Colt Dragoon and put a round through its tawny body. It fell between our horses. Danny slipped off his saddle and stood over its body. He was breathing hard when he looked up at me.

“I never saw anything like that,” he said. “You’re one-third human and two-thirds gun hawk.” He watched me close.

“You’re a hard killer, John.”

I didn’t say anything. It didn’t sound like a compliment the way he said it: one-third human. I had been trying to protect him. Why didn’t he see that?

He kicked the big cat over. “Her teats are swollen. Her cubs will die now that she’s dead.”

“Those claws and teeth will bring a good price in Albuquerque if you polish them,” I said.

“Why would I want that?”

He climbed into his saddle and shook the reins out. I felt I had been judged. It made an emptiness in my chest. The same emptiness when Bull Hod had slipped across the border beyond my reach.

As we were riding back Danny muttered to himself, “That cat wasn’t attacking us. She was startled because we came downwind on her.”

I looked at my right hand. “It just happened.”

“That would bother me, John. But you seem easy with it.”

I didn’t know how to explain it’s always that way with me. Instinct. Danny wasn’t above killing; we were hunting together after all. But he hadn’t liked the ease with which I’d done this. After seeing his reaction, I wasn’t sure I did, either.

We never mentioned the mountain lion again that day, but it was always in our past, roaring.

\* \* \*

That evening, we sat talking and eating as the desert night shook itself loose and slipped down from the San Andreas mountains. Magra boiled black coffee while we washed our faces with water fetched from the well.

With the sun spinning red gold on the flanks of the mountains, Danny looked around, a cup of coffee steaming in his fist, and said, "This is beautiful country. And that's a beautiful girl."

Magra smiled. "Thank you," she said in her broken English. She went about her chores, sneaking pleased glances my way. She was glad I had made a new friend, had found someone else I could trust.

The next morning I saw Danny talking to Magra after breakfast, their bodies silhouetted strong against the red horizon, voices carrying like cottonwood seeds on the dry air. Several times their hands touched. That afternoon I rode in from town after business and found them sitting together in comfortable silence.

Magra knew me well. She saw I was troubled. When we were alone inside the half-finished cabin she said, "He's lonely. His heart is hurt deep. I get the feeling he's looking for someone he lost."

"His wife died recently."

She shook her head. “He’s not interested in me. This is someone he loved more. From a long time ago, I think.” She was putting tin plates and cups away in her new cupboard. “He told me about the big cat you killed.”

I thought if I moved I would snap like dry straw. “He did?”

She held one of the plates, her head bent. . “It bothers him. It bothers me, too.”

“I didn’t kill that mountain lion on purpose. I can’t believe he mentioned it.”

She put the plate away, wiped her hands on her apron and turned. “John, instead of being angry maybe you should be grateful for people who care about you.”

I walked out of the half-finished cabin. Danny was sitting against the fence, whittling. I sat down beside him and cleaned my gun. There was a discarded plank with the word DUNKIE carved into lying it at his feet. I picked it up.

“What’s this?”

He laughed sheepishly. “It’s a mystery I’m trying to puzzle out. Got stuck in my head the day I rode into Haxan. Maybe someday I’ll get it figured.”

“Can I have it?” Magra asked, coming forward. “I would like to have its magic hanging above the door.”

“You don’t know what it means,” I said.

Her dark eyes sparkled. “Ai, I think maybe I do.” She knelt beside me and ran her fingertips over the wood. “It’s a hidden word for *friend*. If you look close enough, John, you can see it.”

But as it turned out I didn’t have the time. A horse and rider topped the rise. It was my deputy, Jake Strop, on a dun mare. He wouldn’t be coming unless it was bad news.

This was Haxan. The center of blood and dust. Peace never lasted there.

\* \* \*

“They killed him sure, Mr. Marwood,” Jake said. “Shot him in the back from that alley yonder.”

“Hold that lantern closer, Jake,” I said. It was two in the morning and we were standing over a dead man. “You recognize this cowboy, Danny?”

“Boy” was right. He wasn’t more than fifteen.

Danny shook his head. “He’s not one of my men.”

“Well, lots of drifters come through Haxan. Some of them never leave. What else do you know about this business, Jake?”

“I was in the office when I heard the shot. I ran out but it was dark and I couldn’t see anything. I checked the saloons and they were all quiet except Mr. Wicker, at the Quarter Moon—he said a cowboy won a little money at faro.”

“How much money?”

“Thirty dollars. The cowboy bought drinks for the house and left with ten dollars remaining.”

“Anybody leave with him?”

“Not that Mr. Wicker remembers.”

“What happened then?”

“I was headed to the office when I saw what looked like a bundle of clothes lying in this alley. I lighted a match so I could see his face. He looked like the man Mr. Wicker described: young with blonde hair and a wispy moustache. I didn’t touch anything and I rode out to get you.”

“You did right. Let’s look in that other alley across the way.” We walked across Front Street, Jake leading the way between the thick adobe walls. “Hold that lantern steady, Jake. See? Boot prints. Someone bushwhacked that boy, all right. Probably heard he won money and thought to take it from him.”

“Who would shoot a boy for ten dollars?” Danny asked.

Jake made a sound of disgust. “In Haxan? Name your man. Something wrong, Mr. Marwood?”

“This drift sand blown against the boardwalk. You can see the boot prints, plain as leather. Spanish heels with a crucifix carved into them. Only one man wears boots like that, Jake.”

“My stars, you’re right.” Jake’s face was yellow sick in the lamplight. “Bull Hod is back in town.”

“Who is Bull Hod?” Danny asked.

“A gunman. Shot and killed a federal paymaster in Wichita before he came here and started causing trouble. Last I heard his bounty was up to five thousand.”

“I’ll get our horses,” Jake said.

“No, you stay here. There’s a trail herd coming in tomorrow. We can’t leave Haxan without a lawman.”

“Mr. Marwood, you can’t go after Bull Hod alone. Not again. That man’s more monster than person.”

“Got no choice, Jake. Law says I have to bring him in.”

“I’ll ride with you, John,” Danny said.

I couldn’t understand why he offered his services so quickly. He obviously thought I was a little loose with my gun. But maybe he figured he had a better chance to figure out why he was lost in Haxan if he stuck close to me. “I can’t ask you to do that, Danny. This man is dangerous. He’s my business.”

“Maybe so. But I’m a good shot and we’ve hunted together before. You might need a gun to cover your back.”

“All right, it’s your funeral. Jake, you see this boy gets buried proper. Come on, Danny. We’ll put a few miles under our saddles before daybreak.”

“You know where this Bull Hod is headed?”

“There’s a line shack southwest of town on the edge of a cedar forest. He used it as a hideout last time. I expect he’s

headed that way again. Hod is dangerous, but he's not long on imagination. That's why I'll catch him this time, no problem."

\* \* \*

DUKEIN.

KINDUE.

We rode until mid-morning and made a cold camp to rest the horses. Danny sat across from me scratching letters in the desert floor with a stick.

"How much farther, John?"

"We'll reach the line shack around sundown. We'll take Hod after he goes to sleep."

"Sounds simple enough." ENDUKI.

"Only if the weather holds out."

"Yeah." He tapped his stick on the hard ground. "I don't like the look of those clouds building in the west."

I had been watching them, too. "There's an arroyo we've got to cross to reach the line shack. If the rain hits we might not be able to ford."

"You want to leave now?"

"We can walk the horses. Maybe beat that coming rain."

Danny scratched the words out in the dirt and tossed his stick away. "All right, let's give it a try."

\* \* \*

The bottom fell out an hour later. We donned our slickers but they did little to keep us dry. The lashing rain swept off the flanks of the mountains and scoured the land. We reached the arroyo. It was full of gushing water that tore at the crumbling banks and the roots of trees with unrelenting force.

“You still want cross *that*?” Danny shouted above the weather.

“No. We’ll never make it.” Through an occasional break in the sheets of rain I glimpsed a dark mass ahead: the cedar forest. “We’ll have to ride around. Lose a lot of time.”

“Better than drowning.”

I couldn’t argue with that. We led our horses north over broken country, stumbling and leaning into the gray rain that whipped at us. The horses kept trying to tail off into the wind. It finally got so bad we couldn’t lead them anymore and had to stop. When night fell it was too dark cross open country. We hobbled the horses and sheltered in the lee of a fallen hackberry tree.

“John.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you remember the last time we hunted in the rain?”

“When was that?” I pulled my hat down to shield my face.

“Nothing. I thought I remembered different.” He paused.

“What will happen when you catch this Bull Hod?”

“Law says bring him in for trial.”

“You hold with that?”

A stream of water ran from the peak of my hat and splashed between my knees. “This is Haxan, Danny.”

“You sure that’s not an excuse?”

“How do you mean?”

“I’m remembering that mountain cat.”

“You can’t leave it alone, can you, Danny?”

“No, John, I can’t. But you can, and that’s worrisome. Maybe you’re a better man than you think, but you’re not looking deep enough to see it.”

“That why you volunteered to ride flank?”

“Yes. I wanted to make sure this hunt went okay for you.”

“Funny, since I don’t seem to do many things right in your eyes to begin with.” The rain whipped sideways into my face.

“Magra says you’re looking for someone.”

“I’m starting to remember why I’m here.”

That big cat was roaring again. “I saw you holding hands with her.”

“Don’t be ignorant, John. I didn’t become lost for her.”

“Who then?”

Danny laughed softly. “Dunkie, I guess.” He bundled up, and I couldn’t think of anything else to say either.

It was a long, miserable night.

\* \* \*

When morning dawned the eastern sky was yellow and pink. The empty desert looked clean and bright and painted anew.

After a quick breakfast of hardtack and rainwater we kicked north and circled the arroyo. We came across a switchback for an abandoned silver mine and followed it into the sunlit day. Before long we were riding through the cedar forest. Shafts of sunlight pierced the gloom.

I pulled my Colt Dragoon. "There's the clearing up ahead," I warned Danny. "The line shack is built into the side of the mountain. We'll have to approach from the front."

He pulled his Remington repeater from its boot and cocked the lever. "I'm ready."

We rode apart so Hod wouldn't catch us both with the spread from a scattergun. The shutters of the line shack were closed tight. No smoke rose from the stone chimney. We got off our horses and approached. I kicked the door in and went through fast while Danny covered me from behind.

The shack was empty. Nothing but sugar sacks, a rough-hewn cedar table with crude benches, and a half-rotten rope bed. The iron stove was stone cold and the grate burned out because someone had used buffalo chips for fire instead of wood.

We walked around the outside of the shack and found Hod's trail. Danny squatted and picked at the freshly impacted horse tracks with a fingernail. "Looks like he rode out early this morning. Three, maybe four hours before sunrise, by my reckoning."

"He headed down the mountain as we were coming up."

Danny pulled at his bottom lip. "You figure we passed him in the dark?"

I nodded. "A man like Hod knows when he's being hunted. He'll rely on those instincts to keep him alive."

Danny frowned. "In other words he's trying to ambush us."

"That's how I figure it, too."

We mounted our horses and chased the trail. When we reached open country we rode hard, trying to close the distance.

We were rounding the draw of a slot canyon when the first shot cut my horse's withers. He reared up and I went down hard, skinning my hands and face on rock. I rolled and pulled my gun. "He's behind that wood pile!" I cried. Hod fired his rifle a second time and caught Danny below his collarbone. He spun off his saddle and fell to the desert floor while his horse bolted.

Danny was alive, but he was hurt bad. I was moving for position when a third shot kicked sand inches from Danny's

head.

“Put your gun down, Marshall, and kick it away.” I could hear the distinct click as Hod cocked his rifle. “He ain’t nothing to me.”

I set my Colt down and pushed it away with my foot.

“The derringer and your knife, too. I know you’re loaded down with iron.”

I tossed them aside.

Bull Hod rose from a jumble of shattered stumps and mesquite bushes at the far end of the draw. He had a broad face, with eyes like polished amber pushed deep in brown dough, and a ragged knife-slash for a mouth. He held his rifle on me.

“Missed you in the dark. So I arranged this little welcoming party.” His lips writhed in a smile. “You and me, we’ve got business to settle, Marshall. I can’t have you chasing me all over the territory.”

“You shot that boy, Hod. You knew I would come after you again.”

“Easiest way to get you on my trail. And I’ve got the gun.”

He talked too much. I turned my back on him and went to see about Danny. He was sitting up, a bloody hand clasped to his collarbone. “Went right through.” His face and lips were pale. “We walked into it, didn’t we? Like the lion.”

The wound was clean but he would need proper attention. I stanchd the flow of blood with his undershirt and tied cordage around his chest to hold the makeshift bandage in place. “It’s my fault, Danny. I didn’t think Hod was anything more than an animal, even when it came to planning a deadfall. I won’t underestimate him again.”

“Stop jawing,” Hod demanded, “and catch up those horses.”

“What do you have in mind?”

He emerged from behind the stumps and brush. His body was thick and hard with short, sturdy legs that hammered the ground when he walked. He was the kind of man who always punched at the world. “I’m riding back to Haxan with you and your friend in tow.”

“Are you simple, Hod? It’s forty miles to Haxan.”

“Then I’ll drag you. Come on, I plan on making Haxan by sundown.” His thick lips skinned back from his teeth. “Then I’ll execute you in the plaza in front of the townsfolk, and that’ll be the end of one more U.S. Marshall.”

\* \* \*

Bull Hod took our boots and threw them away. He bound our hands tight and tied them to lines trailing from the saddle horns of our horses.

By midday Danny was in a very bad way. His head swung

back and forth like a sick cat's and scarlet froth dripped from his mouth as he stumbled to keep up.

"Try to hold on, Danny," I said. I was parched. My lips were cracked and my tongue swollen like a rattler's tail in my mouth.

His breath bubbled in this throat. "I'm hurt for fair, John. Blood... blood in my chest."

"Hod." I yanked on the lead rope to get his attention, causing the horses he was leading to shy. "Hod!"

He twisted in his saddle. "What do you want?"

"This man needs water."

Bull Hod tipped his hat to keep the sun off his face. "We don't stop." He kicked his horse and we started off again.

"Try to hang on, Danny." My feet were cut and bruised. I could feel the skin flay with each step. Only my hate, and my concern for Danny, kept me going. "Keep fighting, Danny. Every time you take a step you show Hod for the coward he is. Listen to my voice. Don't drift away."

His arms and legs moved in a series of ill-timed jerks. "Head's all swimmy, John." He collapsed to his knees and I used all my strength to haul him to his feet before I, too, was pulled down and dragged across the desert floor.

We staggered on, Danny's outstretched arms lapped over mine for support. After another hour the clotted blood around

his mouth was crusted black. “Sun. Sky. Time. No time for us. Once there was, long ago. We hunted together, remember? Now all those memories are breaking like clouds across my eyes. Letting me see farther than ever before.”

“Shut him up.” Hod shook himself like a wet dog that had crawled from a sewer sump. “That spook talk is giving me the crawlies.”

“Hod, we have to stop or he’ll die.”

Hod’s laughter was like the rasp of iron on wood. “Killing don’t mean nothing to me, lawman. Same as you, from what I gather.” His lizard eyes went narrow. “Now, quiet him down or I’ll do it with a bullet.”

“Danny, you have to keep awake.”

“My, she was pretty that morning.” His legs were giving out. I did what I could to support him and urge him on, but my hands were tied too and there wasn’t much I could do. “I’m remembering how I came to be lost. Why I wanted to find you across all these years.”

“Danny, concentrate on my voice.”

“When you reach that far from the past you tend to forget things in the here and now. After she died I was all alone, John. I had to find you again.”

His head leaned heavy against my shoulder. What remained of his mind kept his legs moving, one foot dragging

in front of the other. “You remember that monster we hunted in the cedar woods? I loved her, Gil. But she left and then you were there. You found me, your old partner. After all these years I reached out and Haxan pulled me in. Through the grace of all the gods, we were allowed to hunt together one last time. But I won’t get to help you find what you lost—which is why I came in the first place. I was afraid for you.”

Hod said, “Make him stop that crazy talk.”

“Enkidu! Enkidu!” It was a high-pitched scream that pierced the desert air. The sense of loss it conveyed made me jump.

“Danny, wake up. You have to wake up!”

His head rolled off my shoulder. “I can’t, Gil. Sometimes, the monster has to win.”

He fell. I tried to pull him up but Hod whipped the horses and I was jerked forward. I called for Hod to stop, but he wouldn’t listen. I tried to haul Danny to his feet. I couldn’t revive him. I couldn’t get him up.

After a while, I didn’t have the strength to try.

\* \* \*

Hod rode until sundown. He made it a point to pick the roughest terrain we could cross. He reined in the horses and got down, stretching his thick arms and cracking the heavy

bones in his shoulders. He came toward me and prodded Danny with the toe of his boot.

“Not much left, is there.” It was his way of making small talk.

My head throbbed and my tongue was swollen from thirst. I had to croak each word out separately: “Let me bury him.”

“I’m not about to put a shovel in your hands. You dig where you stand.” He cut the rope loose from the saddle horn but kept my hands lashed.

Exhausted, I sank to my knees and scraped at the sand and loose rock. Hod removed the saddles from the horses and made a fire. I got Danny buried and covered the shallow grave with flat stones and juniper branches.

It was long into night by the time I finished.

I staggered toward the firelight. The sky was deep purple. The late moon, rising in the east, flooded the desert with cold, unforgiving light.

“Give me water,” I told Hod.

“You get nothing from me, lawman.”

“Don’t be stupid, Hod.” My throat felt like fire. “You want to execute me in Haxan, then you’d better give me water.”

He watched me with those polished yellow eyes before tossing a canteen at me.

“Don’t drink too much,” he warned, “or you’ll founder. We barely got water for the horses.” He looked around. “This is bad country we’re in. But men like you and me, it’s the kind of land that makes us feel most alive.”

I spun the cap on the canteen and tossed it back. “I’m not like you, Hod.”

“That ain’t the way I hear things.” He made a motion. “Have a seat. Gonna be a long night.”

“I’m going to kill you, Hod, but I’m not like you.” I collapsed on the opposite side of the fire with less grace than I wanted.

“Sure.” He watched the fire, occasionally breaking off a piece of pemmican with his strong teeth and chewing thoughtfully. “You hungry?”

I hung my head and shook it back and forth. I was too weary to eat.

The firelight highlighted Hod’s wild eyebrows and the round, grizzled curves of his face. “Inky-doo. What’s that mean?”

“From a long time ago. You wouldn’t understand.”

I’m not sure I did. Even I couldn’t remember everything from my past. It was like trying to make out shapes dancing behind heavy muslin. But after Haxan had pulled him in Danny

had gleaned a truth from both our pasts that only he understood.

Maybe I did, too, after a fashion.

“Sounded important to him.”

“It was a secret word. It means friend.”

Maybe that’s why he was able to reach through all these years and find me. Some words have that much power.

Hod leaned on one elbow and crossed his legs. I could see the crucifixes carved in his boot heels. “Never can tell how a man will face death.” He tore another piece of pemmican and chewed. “I once gunned down a station master in Hays City while he was having his morning shave. He dropped to his knees and started laughing. Man with a bullet in his brain, and he dies laughing. Explain that.”

“I’m going to kill you, Hod.”

He hunched forward, his heavy body highlighted by the firelight. “Get this straight, Marshall. I don’t hide behind a tin badge pretending to be something I’m not.”

Yes, maybe I was remembering more than ever before. Maybe that’s why Danny came to be lost in my world. But it was he who had found me, and not the other way around.

Friends do that. Call one another through the mist. Reach past the muslin curtain. Teach.

“I’m not hiding anything, Hod. I’m going to show you who and what I am before the sun rises.”

“You talk like we’ve met before.” The big man shrugged. He swallowed the wad of dried meat and sipped water from the canteen.

The smoke from the fire curled like an Arabian ladder into the night sky. When he spoke again his words were slow and measured, as if they, and in some sense he, were waking from a coiled, wintry sleep.

Like me.

“People wouldn’t say killing was evil if they believed heaven was better. I know you want to revenge your friend, Marshall. I don’t blame you.” He kicked a stone into the fire. “To fear death you first have to be afraid of life. I think that’s why the station master laughed after I shot him. He didn’t care about dying any more than he cared about living. He was my brother in a way.” Hod lifted his yellow eyes. “Same as you.”

A knot in one of the piñon logs popped. Yellow sparks whirled skyward. The scarred face of the moon covered the entire night sky, crowding out the stars.

“I’m not like you Hod, and I’ll never end up like you. I’ve killed men, yes. And I will again. But I’m nothing like you.”

I now understood Danny’s unease over my killing that lioness. But it had taken his death to make me look deep

enough to see it.

With a price that steep I had to face the truth about what I never wanted to become. But knowing the line was there meant it was now my choice when to cross it.

Hod rubbed his hands on his jeans. “Well, I guess there’s no talking to you. Let’s just call it time. Ain’t no way you’re going to make it to Haxan and I can’t watch you all night long.”

When he stood fine dust sifted from his clothes. He was a tall, primeval figure with the light of the moon whorling around him like cold flame.

He stepped around the campfire and cut my hands free with a skinning knife. He sheathed the knife and tossed a gun in my lap. It was my Colt Dragoon, loaded.

“I guess in a way we are brothers,” he explained. “I don’t remember my real kin. If I had any, you’d be it. Seems fitting, anyway.”

He backed off, standing on the far side of the fire. I struggled to my feet. My hands were numb and my legs barely supported me. I couldn’t feel the gun butt and trigger guard.

“I’d much rather kill my own than a stranger. It’s your play, Marshall.”

“I thought we were going to Haxan.” I was trying to buy time as the blood rushed into my hands with the stabbing agony of hatpins.

“We only go as far as we need in this life.” His face closed down. “And you’ve come a far piece already.”

One of the logs in the fire spat pine resin with a hiss.

Hod went for his gun. I kicked a flaming brand from the fire with my bare foot. As he twisted to avoid getting burned I fired twice. The second shot hit him in the breastbone and he went down.

I walked up on him, breathing hard.

He clutched his gun over his hot wound. His blood pumped black in the firelight.

“I’m hit bad,” he gasped, “but it’s not a killing wound.”

“I know.” I took a deep breath and raised my gun.

His amber eyes reflected the ashen light of the high moon.

“Tell me true, lawman. What kind of man are you?”

“I’m not.”

He grinned through his agony. “Then you *are* like me. My brother.”

“Not even close, Hod.”

I shot him in the mouth.

\* \* \*

I rode back to Haxan the following day. Piebald was sitting under the shade, whittling a chunk of cedar. “Hello, Marshall. Get that gunman you were after?”

“This time.”

Piebald cocked his head to one side and continued to whittle. “Killed him, I reckon.”

“I didn’t have any choice.”

“You sound sorry. Where’s Mr. Moth?”

“He went home.”

“You’ve got his horse.”

“He took a different path.”

“Too bad.” Piebald flung the wood shavings down and lurched to his feet. “I liked him. He bought me a piece of licorice the day he rode into town.”

“How’s that?”

“Said he was looking for an old friend. The two of them got separated long ago and he wasn’t sure his friend would remember.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Slipped my mind, somehow.”

Piebald took the reins and started to lead the horses into the stable. He stopped and turned around. A wan smile played across his freckled face.

“Marshall, you reckon that nice Mr. Moth found what he was after?”

*Enkidu.* And shapes behind muslin. And maybe, just maybe, a bit of humanity—and the past—I had always considered lost.

“Piebald, I think we both did.”

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## MY SISTER'S SOUL

by Erin A. Tidwell

I picked the lock on my sister's soulbox with the end of the finest-gauge henna-painting stick I owned. The stick itself was nearly as thin as a needle, perfect for the most intricate of designs—or for picking a lock.

The first time, I'd lifted the lid with shaking hands, my eyes jumping around the empty kitchen to ensure yet again that I was alone. I'd peeped into the box and gauged the exact color of my sister's soul before slamming the lid shut and hurriedly placing the box behind the fake brick in the family hearth.

This time my unease fell away beneath the eager ache that ran through me at the thought of seeing Khatereh's soul again. I had dreamed of the soul night and day since I'd first opened the soulbox two weeks ago, 'til I could hardly put it out of my mind. It wasn't right to obsess about it like this, but I could not stop myself.

The lock opened with a snick and I withdrew the henna stick.

The soulbox, made of hand-hewn stone—inlaid on the top of the lid and along the sides with intricate patterns of metals and gemstones in blues and greens with saffron accents—

looked like a holy relic box, the kind most families used to store their lineage documents. But my family had another box for its holy relics.

I opened the lid. My sister Khatereh's soul rested in thick folds of pure white velvet. Ornate patterns embroidered in gold thread looped and twisted together along the edge of the velvet. Beautiful to the eye, the case and its lining faded to obscurity next to the soul. I caught my breath.

I picked the soul up carefully between my thumb and forefinger. It was warm as human flesh and smoother than glass, and it resembled nothing more than a strikingly beautiful azure marble. It was like holding Khatereh in miniature. The demons she hunted might kill her mortal body, but they could not steal her eternal soul because it was not encompassed in her body but in this thumb-sized marble.

I brought it into the circle of light cast by the nearest lamp, where I'd laid a pile of azure blue linen, and held it near. The fabric, beautifully and richly dyed, paled in comparison to the soul. I could not slay demons, like my sister, but I had always possessed an extraordinary eye for choosing the perfect color for any person as soon as I met them. With Khatereh, I had seen her soul with my own eyes and knew a true match was impossible, but the swatch I held was the best I could find.

I let the soul drop into the palm of my hand and curled my fingers around it. It was so pleasant to hold that the thought of putting it down again was almost physically painful. I wrapped the swatch of fabric around my closed hand. Warmth seemed to radiate from the soul into my palm.

I stood for a long time, feeling at peace, before I finally shook myself out of my daydreams. It was not safe to stand, alone, holding a soul—what if some unharnessed demon could smell it on me? Of course demons couldn't smell, Khaterah had told me so; and the soulbox wasn't Watched. Khaterah kept it carefully cleansed of any magic lest the out-of-place bit of magic draw the attention of a passing demon.

Still, it was hard to put it down again. I had to look away as I placed it back and closed the lid. The lock clicked shut and I slipped the box back into its hiding place.

I picked up the pile of fabric and turned back to the door just as footsteps thudded down the hallway and my young brother Mohsen burst up from the stairwell.

“Aliyeh! She's here!” He made a flying leap over the bench by the table and skidded to a stop at the window that faced the street. “Look! The Red Carriage!”

I set the fabric carefully aside. I joined Mohsen, peering through the lattice at the flame-red carriage that was blocking most of the street. I'd ridden in one of the flame-red carriages

once, the first midsummer after Khat became a full-fledged magus.

Two men in the red-and-white livery of the magi guild sat on the driver's bench. She had no guards; who would attack a magi's carriage?

Mohsen and I were home alone; our father, the only other resident of the townhouse, was out. I hurried to wrap the piled fabric in a length of plain muslin and hide it in a cabinet. "To the door, quickly now," I told Mohsen, dragging him away from the window and out of the kitchen.

One of the men in livery drew the carriage's gauze curtains aside as I opened the house door. A slim figure in a red hooded cloak stepped out. I saw a flash of pale hand and stringy arm from beneath it. I saw a flash of pale hand and stringy arm from beneath it. For a moment, my eyes caught on her arm. Concern ran through me and questions flew to my tongue, but I held them back. I couldn't greet my sister by telling her how sickly she looked.

Then she ascended the five steps to the door. Beneath the cloak she was clothed in black and gray: a black overdress, a gray scarf over her head. She pushed the hood back. Her face was thin, with deep sunken eyes above hollowed cheeks. Her once-black hair was laced with white, a big shock of it on one side and individual hairs shot through the rest. Her neck, like

her hands, was too stringy, the muscles too apparent under paper-thin flesh.

She looked dead, as well she would be if she were anything else. Only a powerful magus could live without a soul. But even Khatereh needed the touch of her soul once in awhile; on midsummer day, as was her personal tradition, she would let it rest within her and be renewed. With her soul inside her body, she would be as vibrant and beautiful as a twenty-two year-old sister ought to be, and when it was removed she would look healthy again, for a while.

My tongue caught in my mouth and a long, awkward moment passed before I stammered the traditional greeting. “Welcome to our father’s house, eldest sister.” Beside me, Mohsen repeated my words.

Khatereh’s lips moved in a twitch that might’ve been a smile, or a frown, or perhaps just a tic. “It’s been a long journey,” she said. She stepped in, past me and Mohsen, and began to unwind her scarf.

I caught a whiff of lavender-scent, masking a hint of something else—a not-healthy smell that made me want to make a face. I turned away quickly to hang the cloak on the pegs in the hallway.

Turning back, I gestured to the thick cushions in the room beyond the hall. “Sit and rest, Khat. Let me get you something

to refresh yourself.”

I hurried out before she could answer. In the kitchen’s chill box lay a tray of chunked fruit that I’d prepared early in the morning, a bowl of yogurt, chilled juice, and flatbread. Last I brought out a dish of hummus, our own family’s traditional recipe. I put the dishes on a tray and took it back.

Khat had seated herself and was lounging on the cushions. She was examining her hands and I had a few seconds to look at her. Every year Khat returned home looking sickly, but never had she looked so aged. Her features were alike to my own, if perhaps I had already lived ninety bitter years rather than fifteen easy ones. Her fine black silk dress hung on her as if it had been tailored for someone larger.

Mohsen sat nearby. This year he was old enough not to clamber on her into her lap, but his attention was fixed on Khatereh. “But Eldest Sister, won’t you tell me how many demons you defeated this year?”

Her face stormy, Khatereh shook her head once, sharply. “Magery and demons—I don’t want to talk about that now.”

“But Eldest Sister—” Used to having his way, Mohsen pouted.

“Mohsen! Don’t badger her,” I said.

I put the tray on a low table near the cushions Khat had selected and seated myself to the side. Khat ate a few pieces of

fruit and sipped the juice. Mohsen waited just until her fingers retreated to grab food for himself.

“How was your journey?” I asked. I tore a bit of flatbread and dipped it in the hummus.

“Too long, too dusty,” Khat said.

“Well, you’ll have a few days’ rest before you have to go back. Still six days until midsummer.”

She tore off a piece of flatbread on her own and dipped it in the hummus, but when she put it in her mouth, she made a face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Not enough chili powder,” she said after a minute.

I took another bit of flatbread and dipped it in again, but the hummus tasted just like normal. Some families had spicy hummus, some used lots of lemon, some lots of garlic; our family recipe makes it salty.

Khat set her food down abruptly and rose from the cushions. “I want my soul.”

“But Khat—I thought you couldn’t have a soul but at midsummer.”

“I oughtn’t,” she said, her eyes focusing on nothing. “Midsummer is a powerful time, though not all magi choose it.” She looked straight at me, but her tone wasn’t accusatory, just intent. “I just want to check on it.”

I stuffed a last bite of bread into my mouth and stood. “Mohsen, go on back to your studies,” I said. He started to pout but then looked from me to Khatereh and gave up. I led Khat to the kitchen.

Khat was apprenticed as a magus when she was thirteen years old, but she hadn't lost her soul right away. She'd been comfortable and healthy through her apprenticeship and first years as a working magus. Once, she'd confided in me that her talents were such that her master had started to train her to deal with demons. Dangerous business, she'd said. But so important, because the skills were rare and hard to master, and the demons very clever. But I wasn't to worry about her, she told me, because she had learned to store her soul outside her body, and that way the demons couldn't get at it.

Other magi stored their souls in other places, and visited them at other times. Khat had said she felt safer with hers at home, so it had been placed in the soulbox and stored in our hearth

As I entered the kitchen with Khat at my side, I glanced at her face in profile. Her skin was so thin it was nearly translucent. Her cheekbones, forehead, and chin were too prominent.

I stopped by the table and turned to face her. “Khat, what happened?”

“What?” Surprise flickered across her face before her brows drew together. “What do you mean? Nothing happened. I came home because it’s midsummer.”

Her words made my heart sink, and more—I was afraid. What could be so bad she would no longer confide in me? “You — you don’t look like you anymore, Khat. You look sick.”

She waved her hand dismissively, a very un-Khat-like gesture. “Of course I’m sick. I have no soul. Something you wouldn’t know about, would you?” She said the last so angrily she was almost spitting. She spun on her heel and left the kitchen, her back stiff and steps heavy, leaving me standing at the table, staring after her.

\* \* \*

The glass jar of beads atop the pile of fabric tinkled cheerily as I descended the steps from the upper story. I’d finished sewing the pieces of Khat’s dress into a whole garment and started the beading along the neck and cuffs under the light of the midmorning sun. The swirling whorls I’d designed were simple, yet graceful enough for a woman of Khat’s social standing. I envisioned her wearing it on midsummer night, when she, as fitted her position, would be the first woman in the city to dance when the moon came up. Everyone would envy her beauty.

The bright sun helped me see my work, but the weather had turned chancy, black clouds layering the horizon in a manner that preceded dry summer thunderstorms, necessitating a move indoors.

Aside from a brief visit to the rooftop to take in some of the milder morning sun, which Khat had acquiesced to reluctantly, she had been abed all day.

I entered the kitchen deep in thought, only noticing Mohsen bending over a small case because he slammed it shut when he caught sight of me. I stopped to double-check what I'd seen. Yes, the wicker object at his feet was indeed Khat's trunk. "What are you doing?"

He hesitated, his dark eyes circling me as if seeking inspiration. Finally he drew himself up, his spine straight, shoulders stiff. "Sisters shouldn't question the work of their brothers," he said, the sort of line a man would use against a querulous female relative.

I remembered the evasive answer he'd given for disappearing from the roof when Khat appeared, and frowned. "Mohsen, what mischief are you up to, hiding in here with Khat's things? You take that and put it back where you got it. Male or no, father won't condone you stealing from Khatereh."

Mohsen's adult façade crumbled a bit. "But Aliyeh, I just wanted to help."

“By sneaking through Khat’s personal things?” I laid the pile of fabric and jar of beads carefully on the table and reached for the wicker case. Mohsen’s features tightened, but he said nothing and left quickly.

I held the box against me. Alone, I felt the temptation to put it back down and open it up. Khat was—unwell. And aside from spending most of the hours since her arrival abed, she hadn’t acknowledged her unwellness. She’d turned aside even Father’s questions with disapproval and a cold gaze.

I ran my fingers over the case, feeling the weave of the rounded, glazed wicker. Perhaps Khat was at the low point of a perfectly regular stomach ailment, something picked up along her journey home. Perhaps she felt too miserable to go out, and too embarrassed to be seen so weak and unhealthy. There were few women who held the public respect of the traditional-minded town elders like Khat did. But why wouldn’t she tell me what ailed her so I could help?

I doubted the answer was to be found in her personal luggage. Only Khat knew, and for whatever reason she no longer shared her secrets with me.

I bit back a surge of bitterness. How had I lost the trust of my sister? Our once-weekly letters had dwindled when she graduated her apprenticeship, but hadn’t her warmth remained? Except that lately her letters were short and curt,

but I'd assumed she was just busy. I could not think of anything I'd done to offend her.

Taking the chest, I left the kitchen again and went up the stairs. The rooms in the south half of the house were all women's rooms. Khat's was second in the hall, a place of honor usually reserved for ranking wives, if a man had them. Khat had been given the room when our mother died. I stood for a minute, the carpet of the runner rug cushioning my toes through the soft house-shoes as I composed myself.

I knocked gently and heard Khat call out for me to enter. She was pushing herself up to sitting in the bed when I opened the door. Her eyes widened and then narrowed again when she saw the chest.

"Mohsen was concerned about you," I said, my voice firm and level. "He thought it was his brotherly duty to help, so he took your chest."

"He stole that from me to help?" Khat's expression was simultaneously cross and amused. "Give it here."

I stepped forward and passed the chest into her outstretched hands. The sickly smell I'd noticed around her clung to the air by the bed. I coughed and stepped back again. Khat didn't notice.

"I don't know what he was thinking," I told her as she sorted through the contents in a perfunctory manner. I glanced

at the window; a breeze would freshen the room, but Khat had the shutters closed and bolted. I looked back as she snapped the chest's lid shut and set it aside. "Khat, we're all concerned about you. I know you're sick but you won't tell father what ails you. Is it a womanly ailment?" I wondered, for the briefest second, if Khat could possibly be pregnant.

"No, of course not," Khat said. Her tone made it clear that the idea was laughable, but that she wasn't amused. "This soulless body doesn't have issues of that sort."

I bit my lip, feeling tears surface at the harshness in her voice. "Well, what's wrong with you, then? Khat, why won't you tell me? You used to share all your secrets with me, and I've always kept them for you."

"It's not your business!" Khat's brows drew together, angry. "Just leave me be! You're being shrill, Aliyeh, and you've no place questioning me."

"That's not fair. Who else cares for you as much as your family? As much as your sister?"

"My family doesn't understand a thing about magic," Khat said coolly. "Now go away, dear sister-child, and stop bothering me."

Eyes burning, I turned to go. In the doorway, I turned back. "Did something happen to you while you were slaying a demon?"

Khat's harsh voice was as cold and clear and sharp as frozen crystal. "Do not speak to me of demon slaying. And *leave this room.*"

The next moment I found myself at the foot of the stair, shivering in the heat of the day. The tips of my fingers and toes tingled with the aftereffects of magic. Try as I might, I could not remember if I'd closed Khat's door, or even how I'd taken the stairs.

\* \* \*

The skeleton of Khatereh's midsummer dress covered the table in the kitchen, the hem draping along the long side. Seated on a chair next to it, I drew my threaded needle in and out, in and out, sewing up the hem with swift, tight stitches. It was a simple dress, short-sleeved, box-necked, lightly shaped at the bodice, and loose but not voluminous at the skirt. With the deep hue and sprinkling of beads whorling along the hem and neckline, it didn't need any fancy cutting.

As I worked I worried about Khatereh. Three days past her arrival, her face seemed thinner and more pale, her body skinnier, her hair drier. Only her eyes burned brighter.

I didn't understand our argument or how it had ended. I'd never seen Khat use magic willfully like she had used it on me.

With every stitch I longed for her to recover her health and safety. I prayed for her soul, but also for her mind and her

body, and most of all, for the strain between us to disappear. Perhaps her soul would fix it, come mid-summer. Except that I felt certain it would not.

I paused to straighten my cramped fingers. Khat had gotten worse, but at the same time, the dress appeared more luminous every time I picked it up. I would have to take it in once Khat tried it on, but it would fit. I was anxious to finish and present it to Khat, hoping it would ease the tensions that had mounted in the last three days.

Somewhere beyond the kitchen, I heard voices raised in strife. Khatereh, her tone swift and sharp; our father, his voice steady but questioning. The argument continued in fits and starts for several minutes, until at least I heard the door open and close as father left the house. Khat appeared in the kitchen door.

“Well,” she said, looking surprised to see me. “What are you doing in here? Sewing?”

I nodded, the needle still poised in my hand. “Do you like the color?”

She glanced at it sidelong, her mind obviously on something else. “It’s very blue.”

I swallowed a lump of disappointment as she walked past the table and knelt by the hearth. Her back blocked my view. As I looked away, tears in my eyes and hurt in my heart, a thought

surfaced: Khat didn't act like—well, like Khat. My Khat had never been so short-tempered or sharp-tongued, and she'd always shared her life with me. This was not my Khat, not the elder sister I loved and respected.

I looked up when I heard the dull scraping sound of brick moving against brick. Slowly, I untucked my legs from beneath the bench and slipped my feet into my house-shoes.

Before I could move, Khatereh rose from her knees with the soulbox in her hands. Her face showed joy, and she was talking under her breath as she set the box on an empty square of table. She seemed to have forgotten I was in the kitchen with her.

She opened the box and pulled open the white velvet with eager hands, then paused. Her fierce delight became puzzlement as she reached inside. I heard the thump of the soul hitting the velvet-covered wooden base. She fished around inside the box, caught it in a cupped palm, and lifted it up.

"This is not my soul," Khatereh said, her voice rising in outrage. "*Where is my soul?*"

Stark shock melded swiftly into anger, her brows drawing together and her hallow face twisting. She let out a wordless cry and swept the box from the table. It smacked into the brick hearth and fell to the ground. She held the soul up again, then threw it to the floor with a harsh grunt of fury. It bounced once

on the cobbled floor and rolled, and I could see that it was no longer filled with the bright azure blue of Khatereh's soul but appeared to be a cloudy gray marble.

I grew cold as horror spread through me. Had I damaged the soul by taking it from the box? Had I caused Khat to become this *thing* that wasn't my Khat?

The marble bounced against a particularly uneven floor tile and diverted from its path, rolling toward me. If Khatereh was sick, and she was, her soul itself looked dead.

"Khat—"

Her attention focused on me like an eagle on a mouse, but more: her eyes almost burned with her interest. "Do you know where it is?"

"No," I whispered. "I—"

"Then don't speak," she snapped. She knelt back down to the hearth, running her fingers over the bricks and muttering. "Could it be in another box? The first, a decoy?" Her words grew less distinct as she leaned down even more, twisting her head as if to peer under the shallow shelf.

"But Khatereh—"

Her attention returned so quickly I jumped. The needle poised over my cloth jerked and jammed into my finger. I squawked, looking down to see a drop of bright blood swelling on my fingertip.

“Did you nick yourself?” Khatereh asked, her voice at my ear. I hadn’t noticed her move, but now she stood a mere half-step beside me, the soulbox apparently forgotten as she looked at the blood.

“Just a little prick.”

“But it’s bleeding,” Khatereh said.

I looked up at her, frowning. The angry lines on her face had smoothed. She reached for my hand with knobby fingers, but I flinched away from her touch.

“Let your elder sister help you,” she said, her voice smooth and soothing as velvet. I felt my muscles relax, the tension between us disappear. I let me head dip sideways, and in doing so, my eyes caught hers, and the lull of the moment was broken by what I saw.

In three whole days she hadn’t once met my eyes straight on.

Khatereh’s eyes smoldered. They weren’t empty in the way her eyes usually were without her soul. They were—different. Full of dark. Too interested, suddenly, in me. Eyes that would swallow me, if I looked into them too long.

“It’s just a prick,” I said again, stammering. My skin felt hot and clammy, like a fever. “I can take care of it.”

“No, I insist,” Khatereh said, and her hands fastened on my arm.

Her stringy-looking hands were as strong as iron claws. She met my eyes again, full-on, nothing hidden, and I knew, abruptly and with utter certainty, that the thing before me wasn't my sister. It was a demon in my sister's body. It had come to take Khatereh's soul, but with the soul missing and my blood as a lure, it would settle for mine.

"Khat," I said. My voice shook. Was she my sister at all, or entirely demon? I didn't know what to say to drive her away, but I didn't want her—it—touching me. "Khat."

"What?"

I jerked my arm away from her and slid sideways just out of her reach. I opened my mouth to scream, but closed it again. What could anyone do against a demon? If the fight brought Mohsen the demon might devour us both. "Khat, don't," I pleaded.

Her lips curved upward, a smirking smile that didn't reach her soul-eating eyes. She came toward me again, and her voice echoed in the dull room as she spoke. "Don't struggle so, little sister. Relax." Her tone was smooth as silk. It flowed over me again like an invisible snare. She grabbed my arm, nails digging in so hard they broke the skin. Blood welled and I shuddered, though my fear was a distant, detached shadow, held back by the lulling power of her voice.

The Khatereh-demon leaned over. A swatch of the skirt I'd been hemming pressed between us, useless as a shield. I smelled Khat's usual lavender scent and an undertone of sickness, like something going rotten. Her tongue slid up my arm and lapped at the blood. She made a noise of delight then jerked back and looked at me. A droplet of my own blood hung precariously from her lower lip. "You have her soul. I can feel it here, with you." The Khatereh-demon laughed. "How sneaky. But now I'll have the souls of two magi."

I had her soul? Khatereh's "I don't understand."

Instead of answering, the Khatereh-demon sliced her nails across my arm, raking open a deep cut that bled immediately, then leaned down again to lick up the fresh blood. She paused at the deepest part of the slice and sucked lightly. I whimpered.

I remembered asking Khat, in her second or third year of training, about repelling demons. I had expected tales of flashing magic and invisible chains. She'd laughed uncomfortably and then told me, in gory detail, about learning to make charms from the skin and hair and even the dried blood of the dead. Demons, she'd said, feared and abhorred the permanence and finality of death as much as they desired the taste of life gained from devouring souls of their human victims.

Khatereh's body, soulless, was nearly a dead thing itself.

I still held the needle in my right hand. The Khatereh-demon held my left arm. But could I move?

I had only a few seconds to act, and willpower would have to be enough. I tightened my grip on the needle, drew back, and slammed it into the Khatereh-demon's bare upper arm. She jerked, releasing my left arm and twisting, reaching for the wound. I dragged the needle down, making a short but deep gash.

For one long moment, the gash remained dry.

The Khatereh-demon ground her teeth. Too fast to follow, she grabbed my hand and wrenched it away. I heard as much as felt a crack. My arm hung at the wrong angle. The pain hit me all at once and my knees almost dropped from under me.

And then the Khatereh-demon howled. Blood, thick dark-red blood—Khatereh's own dead blood—oozed from the slice. The Khatereh-demon stepped back, away from me, ramming one hip into the table as she stumbled.

Wind whirled, impossible in the enclosed kitchen—more impossible in that it battered the center of the big room but didn't extend to the walls or shelving. I clutched the azure dress to me as the fabric flapped up, swept off the table. A foul smell of rotten meat flooded the air. I gagged and swallowed back bile. I closed my eyes against the bite of the wind and pressed

the dress to my face to block out the wind as I dropped to the floor.

My breath came in gasps, loud in a sudden silence. I crouched on the floor, supported by my uninjured arm, and raised my head slowly. The air was still and Khatereh sat a few feet away, against the kitchen wall, blinking.

I straightened slowly, still on my knees. “Khat?”

She focused on me with tired but otherwise normal eyes. “It’s me, Ali.”

I nodded, sensing in her a subtle change, the disappearance of the aura of basic unwellness that had clung to her for three long days. “It was a demon, wasn’t it, Khat?” I could still feel the slick sweat of pure terror on my skin, refreshed by fading adrenaline.

“Yes.” She leaned back supported by the wall. “You did well, Ali. Hand me the dress?”

I pulled the heap of fabric around me and scooted awkwardly along the floor until I could give it to Khat. I leaned against the wall beside her.

Khatereh took the brilliant blue fabric and cradled it in her arms. “Such a pretty color. You kept it safe, you know. My soul, safe in the stitches of this dress.” She let out a small sigh, and then laughed, shortly. “I should have guessed. You’re a Soul Stealer.”

“What?” I flinched away as if struck. “I didn’t mean to steal it, Khaterah.”

“No, no, of course you didn’t,” she said. “You could not know what you were doing. And it’s a very rare talent. You’ve probably always seen something of people’s true natures and just didn’t know what to do with your gift.” A moment later her nose wrinkled, and her eyes narrowed as she scanned the room. “Help me up, Aliyeh.”

I crouched and supported her under one arm. She grabbed my elbow with one hand and clutched the dress to her with the other and she struggled to her feet. I could feel her shudder with the effort. “It’s not gone,” she said.

I followed her gaze. At first I saw nothing, but as I stared I saw a shadow under the table ripple, oozing toward us.

Khat swayed against me. I glanced back at her, feeling terror rise anew as I took in her pale face. “Ali. Get my soul back. I’m too weak to keep the demon from stealing it out of my hands, and I don’t have the strength to fight. This body has lost its resiliency just keeping itself alive this long.”

Fear bit into me. “I don’t know how.”

“Of course you do. You just never thought of doing it before. Close you eyes and think of how it happened in the first place.”

She thrust the dress at me, and I took it. I closed my eyes and tried to remember. The soul was blue when I had removed it from the box the second time, but I could not remember what it looked like when I put it back. I recalled standing in the lamplight with the soul clasped in my hands, feeling warmth. I realized the dress felt warm, too, where I had it clutched against my side.

“Ah,” murmured Khat.

My eyes flew open just in time to see her throw a ball of fire. It struck the inky shadow where it lay halfway exposed between the table and the wall. The fire disappeared into the blackness for a moment, then the whole shadow burst into bright blue and green flames. I pressed the soul-less linen over my mouth and nose swallowed hard against the smell of rot and ash.

Khat swayed a bit and caught herself against the wall. “I don’t know what’s going to be harder: explaining the smell to father, or telling him you’ll have to go with me after midsummer.”

I shuddered, remembering Khat as she’d been without her soul. “Better than having him eaten by a demon.”

Khatereh’s face blossomed into a warm smile. She put one thin, stringy arm around my shoulders and squeezed me

gently. “Don’t worry. They’ll have a much better use for a girl who can manipulate souls than chasing demons.”

I leaned against her, just like I’d done as a child. Her hair smelled of lavender, simple and clean. I smiled and hugged her back.

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## COVER ART

“Sabicu,” by Myke Amend



Myke Amend likes to mix the dark with the lighthearted, the serene with the chaotic, making pieces that can invoke different and opposing thoughts and feelings. He has been featured and/or interviewed in *Kilter Magazine*, *Dark Roasted Blend*, *IO9*, *Fantasy Art*, *Brass Goggles*, *Elfwood*, *Superpunch*, and many other web magazines and blogs. More of his work can be seen at <http://www.mykeamend.com/>.



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