



Issue #142 • Mar. 6, 2014

Special Issue for *BCS* Science-Fantasy Month 2

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THE BREATH OF WAR

by Alette de Bodard

Going into the mountains had never been easy. Even in Rechan's first adult years, when the war was slowly burning itself to smoldering embers, every Spring Festival had been a slow migration in armed vehicles, her aunts and uncles frequently stopping in every roadside shop, taking stock of what ambushes or roadblocks might lie ahead.

The war might be over—or almost so, the planet largely at peace, the spaceports disgorging a steady stream of Galactic and Rong visitors onto Voc—but the pace was just as frustratingly slow.

They'd made good time at first: coming out of the city early in the morning and becoming airborne at the first of the authorized takeoff points, the steady stream of soldiers repatriated from the front becoming smaller and smaller as they flew higher, like insects on the intense brown of the road; zigzagging on the trails, laughing with relief as they unpacked the fried dough Rechan had baked for lunch, almost forgetting that they weren't setting out on an adventure but on something with far longer-reaching consequences.

And then the flyer's motor made a funny sound, and the entire vehicle lurched downwards with a sickening crunch that jolted Rechan against the wall. And before they knew it, they were stranded on a dusty little road halfway up the mountains, leaving Rechan's niece Akanlam bartering with a local herder for a repair point.

By the sounds of it, the bartering was not going well.

Rechan sat against a large rock outcropping, rubbing the curve of her belly for comfort; feeling the familiar heaviness, the weight of the baby's body in her womb like a promise. *You'll be fine*, she thought, over and over, a saying that had become her lifeline, no matter how much of a lie it might be. *You'll be fine*.

"We should be able to solve this," Mau said. The stonewoman's face was as impassive as ever. Her eyes didn't crinkle as she spoke, her mouth didn't quirk; there was only the slow, quiet sound of her breath.

"You think so?" Rechan shook her head, trying not to think of her dreams. It was so many years since she'd carved Sang—so many years since she'd gone into the mountains with little more than rations and carving tools—but, with the particular link that bound a woman to her breath-sibling, she could feel him every night: blurred images of him hovering over the plat-

eaux, never venturing far from the place of his birth. A relief, because he was her only hope.

On Voc, it took a stoneman's breath to quicken a baby at birth—and not any stoneman's, but the mother's breath-sibling, the one she had carved on accession to adulthood and entrusted with her breath. Without Sang, her baby would be still-born.

“We'll find a vehicle,” Mau said.

Rechan watched her niece from a distance. The discussion was getting animated and Akanlam's hand gestures more and more frantic. “Help me up,” she said to Mau.

The stonewoman winced. “You shouldn't—”

“I've spent a lifetime doing what I shouldn't,” Rechan said; and after a while Mau held out a hand, which she used to haul herself up. The stonewoman's skin was *lamsinh*—the same almost otherworldly translucency, the same coolness as the stone; the fingers painstakingly carved with an amount of detail that hadn't been accessible to Rechan's generation. Mau was Akanlam's breath-sibling; and Akanlam had put into her carving the same intensity she always put in her art. Unlike most stonemen, nothing in her looked quite human, but there was a power and a flow in the least of Mau's features that made her seem to radiate energy, even when sitting still.

“What is going on here?” Rechan asked, as she got closer.

Akanlam looked up, her face red. “He says the nearest repair point is two days down.”

Rechan took in the herder: craggy face, a reflection of the worn rocks around them; a spring in his step that told her he wasn’t as old as he looked. “Good day, younger brother,” she said.

“Good day, elder sister.” The herder nodded to her. “I was telling the younger aunt here—you have to go down.”

Rechan shook her head. “Going down isn’t an option. We have to get to the plateaux.”

The herder winced. “It’s been many years since city folks came this way.”

“I know,” Rechan said, and waited for the herder to discourage her. She’d gotten used to that game. But, to her surprise, he didn’t.

“Exhalation?” he asked. “There are simpler ways.”

“I know,” Rechan said. He’d mistaken Mau as her breath-sibling and not Akanlam’s—an easy mistake to make, for in her late stage of pregnancy, having a breath-sibling at hand would be crucial. “But it’s not exhalation. She’s not my breath-sibling; she’s *hers*.”

The herder looked from her to Mau and then back to Akanlam. “How far along are you?” he asked.

Too far along; that was the truth. She'd waited too long, hoping a solution would present itself; that she wouldn't need to go back into the mountains. A mistake; hope had never gotten her anywhere. "Eight months and a half," Rechan said, and heard the herder's sharp intake of breath. "My breath-sibling is in the mountains." Which was... true, in a way.

The herder grimaced again, and looked at the bulge of her belly. "I can radio the nearest village," he said, finally. "They might have an aircar, or something you can borrow, provided you return it."

Rechan nodded, forcing her lips upwards into a smile. "Perfect. Thank you, younger brother."

* * *

The village didn't have an aircar, or a cart, or any contrivance Rechan could have used. They did have mules and goats, but in her advanced state of pregnancy she dared not risk a ride on an animal. So they radioed the next village, which promised to send their only aircar. Rechan thanked them, and hunkered with Akanlam down in the kitchen to help with the communal cooking. There was a wedding feast that night, and the community would need the travelers' hands as much, if not more, than their money.

Mau came by the kitchen later, having spent the afternoon gossiping with the village elders. “They say there’s rebel activity on the plateaux,” she said, handing Rechan a thin cutting knife.

“Hmm.” Rechan took a critical look at the seafood toasts on the table. Half of them looked slightly crooked; hopefully in the dim light the guests wouldn’t mind too much.

“Herders don’t take their beasts into the mountains, and especially not on the *lamsinh* plateaux. They say people go missing there. Crossfire, probably. They say on quiet nights you can hear the sounds of battle.”

Rechan thought of her dreams—of Sang’s savage thoughts, the thrill of the hunt, the release of the kill, permeating everything until she woke up sweating. What kind of being had he become, left to his own devices on the plateaux? “You’re not trying to discourage me, are you?”

Mau shifted positions; the light caught her face, frozen into the serene enigmatic smile that had been Akanlam’s as a child. “Ha. I’ve since long learnt how useless that is. No, I just thought you’d like to know exactly what we’re going into.”

“War,” Akanlam said from her place at the stove, her voice dour. “The last remnants of it, anyway.”

The Galactic delegation had arrived a couple of days earlier, to formalize the peace agreement between the government and the rebels; the spaceports were being renovated, the ter-

minals and pagodas painstakingly rebuilt. “I guess,” Rechan said. “It always comes back to the mountains, doesn’t it?” She shifted positions, feeling the baby move within her, a weight as heavy as stone. “Legend says that’s where we all came from.”

“The prime colony ark?” Akanlam scoffed, chopping vegetables into small pieces. “That was debunked years ago.”

A cheer went up outside. Rechan shifted, to see onto the plaza. A gathering of people in silk clothes, clustered around the lucky trio. She was young, even younger than Akanlam; wearing a red, tight-fitting tunic with golden embroidery, and beaming; and her groom even younger than her, making it hard to believe he had cleared adolescence. The breath-sibling was a distinguished, elderly gentleman in the robes of a scholar, who reminded Rechan of her own grandfather. He was standing next to the bride, smiling as widely as she was. The sunlight seemed to illuminate his translucent body from within: it had been a beautiful block of stone he’d been carved from, a white shade the color of Old Earth porcelain; likely, so close to the plateaux they could pick their blocks themselves, rather than rely on what the traders brought them.

By their side was someone who had to be the bride’s sister, carrying a very young infant in her arms. The baby’s face was turned towards the couple, eyes wide open in an attempt to take everything in; and a little brother in fur clothes was pre-

vented, with difficulty, from running up to the bride. The baby was three months, four months old, perhaps? With the pudgy fingers and the chubby cheeks—her own child would be like that one day, would look at her with the same wide-eyed wonder.

“Life goes on,” Akanlam said, her face softening. “Always.”

“Of course.” That was why Rechan had gotten herself inseminated, against the family’s wishes: she might have been a failure by their standards, thirty years old and unmarried—for who would want to marry someone without a breath-sibling? But, with the war over, it was time to think of the future; and she didn’t want to die childless and alone, without any descendants to worship at her grave. She wanted a family, like the bride; like the bride’s sister: children to hold in her arms, to raise as she had been raised, and a house filled with noise and laughter instead of the silence of the war, when every month had added new holos to the altar of the ancestors.

“I’ll go present our respects,” Akanlam said.

“You never had much taste for cooking,” Mau pointed out, and Akanlam snorted.

“Elder Aunt cooks quite well,” she said with a smile. “Better to leave everyone do what they excel at, no?”

“You impossible child,” Rechan said as she so often did, with a little of her usual amusement. Akanlam was the niece

with the closest quarters to her own; and she and Mau and Rechan often got together for dinners and after-work drinks—though none of them ever let Akanlam cook. As Mau had said: not only did she not have much taste for it, but left without supervision she'd burn a noodle soup to a charred mess before anyone could intervene. She did mix superb fruit chunks, though. "What are you going to do when you get married?"

"You're assuming I want to get married," Akanlam said, without missing a beat. "And even if I did, I'd stay with you. You're going to need help with raising those children of yours. How many did you say you wanted?"

"I'd be lucky to have one," Rechan said, finally. But she'd dreamt of a larger family; of the dozens brothers and sisters and cousins of her youth, before war carved a swathe through them—a horde of giggling children always ready to get into trouble. If she could find her breath-sibling again.... "And I'm old enough to do what I'm doing."

"Oh, I have no doubt. But it's still a job for two people. Or three." Akanlam smiled. "I'll see you outside."

After Akanlam had gone, Mau swung from her wooden stool and came to stand by Rechan. "Let me have a look."

Rechan almost said no, almost asked what the point was. But she knew; too many things could go wrong at this stage. It

wasn't only birth without her stoneman that could kill her baby.

Mau's hands ran over the bulge of her belly, lingered on a point above her hips. "The head is here," she said, massaging it. "He's shifted positions. It's pointing downwards, into your birth canal. It's very large."

"I know," Rechan said. "My doctor said the same after the scan. Said I'd have difficulty with the birth." There were new systems; new scanners brought by the Galactics, to show a profusion of almost obscene details about the baby in her belly, down to every fine hair on its skin. But none of them had the abilities and experience of a stoneman.

"Mmm." Mau ran her hands downwards. "May I?" After a short examination, she looked up, and her face lay in shadow.

"What is it?" Rechan asked. What could she possibly have found?

"You're partly open," Mau said, finally. "You'll have to be careful, Elder Aunt, or you're going to enter labor early."

"I can't—" Rechan started, and then realized how ridiculous it would sound to Mau, who could do little more in the way of medical attention. "I have to get back to the plateaux."

Mau shook her head. "I didn't tell Akanlam—because you know this already—but the path gets impracticable by aircar after a while. You'll have to walk."

As she had, all those years ago. “You’re right,” Rechan said. “I did know.” She braced herself for Mau to castigate her, to tell her she couldn’t possibly think of taking a mountain trail in her state. But the stonewoman’s face was expressionless, her hands quite still on Rechan’s belly.

“You’ll have to be careful,” she repeated at last.

She couldn’t read Mau at all. Perhaps it came from never having lived with a breath-sibling of her own. “You never told me why you came,” Rechan said. “Akanlam—”

“—came because she’s your niece, and because she knew it was important to you.” Mau nodded. Was it Rechan’s imagination, or was the baby stirring at her touch? Mau was Akanlam’s breath-sibling, not hers. She could deliver the baby, but couldn’t give it the breath that would quicken it—yet still, perhaps there was something all stonewomen shared, some vital portion of the planet’s energy, a simmering, life-giving warmth, like that stone she’d touched all those years ago before she started her carving. “I came because I was curious. You’re a legend in the family, you know.”

Rechan snorted. “The one without a breath-sibling? That’s hardly worth much of anything.”

Mau turned, so that the light caught on the stone of her arms, throwing every vein of the rock into sharp relief. “But you do have a breath-sibling, don’t you, Elder Aunt?”

How much did she know, or suspect? Rechan's official story had always been she couldn't remember, and perhaps that had been the truth, once upon a time, but now that they were in the mountains again—now that the sky lay above them like a spread cloth, and the air was sharp with the tang of smoke—memories were flooding back.

"I know the story," Mau said. "They measured you when you came back down, attached electrodes to your chest and listened to the voice of your heart. You had no breath left in you; even if they gave you *lamsinh*, you wouldn't have been able to bring a carving to life. You'd already given your breath to someone. Or something." Her gaze was shrewd.

So that was it, the reason she'd come with them: knowledge. Akanlam was happy with her art gallery and her shows; but of all the curious apathy she could show with life, none of it had gone into her breath-sibling. "You were curious," Rechan said.

Mau smiled, that odd expression that didn't reach her eyes. "You carved something in the mountains—came back covered in stone dust. What was it, Elder Aunt?"

* * *

She remembered her last trip into the mountains as if it was yesterday: going barefoot in the morning, with a curt message left on her parents' comms unit. She'd taken the set of

carving tools that had been given to her on her sixteenth birthday—the straight cutter, the piercer, the driller, and all that would be necessary for her exhalation ceremony. It was a beautiful set, given by Breath-Mother: the finest hardened glass, as translucent as the best *lamsinh* stone, and hardly weighed anything on her back. As she walked away through the sparse scattering of buildings on the edge of the city, she heard, in the distance, the rumble of bombs hitting the Eastern District—the smell of smoke, the distant wail of militia sirens—and turned her head westwards, towards the mountains.

The mountains, of course, weren't better—just further away from any hospital, Flesh-Mother and Father would say with a frown—more isolated, so that if you were captured no one would know where you were for days and days. They'd have a block of *lamsinh* brought to her for the exhalation; everyone did, paying militia and soldiers and the occasional daredevil to cart the life-sized stone into the city. She just had to wait, and she'd be safe.

Rechan could not wait.

She was young, and impatient; and tired of being cooped up for her own safety. She should have been off-planet by now, sent off to Third Aunt for a year's apprenticeship in the shipyards; except that the previous summer all spaceport traffic had been halted when a bomb exploded in the marketplace;

and the apprenticeship went to some other relative who wasn't from Voc, who didn't have to cope with bombs and battles and food shortages. By now—if it hadn't been for those stupid rebels—she could have had her hands in motor oil; could have climbed into pilots' cabins, running her hands on the instruments and imagining what it would be like, hanging suspended in the void of space with only the stars for company.

Life wasn't fair, and she certainly wasn't going to wait any longer to become an adult.

* * *

There probably was a divinity somewhere watching over thoughtless adolescents; for Rechan had made it into the mountains, and to the plateaux, without any major trouble. She hitched a ride on a peddler's cart—so many things that could have gone wrong there, but the peddler was nice and friendly, and glad for the company—and then, when there no longer were villages or people, she walked. From time to time, she'd had to duck when a flyer banked over the path. At this height, it had to be rebels, and they'd kill her if they found her, as they had killed Second Uncle and Seventh Aunt, and Cousin Think and Cousin Anh; all the absences like gaping wounds in the fabric of family life. Demons take the rebels, all of them; how much simpler life would be if none of them were here.

And then she stood on the plateaux—her feet hurting, her bag digging into the small of her back, her breath coming in fiery gasps—and it didn't matter, any of it, because there was the stone.

She'd only seen the blocks the traders brought down. The one for her cousin's exhalation had been roughly the size of a woman; of course, with *lamsinh* at such a dear price, people would buy only what was necessary. But here were no such constraints. The stone towered over her, cliffs as tall as the Temple of Mercy, broken bits and pieces ranging from the size of a skyscraper to the size of her fist; colors that ranged from a green so deep it was almost black, to the translucent shades Flesh-Mother so valued, the same color used for all the family's breath-siblings—all the stone's veins exposed, streaks of lighter and darker nuances that seemed to be throbbing on the same rhythm as her own frantic heartbeat.

She walked among them, letting her hand lightly trail on the smooth surfaces, feeling the lambent heat; the faint trembling of the air where the sun had heated them through, like an echo of her own breath. People had always been vague about exhalation: they'd said you'd know, when you saw your block of stone, what kind of breath-sibling you wanted to carve, what kind of birth master you wanted to give to your children yet to come. But here she didn't just have one block of stone, but

thousands; and she wandered into a labyrinth of toppled structures like the wreck of a city, wondering where she could settle herself, where she could make her first cut into the incandescent mass around her.

And then she rounded the edge of the cliff, and saw it, lying on the ground.

It was huge, easily ten times her size, with streaks the color of algae water, and a thousand small dots, almost as if the stone had been pockmarked; a pattern of wounds that reminded her, for some absurd reason, of a tapestry that had used to hang on Seventh Aunt's wall, before the bomb tore her apart in the marketplace.

In all the stories she'd heard, all the tales about girls running off to have adventures, there was always this moment; this perfect moment when they reached the plateaux, or when someone showed them a block of stone, and they just *knew*, staring at it, what it would look like when whittled down to shape; when they'd freed, measure by agonizing measure, the limbs and head and body of their breath-sibling, the one who would be their constant companion as they traveled over the known planets. In the stories, they didn't carve; they revealed the stone's secret nature, gave it the life it had always longed for.

Rechan had never given that credence. She was the daughter of an engineer, and believed in planning and in forethought; and had brought sketches with her, of how her own stoneman would look, with delicate hands like her mother, and large strong arms that would be able to carry her to hospital if the delivery went badly.

Except that then, she stood in front of the stone, and saw into its heart. And *knew*, with absolute certainty, that it wasn't a stoneman that she needed or wanted to carve.

* * *

Later, much later, when she thought about it all, she wondered how she'd endured it—months up in the plateaux with scant rations, sleeping rough, sheltering under the rock face when the rain came—day after day of rising and going back to her block of stone; carving, little by little, what would become her breath-sibling.

She did the outside first: the sleek, elegant hull, tapering to a point; the shadow of the twin engines at the back, every exhaust port and every weapons slit rendered in painstaking detail. Then she turned inwards, and from the only door into the ship, made corridors inch by agonizing inch, her tools gnawing their way through the rock. All the while, she imagined it hanging in space—fast and deadly, a predator in a sea of stars, one who never had to cower or shelter for fear of bombs or fly-

ers; one who was free to go where she wished, without those pointless restrictions on her life, those over-solicitous parents and breath-mothers who couldn't understand that bombs happened, that all you could do was go out and pray, moment after moment, that they wouldn't fall on you.

It was rough carving. She didn't have the tools that would be available to the generation after hers—not the fineness of Akanlam's carving, who would be able to give Mau fingernails, and a small pendant on her chest, down to the imprint of the chain that held it. She carved as she could—hour after hour, day after day, lifted into a place where time had no meaning, where only the ship existed or mattered; stopping only when the hunger or thirst brought themselves to her attention again, snatching a ration and then returning, hermit-like, to the translucent corridors she was shaping.

Until one day, she stepped back, and couldn't think of anything else to add.

There was probably something meaningful one was supposed to say, at an exhalation's close. She'd read speeches, all nonsense about “your breath to mine” and meters and meters of bad poetry. It didn't seem to matter very much what one said, truth be told.

“Well,” she said to the ship, laying a hand on the hull, “this is it.” Winter had come by then, settling in the mountains, a

vise around her lungs; and her breath hung in ragged gasps above her. “I’m not sure—”

The stone under her hand went deathly cold. What—? She tried to withdraw her hand, but it had become fused to the *lamsinh*; and the veins shifted and moved, as lazily as snakes underwater.

There was a light, coming from the heart of the stone, even as the breath was drained out of her, leaving her struggling to stand upright—a light, and a slow, ponderous beat like a gigantic heart. *Breath-sister*, the stone whispered, and even that boomed, as if she stood in the Temple of Mercy, listening to the gong reminding the faithful to grow in wisdom. *Breath-sister*.

Her hand fell back; and the ship rose, casting its shadow over her.

He was sleek elegant beauty—everything she had dreamt of, everything she had carved, all the release she sought—and he didn’t belong on Voc, anymore than she did.

Come with me, the ship whispered; and she had stood there in the growing cold, trembling, and unable to make any answer.

* * *

“A ship,” Mau said, thoughtfully.

Rechan shivered. It had made sense at the time. “I named him Sang,” she said at last. *Illumination*, in the old language of the settlers—because he had stood over her, framed by light.

“I didn’t even know you could carve ships.”

“Anything living,” Rechan said, through clenched teeth. She was going to feel sick again. Was it the baby, or the memories, or both? “Stonemen are tradition, but we could have carved cats or dogs or other Old Earth animals if we felt like it.”

“Whoever you’d want assisting at the birth of your children,” Mau said with a nod. She smiled, her hand going to the impression of the pendant on her chest. “I suppose I should be grateful Akanlam followed tradition. Being an animal wouldn’t have been very—exciting.”

But you wouldn’t know, Rechan thought, chilled. You’d be quite happy, either way. That’s what you were carved for, to give your breath to Akanlam’s babies, and even if you hadn’t been born knowing it, everyone in our society has been telling you that for as long as you can remember. How much responsibility did they have for their carvings? How much of themselves had they put into them; and how much had they taught them?

And what did Sang owe her, in the end—and what did she owe him?

“Your ship is still up there,” Mau said. Her voice was quiet, but it wasn’t difficult to hear the question in her words.

“Yes,” Rechan said. “The crossfire you heard about, it’s not between the rebels and the government soldiers. It’s Sang mopping rebels up.” It hadn’t been what she’d dreamt of, when she’d carved him; she’d wanted a spaceship, not a butcher of armies. But, consciously or unconsciously, she hadn’t put that into her carving.

“The ship you carved?” Mau lifted an eyebrow.

“I was young once,” Rechan said. “And angry. I don’t think I’d carve the same, if I had to do it again.” Though who could know, really. She’d always wondered what would have happened, if she’d answered the question Sang had asked; if she’d said yes. Would she still be on Voc, still going over the bitter loneliness of her life? Would she be elsewhere on some other planet, having the adventures she’d dreamt of as a teenager? If she could do it again....

“Anyway,” she said, “I don’t have much choice. If we don’t reach the plateaux in time....” She didn’t dare say it, didn’t dare voice the possibility; but she felt as though someone had closed a fist of ice around her heart.

* * *

They were halfway to Indigo Birds Pass, where they would have to abandon the car, when the noise of a motor made everyone sit up.

“That’s not good,” Akanlam said. “We’re sitting targets here.” She didn’t stop the aircar, but accelerated. The noise got closer, all the same: not a flyer but a swarm of drones, dull and tarnished by dust. They banked above the overhang ahead and were gone so quickly it was hard to believe they’d been there at all. Akanlam made a face. “Rebels. Our army has Galactic drones.”

“Let’s go on,” Rechan suggested. They would get to the pass in half a day. Surely that was enough time, before the drones sent their analyses onwards to their masters. Surely....

Not half an hour later, the drones came back, and hung over the aircar for what seemed like an eternity. Rechan found herself clenching Mau’s hand, so hard that the stone hurt her fingers.

When the drones left, Akanlam killed the motor. “That’s it. We have to go on foot. Under the cliffs, where they’ll have trouble sending flyers. Come on.”

Mau shot Rechan a warning glance. Rechan spread her hands, helplessly. Yes, she had to be careful, but what else could she do?

“There’s a path,” Akanlam called from the shelter of the overhang. “A goat trail, probably, but it’ll be sheltered. At least for a while.”

Rechan slid down from the aircar and walked to the overhang. There *was* a path, twisting along the side of the mountain and vanishing between two large stones. It was steep and thin, and one look at it would have made her doctor’s face pale.

But there was no choice. There had never been any choice: everything had been set from the moment she’d walked into the insemination center; or perhaps even earlier, when she’d lain in the silence of her room and known that she couldn’t bear it forever. She laid her hands on her belly, whispered “hang on” to the unborn baby, and set her feet on the path.

She’d forgotten how tiring it had been, ten years earlier. Her breath burnt in her lungs after only four steps, and her legs ached after eight; and then there was only the path ahead of her, her eyes doggedly on every rock and particle of dust, making sure of her step—perpetually off-balance, struggling to keep the curve of her belly from betraying her as rocks detached under her feet—she mustn’t trip, mustn’t fall, mustn’t let go....

After a while, the pain came on. At first, she thought it was just the aches from the unusual exercise, but it didn’t abate, washing over her in a huge, belly-clenching wave, cutting her breath until she had to halt. Touching her belly, she found it

hard, pointed, and the baby a compressed weight under her hands. A contraction. She was entering labor. No, not now—it was too early. She couldn't afford—couldn't lose everything—

“Elder Aunt?” Mau was by her side, suddenly, her hands running over her belly.

“It's starting,” she said.

“Yes.” Mau's voice was grave, expressionless. Rechan didn't want to look at Akanlam, who'd always been bad at disguising her emotions. “It's your first one, Elder Aunt. This can go on for hours. There is still time, but you have to walk.”

“I can't—” she whispered through clenched teeth, bracing herself against the next contraction. “Too—tired—” And they were going to reach that plateau, and she was going to find there was no ship, that her dreams were lies, that it had never been there—how she wanted to be the ship now, hanging under the vastness of the heavens, without heaviness, without pain, without a care in the world....

Mau's hands massaged her, easing the knots of pain in her back. “One an hour at first, Elder Aunt. Or more apart. There is still time. But you have to walk.”

“The drones?” she asked, and it was Akanlam who answered.

“They haven't come back.”

Not yet, she thought, tasting bile and blood on her tongue. She hauled herself as upright as she could, gently removing Mau's hands. "Let's walk," she said, and even those words were pain.

There was a divinity, watching over thoughtless teenagers; there had to be one for thoughtless adults, too; or perhaps it was her ancestors, protecting her from their distant altar—her thoughts wandering as she walked, step after step on the path, not knowing how far the ending lay, not caring anymore—step after step, with the occasional pause to bend over, gasping, while the contraction passed, and then resuming her painful, painstakingly slow walk to the top.

She found her mind drifting—to the ship, to his shadow hanging over her, remembering the coldness of the stone against her hand, the breath that seemed to have left her altogether; remembering the voice that had boomed like ten thousand storms.

Come with me, breath-sister.

Come with me.

He was there on the plateaux, waiting for her, and what would she tell him?

They climbed in silence. There was just Mau's hands on her, guiding her, supporting her when she stumbled; and

Akanlam's tunic, blue against the grey of the rock, showing her the way forward.

She was barely aware of cresting a rise—of suddenly finding herself not flush against a cliff face, but in the middle of a space that seemed to stretch forever, a vast expanse of *lamsinh* rocks caught by the noon sun—all shades of the spectrum, from green to palest white; and a trembling in the air that mirrored that of her hands.

“There is no ship,” Akanlam said, and her voice was almost accusatory.

Shaking, Rechan pulled herself upwards. “He'll be deeper into the plateaux. Where I carved him. We have to—”

“Elder Aunt,” Mau said, low and urgent.

What? she wanted to ask; but, turning to stare in the same direction as Mau, she saw the black dots silhouetted against the sky—growing in size, fast, too fast....

“Run.”

She would have, but her legs betrayed her—a contraction, locking her in place, as frozen as the baby within her womb, as helpless as a kid to the slaughter—watching the dots become the sleek shape of flyers, hearing the whine of the motors getting louder and louder....

Run run run, she wanted to shout to Mau and Akanlam—there's no need for you to get caught in this. Instead,

what came out of her was a scream: a cry for help, a jumble of incoherent syllables torn out of her lungs, towards the Heavens; a deep-seated anger about life's unfairness she'd last felt when carving the ship. It echoed around the plateaux, slowly fading as it was absorbed by the *lamsinh* stone.

Her hand was cold again, her breath coming in short gasps—and, like an answer to a prayer, she saw the ship come.

He was sleek, and elegant, and deadly. Banking lazily over the plateaux—illuminated by the noonday sun, as if with an inner fire—he incinerated the flyers, one by one, and then hovered over Mau and Akanlam, as if unsure what to do about them. “No you don’t!” Rechan screamed, and then collapsed, having spent all her energy.

Breath-sister. The ship—Sang—loomed over her once more.

She'd forgotten how beautiful Sang was; how terribly wrong, too—someone that didn't belong on Voc, that shouldn't have been here. He should have hung, weightless, in space; instead he moved sluggishly, crushed by gravity; and his hull was already crisscrossed by a thousand fracture lines, barely visible against the heat of the stone. The *lamsinh* was weathered and pitted, not from meteorite strikes but from weapons—in fact, dusty and cracked he looked like a rougher, fuzzier version of the rebel flyers he'd incinerated.

You need me, the ship said, and came lower, hull almost touching her outstretched hands. *Let me give you your breath back.*

It was wrong, all wrong—everything she had desired, the breath she needed for her baby, the birth she'd been bracing herself for—and yet.... “You shouldn't be here,” she said. “You're a spaceship, not a flyer.” She was barely aware of Mau standing by her side, looking up at Sang with wide eyes; of Akanlam, spreading her tunic on the ground.

I waited for you.

“You can't—” But he could, couldn't he? He could do exactly what she'd thought of, when she'd carved him—all her anger at the war, at the rebels, at the unfairness of it all—year after year of hunting down rebels because that's what she'd wanted at the time; not a breath-sibling to help her with a birth, but someone born of her anger and frustration, of her desire to escape the war at any cost.

Come with me.

She'd wondered what she would do, were Sang to ask that question of her again, but of course there was only one possible answer. The world had moved on; she had moved on; and only Sang remained, the inescapable remains of her history—a sixteen-year-old's grandiloquent, thoughtless, meaningless gesture.

“You have to go,” she said, the words torn out of her before she could think. “Into space. That’s what I carved you for. Not this—this butchery.”

The ship came close enough for her to touch the exhaust ports: there was a tingle on her hands, and a warmth she’d forgotten existed—and, within her, for the first time, the baby quickened, kicking against the confines of her womb. She ought to have felt relief, but she was empty—bracing herself against the next contractions and trying to crane her head upwards to see Sang.

You need me, he said. Breath to breath, blood to blood. How else will you bear your children? Come with me. Let’s find the stars together.

“I can’t. You have to go,” she said, again. “On your own.”

“You will not come with me?” The disappointment, in other circumstances, would have been heartbreaking.

“Go, Sang. When this is over—go find the stars. That’s all you’ve ever dreamt of, isn’t it?”

The contractions were hitting in waves now—one barely over before the next one started. *Your child is coming*, Sang said.

“I know.” Someone—Akanlam—grabbed her, laid her on the ground—no, not on the ground, on the tunic she’d spread

out. It was becoming hard to think, to focus on anything but the act of giving birth.

What will you do, for your other children? You need me.

She did; and yet.... “I’ll find you,” she said, struggling for breath. “If I need you.” Of course she wouldn’t; even with her link to him, all she’d have to go on would be fuzzy dream-images; she wouldn’t leave Voc, wouldn’t venture among ten thousand planets and millions of stars in a fruitless search. But it didn’t matter. Sang would finally be free.

Sang was silent, for a while. *I will come back*, he said.

He wouldn’t. Rechan knew this with absolute certainty—Sang was the desire to escape, the burning need for flight that she’d felt during her adolescence. Once he found space, he would be in the home he’d always been meant for; and who could blame him for not looking back? “Of course,” she lied—smoothly, easily. “You can always come back.”

There would not be other babies beyond this one, no large family she could raise; not enough to fill the emptiness of the house. But did it matter, in the end? She’d had her wish, her miracle—her birth. Could she truly ask for anything else?

I am glad.

“So am I.” And it almost didn’t feel like a lie. Rechan relaxed, lying flat on her back; and she settled herself down to

wait for the beautiful, heartbreaking sound of her child's first breath.

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Aliette de Bodard lives and works in Paris, where she has a day job as a System Engineer. In between bouts of coding she writes speculative fiction: her Aztec noir fantasy Obsidian and Blood is published by Angry Robot, and her short fiction has appeared in venues such as Clarkesworld, Asimov's, and various anthologies, as well as multiple times previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, including "[Memories in Bronze, Feathers, and Blood](#)" in BCS #45 and podcast BCS 041. She has won a Nebula Award, a Locus Award, and been shortlisted for the Hugo, Sturgeon and Tiptree awards. Her latest release is the Hugo and Nebula Award-shortlisted Vietnamese space opera novella On a Red Station, Drifting. Visit her at aliettedebodard.com for writing process, book reviews, and Franco-Vietnamese cooking.

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THE RIVER DOES NOT RUN

by Rachel Sobel

Beneath a high pale sun, Doormaker follows the broken road into the demon's kingdom.

She is clad in an armor wrought of primordial isotopes, imbued with mathematics of sufficient strength to reinforce its stability against the demon's fallout. Beneath it, she hides her war-given wounds, which burn and twist at certain hours of the day or beneath the shadows of certain trees.

The silence is unnerving, the wilderness here emptied of the beasts that must once have populated it. Only the birds remain, soaring high overhead, predatory. They are immune to the depredations of the demon's power, or suborned by it. She watches them with wariness in her soul.

Alone, she must be cautious. The demon's presence eddies through the desert air like water, diffuse and subtle, the coil of its sharp intelligence lingering behind the soft pressure of the wind against her face and the fine grit of stone that catches in her hair. Her vigilance against it is a necessary burden; it saps her strength, but she does not lag or falter.

On the third night, a vulture lands beside her fire. Its dark eyes are rimmed in gold, unnaturally bright in the twilight. She watches it in silence, taking in the crooked, cowled wings, the pale feathers on its head, the ruff about its neck.

“You’ve come a long ways to find your death,” the vulture says at last. Its beak is sharp and cruelly curved, and glitters in the light of the fire.

Doormaker laughs. “I’m not afraid of you, carrion-eater,” she says, looking through it to the integral forces holding together the atoms of feather and beak and thready internal organs. Beside the complexity of unweaving spell-wrought mathematics, organic destruction is simplicity itself.

“At least carrion is honest in its perversion,” it says, and crooks its sharply curved beak at her, a vulturine grin. “Has life been so clean with you that you should defend it?”

Thinking of a city afire, of the light of calculated missiles in the sky above her, Doormaker has no reply at first. She thinks again of dismembering the vulture into its component parts, leaving it in a tidy pile of fragmented bone and feather. Instead, she squares her shoulders and looks it in the eye.

“Tell your master I have come to destroy it,” she says. It feels less like bravado than she expected.

The light of her fire gleams against the vulture’s eyes; enough warning that when it opens its beak again there is time

to throw up a shield between her and it, the impermeability and aegis of lead set against its attack. Even so, she is left blinking against the momentary scouring heat and light of radiation.

The vulture considers her, dark-eyed and pale-feathered as a ghost. Breathing hard, Doormaker stares back at it, her back straight, hands outstretched in the form of her art. The silence sits between them, deep and wide as the night that fills the canyon, broken only by the whisper of the wind through cottonwood and sagebrush.

“Your message is received,” says the vulture at last, and in a thunderclap of wind and wings it lifts from the ground, dusty gravel scattering beneath it.

Doormaker watches it go, the shape of its shadow cast against the stars, until it is lost in the cloudless summer sky.

* * *

By day, the badlands blaze, sunstruck and desiccated. The road is stubbled with a hundred years of fallen debris, edged with gold-tipped cactuses and sword-edged grasses. Beside it, the rock formations rise blunt-faced and rosy, reaching up to the cloudless sky and crumbling to sand at her touch.

There are bones, sometimes, bleached severe and haughty by the sun and scattered at the road's edges. She does not ask their history; does not need to. Does not dare.

As a child before the war, she heard the stories of her people's homeland, of the destruction of the great city Nimarat and their exile into the desert. Her grandmother, already aged and bent with the hunger of the homeless, had told her the stories: of the beautiful towers nestled in the canyon, the wide river at its heart, all made rich and fertile by the power of their kept demon. Of the demon's terrible power, and of the arrogance that had freed it of its chains.

The destruction had spread outwards from the ruined city like some parching contagion, until at last a coalition of the strongest wizards of the age had bound it beneath steel and cement and algorithmic certainty. Even they could not reclaim Nimarat, and in their failure they had planted the seeds of the war.

Her people had watched from the ghettos of Isindra as the water in the plateau failed and dried and died away; had clung to their adopted city and turned away from the shadow of their works. In the suborned lands, men and women injured by particle decay and photon castoff found themselves falling steadily under the demon's influence, until their minds became a part of its own and their bodies faltered and failed them. And on the plateau, mistrust had flourished as water grew thinner and scarcer in the wake of the demon's freedom, ushering the disparate city-states towards war.

When she was twelve, a representative of the wizard's school came to the door of her grandmother's house. He stood there on the doorstep, his kinky hair coiling about his face, and told her that she could be a great wizard someday, an unrivaled power in her adopted city, but she must come away with him, must leave her home and her grandmother and live upon the hill at the heart of Isindra, so high that she could watch the storms coming in across the long and dusty plains.

The accounts in the library there told her the side of the story she had never learned: the stories of the demon's power and beauty; of the clear blue light that radiated from it as it moved and the deep and secretive mathematics that had built it. Of the demon's river, called from the dry stone of the plateau and broken to serve the people of Nimarat.

The library was her refuge, a sanctuary she could cling to in the spaces between the brutal skirmishes of the war, and her curiosity became an obsession. She pored over books and yellowed photographs in search of the demon's failings; deduced the weaknesses she might strike at to bring it down and turned that knowledge against the other weapons she destroyed.

Doormaker, they whispered in the streets of Isindra: she who shreds the momentum of warheads in the air and wrings their velocity from them, who with a glance can tear probability

from fact. Doormaker the wizard; Doormaker the destroyer of death.

For years she matched her mind against the weapons of her enemies and brought them screaming down to earth; she fought Isindra's war and failed to save anything she loved. And so she left.

She would restore her homeland, she thought, would win them their independence and their honor, free them from the burdens of their heritage. Her wizardry and knowledge in her hands, she would cleanse the desert; absolve it.

Now, with the road rough beneath her feet and the silence bleak and twisted within her mind, she wonders at her own arrogance in coming here. It has been a hundred years and more since any of her kind entered the demon's lands, and there were many of them then, the demon's binding a work of wizardry the likes of which she could hardly hope to match.

There is nothing left for her in Isindra, but surely there is some simpler errantry she might perform than to fight a thing which has for a century drawn out the souls of all who venture into its territory.

Doormaker tests this thought within her mind, hypothesis and evidence and answer arrayed at once before her; considering them, she rejects it. Instead, she checks her armor, parsing

through the carefully calculated antiradiation spells coiled within it to ensure their stability.

At last, reassured of her invulnerability, she goes on, into the wasteland.

* * *

She reaches the city outskirts on the next day. The brittle stone of shattered buildings crunches beneath her boots; the wind smells of the high dry desert, and her stark shadow paces at her heels.

Nothing troubles her as she passes through downed towers and crumbled walls, towards the looming sarcophagus of the demon's prison at the heart of the city. Once, Nimarat had been the heart of the kingdom of her ancestors, whose wizardry raised the demon and held it prisoned in their service til their strictures failed them. They had brought the river forth from the desert and the city from the stone.

Now she walks through broken ruins warmed with radiation and the fading light of the sun, through streets strangled by the fallen brickwork of a hundred years' abandonment and train tracks whose split rails are choked with dust. The aqueducts have run dry and flow only with hydrolyzed acid formed by the nuclear release of ions, their walls fanned with slender needles of pale yellow crystal.

The graceful architecture of this place has haunted her dreams since the first years of her training, and she is unprepared for the surge of feeling as she steps between dry fountains and dead courtyard gardens. Little grey ashes cling to her legs like fond children, the descendants of the fires that ravaged the city after its evacuation.

The demon's sarcophagus looms over all of it like the tomb it is, slab-built and brutal. Its walls are wrought of slate-colored concrete, now shivered and cracked with age. It was built in haste, without the permanence to outlast its prisoner.

By the time Doormaker reaches the demon's prison the sun is failing, drawn down behind the far-off mountains. In the fading light, the sarcophagus's shadow stretches long and grim across the plaza. It is tempting to wait until morning to enter the prison, but she can feel her own heartbeat quick within her chest, her own impatience pushing her on.

She strips off her right glove and puts her hand against the crack nearest her, extending herself through the surface, into the concrete's molecular matrix. She can feel the telltale tingle of aging magic in her hands, the residue of the walls that the demon's custodians built to imprison it now much battered by time and the willful resilience of the demon itself.

Taking hold of the individual pieces of the wall, she re-arranges the array of its molecules within her mind until at last

they release their bonds upon one another, and the concrete shifts aside and opens to let her in.

She hesitates on the threshold, staring into that consuming darkness, the cold smell of the prison a shock after the clean desert air. At last, she snaps her fingers, dragging from the air a pale grey globe of light that shimmers unevenly in the twilight.

Inside, it is dark, dead—worse than the wasteland outside by far, for here the tools of the men and women who penned the demon in lie scattered about her feet. The light trails her, casting its faint glow across the sloping floor.

Occasionally, it catches against the rough-hewn walls, illuminating the flash-burnt shadows that char the cement here and there; remnants of those who fought the demon, fought for time and the escape of the city's people. The brittle echoes of their deaths drift in the air, clinging like gossamer to her armor, and the whisper of fire pounds in her ears.

They won the time they needed, she thinks, and forces herself on.

All around her she can feel the rotted strictures of the dead wizards, their careful equilibrium disturbed by her presence, by the cool wind that treads lightly in her footsteps and the little light that hovers at her shoulders like a nervous bird. The demon is imprisoned in more than mere cement, but after so long, the spells are frail as spiderwebs. Tilting her head back to

stare towards the ceiling, Doormaker can see with her wizard's sight the broken chains whose failure has allowed it entrance into the wasteland.

The radiation is shredding through her armor at a tremendous rate, breaking apart the bonds of her shielding in sourceless white-hot splashes. She has come far enough that when she looks behind her, the dim light of the evening spills only faintly through the doorway.

At last she rounds a corner and stops in her tracks: ahead, in the distance, she can see the demon's blue glow, deep and rich as the far-off sea. She is so lost in her wonder that the whisper at the edge of her perception is a surprise.

Child of Nimarat, says the demon, its voice resonant inside her head, redolent of the battlefield and the library, at once familiar and frightening.

Welcome home.

* * *

The stinging power in the air pricks at her throat and lungs, gliding over her hands like the ghosts of butterflies. Doormaker stands rigid under the caress of the demon's voice, her hands clenched at her sides, half-conceived spells sparking brief and furious beneath her nails as she digs them into her palms.

I've been waiting a long time for you, says the demon softly. Its mind looms within her own, deep and vast and limitless as the sky, and within that sky it conjures the light of doomed warheads, the brightness of their edges scorching through the lowering clouds. The force of their power is blinding as they rain down upon Isindra, an unending rain of malice, single-minded, destructive.

Doormaker remembers nights huddled in air-raid shelters as a girl, hidden away from the alien brightness of the night; remembers the acrid bite of hatred in her face as she stood, later, older, alone beneath the shining sky, facing down the destruction that assailed her adopted city, the razor-edged shrieks of damaged and dying missiles lashing out in their last moments at the source of their destruction.

Such confidence in your skill, the demon mocks. *Doormaker the destroyer of death; Doormaker the foreigner.* In the tenor of its soundless voice, she can hear its smile.

Tell me, what has your success bought your people?

Doormaker is pinned within its mind, bound in place as it turns her to face her memories of the ghetto aflame, the crooked shanties and rough-cut shelters enveloped in a screaming incandescent inferno. The merciless smothering clouds of smoke loom and grow to swallow her as the heat of

the flames scorches across her face, her hands, choking her breath and seizing tears from her eyes.

They were left undefended, Isindra's scant wizards spent elsewhere; she left them, she thinks, and she is panicking once again as she battles her way through the towering conflagration, strangling the fire at its heart by force of will alone, stumbling through the gritty ash and dying smoke, crying their names in a voice broken to charcoal.

She never finds their bones.

The demon lets Doormaker slip from its grasp, and she can feel it watching as she tears the fabric of herself away from her memories of the war, from the battle the demon has tied her to. She is shaking, harsh shudders that hurt her to her bones, threatening to take her resolve from her, and she can hear the raggedness of her own breath in her throat.

Doormaker rests her hand against the wall, feeling the rough cement against her bare palm, steadying herself. Her people have lived with the consequences of their failure for a hundred years and more, homeless and powerless in a darkening world. The river does not run.

She takes a step, and then another one.

"I have come to redeem them," Doormaker says, quietly, her back straight. The words echo strangely in the sarcophagus, imbued with the burning strength of herself.

She can feel the demon watching her, and she reaches out to it, wrapping herself around its bright and rotting core, extending herself through its awareness of the wasteland. In its corruption it has woven itself through the vast desert that surrounds them, a net snarled over the extent of its domain. She feels its surprise, the momentary flash of something like distress as it realizes how closely she has tied them together, the stillness that follows.

It was like this when I was born, says the demon, and its voice is closer, now, as if it is speaking directly into her ear. The endless open sky over the desert.

And it shows her, only a glimpse: the little settlement huddled in the canyon's shade; the tiny stream cherished, protected. The rough-hewn circle they had chiseled from the rock to contain their ambition, burnt black upon the ground in the brilliant moment of the demon's birth.

I called forth water from the dry and dying earth, the demon whispers in her ear, and she watches the little stream swell and grow and rush forth as the city grew up around it. I can make your people great again.

The river surges forward in its channel, pours itself into the aqueducts and reservoirs of Nimarat, its rhythm mingling with the pounding of Doormaker's heart and the sudden roughness of her breath. The city shines before her with the clamor

and laughter of civilization, the will and fire of her people restored, reborn.

Redeemed.

Before her, she sees the arches of Nimarat raised proud and tall again; sees the restoration of the city, the buildings strengthened and fulfilled, the people stopping in the central square to gossip. Her grandmother's footsteps raise the desert dust in gentle halting puffs—

In the wizard's school, Doormaker learned the tenets of magic, drilled into her head by straight-backed teachers. The art defines reality, they told her, and her practice underscored their words. She learned to model the mathematics of her desired outcome, the forces and energies arrayed within her mind, before she drew them bold across the world's face.

Stretched throughout the long drift of the demon's decay, she can feel the slow beat of its core as clearly as if she held it within her hands; the moment-by-moment whisper of its innermost workings as if its heart were laid bare and vulnerable before her.

Doormaker takes a long breath, steadying herself against the demon's vision: the wide rushing river and the tall white towers and the limitless desert sky overhead.

“My grandmother is dead,” she says, and strikes.

* * *

Outside, in the quiet evening air, Doormaker walks through the dead city. Its rough and broken edges are smoothed out by the starlight, peaceful in the fading light. The sweet clear air of the desert fills her lungs with its breath.

She goes more slowly, this time, dallying in the open courtyards, running her hands over the calm and crumbling stone. She cannot raise it from death, the city of her people; must leave it behind her in the wasteland of the demon's destruction. She is its memorial, now.

In the outskirts of the city she finds the vulture sitting on an age-bowed wall. It is shrouded in its wings, waiting for her.

"You came back," it says, and the fragile starlight glints against its eye. Doormaker can hear the brittle rage in its voice, the emptiness laid raw and broken beneath its amusement. She watches it for a long time, thinking.

"Yes," she says at last. "I did."

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Rachel Sobel writes software by day and stories by night. Her

fiction has appeared in Clarkesworld and GigaNotoSaurus, and she is a graduate of the Alpha Writing Workshop.

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STONEBONES

by Nathaniel Lee

In the morning, Jenivar ran away from home. As the sun reached zenith, she walked along the Black Road, keeping her sunshade overhead. The sun was as white as a bone and bright enough to bleach the colors from everything in sight. Even the Black Road looked more like a faded gray-green in the glare.

Jenivar kept her goggles on and watched her step. The Black Road was full of cracks and crevices, some of them several feet wide and all of them likely hiding places for rock-snakes, drackles, and leathery needlebats roosting away from the sun. To her left was the Big Glass. To her right was the Scrub. Only an idiot tried to travel any distance through either of those. Behind her was the Spine, still visible through the heat-haze. Ahead of her, somewhere out of her sight, was the Skull, and beyond that was freedom. Or destiny. It didn't matter so much what was ahead.

Jenivar looked over her shoulder. The rocky mound of the Spine made a gentle curve along the horizon, its two ridges—the Neck and the Tail—reaching out to embrace the small valley within, granting shade and shelter to the inhabitants. Jenivar

decided that she did not like the view; it looked as though the Spine were reaching out to grasp her and pull her back in.

By now, they'd have found the missing stores. She adjusted her goggles and hurried on.

* * *

It was a six-hour walk to the Skull, but that was assuming you were smart enough to go in the twilight, when the temperature was a little more bearable. Jenivar made it in seven, her skin tingling with the reflected sunlight she'd taken in, despite her poncho, sunshade, and goggles. There was a drackle still squirming on the point of her sunshade's bayonet; she hadn't wanted to fold the sunshade long enough to remove it. Besides, maybe someone at the Skull knew how to make drackles edible. If she could eat the omnipresent black-shelled vermin, her worries about food would be solved.

The Skull loomed over her, twenty feet at its highest point. The eye sockets had been covered with plaster, so that the whole top half appeared smooth and unbroken. There was space up there where travelers could rent a room for the day and wait out the heat inside the cool stone. The jagged teeth, pointed and visibly serrated, had been broken at the front to allow a doorway. It was covered by a ragged curtain, weighted at the bottom to improve the seal and keep out dust and heat. The nostrils vented wisps of vapor, cold and damp air pumped up

from deep underground to fill the Skull's interior. Jenivar saw a drackle skitter out of one foot-wide opening, and she shuddered.

Movement in the distance caught her attention. Jenivar flipped the farsight lenses down over her smoked goggles and peered through, turning the Spine from a distant speck to a sizeable lump. A dust cloud had emerged from the gap between the Neck and the Tail. It seemed that Water-Keeper Ty-mon—not “father,” never that—had woken up earlier than she'd thought he would. That title was half a joke; everyone at the Spine knew Jenivar had been Water-Keeper in all but name for years now. He'd sent Terk and his engine-cycle after her.

She nodded to herself. This was not an entirely unexpected development. She had perhaps an hour before he caught up to her, allowing for the delay when he had to leave the increasingly fragmented road to get around the cracks too wide for him to roll over. She patted her thigh, where the ancient gun Groton had given her rested comfortably in its holster. The withered old historian had told her it was a genuine Knight's weapon, from the days when the Knights had fought the dragons and won the war for humanity. Its cracked screen still flashed with a nearly full charge. Jenivar pushed the curtain aside and stepped from the baking brilliance of the day into a muggy darkness.

The snout formed a long entranceway. There were a few small tables along the rows of stone teeth. Inside, where the dragon's tongue would have rooted, the space opened out into a round area. Above, the roof was rickety wood, imperfectly fitted. Periodically, stone dust drizzled down from the occupants in the rooms overhead. There were more tables here, and a counter of sorts, formed from solid rock. A stairwell behind the counter led down into darkness, and Jenivar could hear the pumps working below to move the cool air up along rubber hoses affixed to the walls and ceiling.

Jenivar pushed her goggles up and looked to the man at the counter, who was big and beefy and bald. His apron was stained, and he stood beside three barrels and a metal trunk. He looked at Jenivar without speaking, and Jenivar returned the stare.

Finally, he spoke. "Yeah?"

It was more of a grunt than a greeting. Jenivar elected to take the man in stride. "Greetings, barman," she said. "I wish to trade with you. I am a Knight on a quest, and I therefore require maps of the area and directions to the nearest marauding dragon."

The man sniffed and rubbed at his nose with a meaty forearm. He looked her up and down more closely, wary instead of apathetic. Eventually, he shrugged. "Got some papers. People

trade ‘em sometimes. C’n let you look at ‘em and take one if you want it. Whatcha got to trade?”

Jenivar moved to the counter and swung her pack around. She rummaged inside and retrieved a piece of paper, twisted at both ends into a wrapper. “Donnybell,” she said, shaking it so the powder inside rustled.

The barman nodded vigorously and snatched it away. “Deal!” he said, sliding it into a pocket beneath his apron.

“And refill my water-bags,” Jenivar added, suddenly unsure of herself. She’d known the herbs from the Spine’s gardens were valuable—the town’s main trading goods—but she had apparently underestimated the market price.

“Sure.”

“And a meal.”

The barman shrugged and grinned at her. His teeth were as ill-made and broken as those of his establishment. He lugged one of the barrels onto the counter, opened the lid to show her it was truly water, and hooked the hose at the bottom onto her bags. She’d drunk far too much on the walk over.

While the bags were refilling, he rummaged in some bins hewed out of the space below the counter and came up with a loaf of gritty bread and a strip of unspecified jerked meat. He handed over the food and Jenivar’s renewed water supply sep-

arately, using both hands for the taut bags. Everyone handled water with a touch of reverence, even Jenivar and Tymon.

Then the barman surprised her; he pulled out a stone mug and filled it most of the way with water from the same barrel before offering it to her.

“My name’s Huj,” he said. He met her gaze, then glanced down. “Drink’s included,” he said, reaching a hand to the lump of Donnybell in his apron pocket.

Jenivar nodded and thanked Huj politely, as was the Knightly thing to do. She had definitely misjudged the value of the herbs she’d taken. She hoped her theft wouldn’t hurt anyone at the Spine. They’d had so much, and she’d taken so little. Was that why Terk was wasting his fuel to chase her down?

Jenivar sat at a table in the corner by the entrance, so she was out of sight of anyone coming in from the bright, but still close enough to dash for it. The bread was impossible to eat, hard as it was, but she soaked it in the water until it softened. The water tasted of mold and moss and deep, deep caverns.

Huj brought her a string-wrapped sheaf of yellowed, flaking documents. “Here,” he said. “This’s all I’ve got. Dunno what’s all in it. Some of ‘em got pictures. Might be maps.”

“Thank you, sir. You are most kind.”

He grunted. “You come up from the Spine, yeah?”

Jenivar nodded.

“Tell that Keeper, Tymon, he owes me for two kegs of rot-gut. Been weeks now.”

Jenivar nodded again, trying to keep her face carefully blank. “When I see him again,” she promised, more or less truthfully.

Huj pursed his lips and lumbered back to his station, where a tall man clad almost entirely in leather belts had come down from overhead to mumble something at him.

Jenivar couldn't understand most of the papers. She knew how to read, but many of the papers were in languages she didn't recognize or were smudged beyond readability. Those that she could read didn't make much sense. She found half of a book with the pages still mostly glued to the spine. There were a lot of documents in the too-fine writing that meant a machine had made them. Others looked like journal entries or contracts. One seemed to be an IOU, but Jenivar didn't recognize the names. Or the currency.

At last, near the bottom of the stack, Jenivar found a map. It had the obvious land-shapes and lines, with words in the middle. It even still had a little bit of coloring on it; the biggest space was still faintly blue, which meant it was an ocean. Grotton had told Jenivar about oceans, of course, but it was exciting to see confirmation that such things had once existed. To think of all that water... What excited Jenivar the most was the nota-

tion she found in the northernmost reaches of the map: “Here be dragons.”

Dragons in the north. That was where she had to go if she wanted to slay one.

Jenivar had just finished her meal when the entranceway flared with light. Someone had pushed aside the curtain. Jenivar bundled up the papers and hastily crammed the last of the meat into her mouth. Heavy footsteps echoed faintly on the rocky floor as a shadow stretched out into the main chamber. A tall, rangy figure strode in, clad in a tight-fitting leather helmet and wrapped at every joint with colorful scarves. He paused in the doorway. Jenivar eased to her feet and pressed against the wall as if she could disappear into it.

Terk. The leader of the Watch, guardian of the Spine.

Her enemy, now.

Huj ducked his head respectfully—more greeting than he’d given Jenivar or any of his other guests—and coughed. “Wasn’t expecting you back so soon,” he said. “What brings you out again?”

“I’m looking for someone,” Terk responded. His voice was deeper than his reedy build would have suggested. “A thief.” He didn’t move out of the entrance, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimness.

“Well, everyone comes through here, though some don’t stop. I don’t ask where they been before.”

“Have you seen a girl-child today?” Terk stepped forward. Jenivar scooted behind him, out of sight, but Huj couldn’t conceal his darting glance at her. Terk caught the movement and spun around, hands going for the blades that hung on his belt.

Jenivar was faster. She had the old blaster up and leveled. “I’m leaving,” she announced.

Terk chuckled and straightened. “Don’t try to threaten me with that toy. It’s been hanging on Groton’s wall since his father’s day.”

Jenivar thumbed the switch. The pistol whirred to life, filling the room with an ominous hum. A tiny red dot appeared on Terk’s chest, just between his scarves.

“I’m leaving *now*,” said Jenivar.

Terk swallowed. “Jenivar. Jen. Be reasonable. You’ve taken more out of the stores than you could earn the rights to in ten years. You’ve disrupted two full days’ work while we sort out the water rations. Tymon is heartbroken. And for what?” Jenivar tightened the trigger until the vents opened. The gun’s hum shifted to a higher pitch. Terk stopped talking.

“Tymon can crawl back into his bottles and stay there for good, for all I care. I’m going to be a Knight,” Jenivar told him,

easing away. She kept her back to the wall and the gun on Terk. “I have to slay a dragon first. That’s the Code.”

“The Knights are a dead cult,” Terk said, flinching as the laser sight glinted across his eyes. It tracked him steadily. “I know you loved Groton. We all loved that old duffer. But this Knight nonsense... he didn’t do you any favors, filling you full of that slag. The Knights probably never even existed, and if they did, it’s crazy to think that they killed dragons.”

“So I’m crazy.”

“There *aren’t* any dragons.”

“There were. I’m going to find where they went.” Jenivar reached the curtain and hooked her ankle around it. “I’ll be covering the entrance. If I see any movement...” She let the remark hang in the air. Terk and Huj stayed frozen. Jenivar ducked outside.

She did keep the gun pointed at the curtain, because she’d said she would and a Knight must not lie. She turned it off as soon as she was out of sight, though. Humming and lighting up was all it could actually do, and Groton had warned her about letting it overheat. Terk’s engine-cycle sat nearby, a low-slung mass of hollow tubes, gears, and chains whose immense motor at the rear gave it the look of a fat black spider. Jenivar considered her options. On the one hand, stealing was un-Knightly. On the other hand, if she tried to flee on foot, Terk

could easily catch her in the engine-cycle. Should mere pragmatism triumph over chivalry? Yet... when a Knight defeated an opponent, he could claim their armor as a ransom. She'd bested Terk in a confrontation, even if it hadn't come to blows. Perhaps the engine-cycle was simply the spoils of combat.

The curtain flexed slightly, as if someone stood waiting just behind it. Jenivar made her decision and slid into the bucket seat in the middle.

The engine-cycle was unfamiliar—Jenivar had only driven pedalers before—but she'd seen Terk start it up any number of times, when he made his trading trips. She'd been so jealous of him and his stories. Cities of three or four thousand people! Buildings that reached up into the sky as well as down into the ground! Surely, somewhere out in that wide world, was a town in need of a hero.

With a cough and a sputter, the engine behind her came awake, spewing thick black smoke. Its roar veered to a keening note until Jenivar hastily pulled the clutch lever and disconnected the motor from the gears.

Terk's basso shout caught her attention. He charged from the entrance of the Skull, waving his warhammer over his head. Jenivar plunged her foot onto the accelerator and the cycle lurched forward, roaring in triumph. Terk dove out of the way as the engine-cycle rushed past him. Jenivar managed to

swerve just enough to avoid the wall of the Skull. She threw her weight against the steering mechanism and pulled the vehicle in a long arc through the sand, bumping at last back onto the roadway. She jerked the clutch into a higher gear and chugged away, back toward the Spine.

The Spine was west, though. She needed to go north. Leaving the road would be difficult at best. A few hundred meters away, the answer to her problems glittered dangerously in the sun. It touched the road here, in its southernmost reach, and extended north to the horizon.

The Big Glass.

* * *

It would have been easier if the Big Glass had been as flat as it looked. The wheels of the engine-cycle bumped and juddered on flaws that Jenivar could hardly see; even with her smoked goggles, the ground was a mass of flare and shine, the sun reflecting in every direction. As it was, she had to constantly fight the steering rod as some lump or furrow in the glass sent a wheel jumping to one side or the other. It was exhausting, and Jenivar felt herself sweating with exertion. The engine-cycle's canopy didn't help. The light came from below as much as above, the sun bouncing back from the ground with almost equal intensity. Jenivar felt broiled inside her protective

clothing. She was drinking her water too fast, she knew, but she also knew the dangers of sweating without replenishing fluids.

She drove all day and into the night, pushing as far as she could in the relative cold before pausing to sleep. There was no point in setting up any precautions; nothing lived in the Big Glass. The Spine had long since merged with the distant mountains on the horizon, the Scrub a darker blotch to the side. Ahead was... nothing. More whorls and curves of glass.

No one knew how wide the Big Glass was, not really. No one had ever crossed it. No one even knew if it had a far side. It was an irregular blotch, inside of which the desert sand had fused to crude glass. The sand was slowly reclaiming the space, gnawing at the rounded edges. Jenivar knew that if you followed the edge of the Big Glass far enough east, you eventually came to a place called Burrows, where the houses were dug into the sand and they used the glass shards as decoration for their homes and bodies. That was three days' hard driving along the perimeter; even Terk had never been further than that. Terk said that carrying enough fuel to go that far ended up burning too much fuel at the start. It was, he said, the Point of Diminishing Returns.

Jenivar had searched Groton's ancient maps for the Point for several days until she'd realized what Terk had meant.

She drove all through the next day, too. She had spare fuel—Terk never left the Spine without at least two extra cans—but water would be the more pressing need. She was already running low. The Big Glass was also the Big Empty; the sand itself was buried beneath several feet of glass, and any water there might be was far deeper than Jenivar could have burrowed by herself.

Tymon had been the Water-Keeper at the Spine since before Jenivar was born, and through the benefits of his office, she'd never known what it was like to be without water. Between the collector sheets up at the Drip and the bucket-and-pulleys down at the Drop, there was always enough water, and no one would begrudge the Keeper a sip or two while he gathered it up and set it to purifying. Jenivar remembered the quiet darkness of the lowest levels of the Drop, so deep that the air grew chilled, down in the caves where the sun could never reach and even a torch or a glowstone felt like blasphemy. No heat, no crawling drackles, no family or neighbors, no forced smiles and unspoken questions; just the steady dripping of water along rock, echoing down the tunnels until it came from everywhere and nowhere, soothing, hypnotic...

Jenivar came awake from her daydream when the engine-cycle bounced over a ramp-like protrusion and kicked sideways. She clutched at the steering rod, but the engine-cycle was

rolling on only two wheels, teetering dangerously. Jenivar threw herself to the side, trying to balance the weight and settle the vehicle. She hovered tenuously for a timeless moment. Then she hit the rim of a pit.

It was a large, shallow depression, worn smooth by years of wear. If the engine-cycle had been rolling normally, the pit would have posed no risk at all, and might even have been a bit of fun to speed through. As it was, the sudden drop removed any semblance of control. The engine-cycle toppled—the wrong way—and crashed to the bottom of the pit, sending up a spray of glass splinters. Jenivar closed her mouth and covered her face with her gloved hands as best she could. She tumbled into a darkness even more complete than that of the caverns around the Drop, silent and smothering.

* * *

When Jenivar opened her eyes again, she saw nothing. After a brief moment of panic, she realized that night had fallen while she still had her smoked lenses down. She tugged her goggles down and tried to assess her situation. A sharp pain in her hand made her flinch, which sent a drackle flying from beside her. The finger-length insect had bitten her, chewing through her sleeve. Jenivar had seen bodies after the drackles got to them. They weren't nice to look at.

She lay on her shoulders on the hard ground, her legs caught in the engine-cycle's seat. She wriggled and managed to scrape her way partially out of the mangled frame. She became aware that her arm felt cold, and she looked down to see a long gash on her forearm, cut through the protective layers. The blood was black in the starlight. She touched it to her lips; it was tacky and crusted, no longer actively bleeding. The edges looked ragged; an artifact of the injury itself, or had drackles been gnawing on it? She shuddered as she realized that she could well have bled to death, dangling upside down in the wrecked engine-cycle, and never woken to realize it. She smelled the sharp odor of its fuel and heard a faint trickling, but she couldn't see what was happening. She also heard a distant hum that seemed to be coming from underground, as though another engine-cycle were running at full tilt somewhere down below.

Jenivar wriggled free at the cost of another cut on her forehead and several painful glass splinters in her back. She checked her water-bags for leaks and ran a quick inventory, operating by touch as much as by sight. Sword, gun, water, sunshade, herb pouch; Jenivar made sure the paper twists of Donnybell were unharmed and the glass bottle of Hellflower extract remained unbroken in its wad of soft fibers.

She shuffled a few meters away and flicked the power switch on her gun. The readout screen came to life, and she turned the useless weapon around at the site of the crash. The faint greenish glow illuminated enough of the engine-cycle to tell that she wouldn't be using it to travel any further.

She was in a bowl-shaped hollow, ten meters across and perhaps a half-meter at its nadir. The light also glinted off of a stream of dark liquid under the engine-cycle. The fuel! It was leaking from the spare cans, forming a puddle that sent out tendrils toward the bottom of the pit, where it trickled into a jagged hole.

The engine-cycle might be a wreck, but fuel was valuable, and she'd couldn't waste the rest of her herbs until she knew better what they were worth. Knightly largesse was all well and good, but she suspected she'd made a fool of herself with Huj, and that rankled. She struggled upright and eased forward. As she drew nearer, she realized that the humming sound was coming from down the hole.

Sudden motion made her halt. A black shape darted out of the hole and skittered toward her. A drackle! She stomped it in instinctive revulsion, its scaly carapace crunching unpleasantly under her boot. The creature's reeking innards gushed out; drackle guts smelled like unwashed feet and rot. She flicked the disgusting thing back into the hole. The buzzing intensified,

drawing nearer to the surface, and Jenivar realized she was in trouble. One drackle was a nuisance. A handful were a pestilence. A whole swarm of them... Her hand throbbed where one had bitten her. Their poison was weak, but even a strong man could be in danger from a sufficient number of them.

Jenivar quickly fumbled open her herb wallet and grabbed a handful of the remaining Donnybell packets. The herb was useful for soothing and calming in very small doses, loosening muscles and sending strange dreams. In large doses, it was almost invariably lethal. Jenivar ratcheted her blaster's power up to the maximum and felt it begin to overheat, soon almost burning her skin through her gloves. She held her breath and touched the paper twists containing the Donnybell to the blaster's battery pack. They smoldered and caught flame. Jenivar held them away from her face and waved them about, making certain the fire was well and truly caught. When the smoke turned dark, she dropped them down into the hole.

The falling flame caught the trickle of fuel, sending a ribbon of fire downward. *Like dragonfire*, Jenivar thought. It illuminated an endless horde of crawling bodies coating the sides of the tunnel, a stream of foulness that seemed to reach into the bowels of the earth. Where the smoke touched, they fell senseless away, and those nearby went into a frenzy, lashing out with their sharp forelimbs.

Jenivar did not linger. Some drackles could fly, and she wanted to be nowhere near the area when any of them made it out.

She was alone, and her engine-cycle was scrap. She might be able to walk back out of the Big Glass, but it would be a hard trek indeed, and Terk would have mobilized anyone he could deputize to hunt her down. He might be waiting for her at the edge, or even following after her.

A Knight would not retreat. A Knight would press on. She oriented herself as best she could by the stars and struck out for what she hoped was the north edge of the Big Glass.

* * *

Jenivar did not feel like a Knight when she emerged from the Big Glass. She should have felt triumph, but she didn't; she felt like a thirst with legs. She'd walked all day in the punishing sunlight across what was functionally an enormous mirror. If she stopped, she knew she would fall and never stand up.

Ahead, the sand gave way to mere sandy soil. A series of small bluffs off to the east held vegetation on their lower ranks.

And there was a thin shape approaching out of the rolling heat shimmers.

Jenivar at first feared it was Terk or a clutch of his deputies, but no, a plodding beast of burden, another figure behind it, and a larger one behind that. Travelers. Perhaps traders.

Jenivar lifted the dusty lenses of her goggles. She knew it would make her paleness all the more apparent—every trader she'd ever seen had been baked brown by their years in the sun—but she wanted clear sight for her first encounter with a true stranger on the road. She tugged her thick gloves off and rested a hand on the pommel of her sword as well.

As the figures approached, Jenivar began to sense that something was not quite right. There was the pack-beast, likely a donkey. But the two figures were strange. One was tall and dressed in the loose robes of a practiced desert traveler, but the short one seemed to have on no clothes at all, and he staggered unevenly, lurching. It wasn't until the tall figure pulled its arm back and Jenivar caught the glint of sun on metal that she realized.

Slaver.

The tall figure had knocked the small one to the ground and was kicking it repeatedly.

A Knight would not stand for injustice, Jenivar knew, but her reserves were severely depleted. Her mission would best be served if she obtained water and directions as politely as possible and moved on to find a dragon, which would likely be menacing dozens or hundreds of people at a time.

The tall slaver appeared to have seen Jenivar coming, as he stood still with his foot on the fallen slave and watched her

approach. Jenivar tried to work up enough saliva to speak; best to present as strong a front as possible.

The slaver turned out to be a lean and rangy man, with the rough nut-brown skin of a regular traveler. His hair was bleached pale by the sun, but he bore two long mustachios that were almost black. His eyes were invisible behind a shaded lens, a wraparound visor that left his peripheral vision intact. The slave was a youth younger than Jenivar, clad in a thin shirt and inadequate trousers, his skin exposed to the sun and his feet to the rocks and sand. He craned his neck to look up at Jenivar but flinched as the man bore down harder on his booted foot.

The man lifted a gnarled hand in greeting. “Hail and well-met, traveler! You have clearly traveled a hard road.”

“Hail,” Jenivar managed, but her throat betrayed her, and the rest of her greeting disappeared in a strangling cough.

“Please,” the man offered, lifting a waterskin from his side, “I have more than enough to see me through my journey, and I would be remiss in my duties as a traveler if I did not offer assistance where I might.”

Jenivar accepted the proffered skin and drank. She was desperately conflicted about accepting water surely purchased with money gained from human suffering, but she was dizzy and nauseated with dehydration already.

“Kandru the Trader is my name,” said the man, “known throughout the Mirrorlands for the quality of my goods and the reasonableness of my bargains. You seem to be on a lengthy journey. I have dried meat, water, salt tablets, even a compass. Or, as you look to have an interest in ancient tech,” Kandru murmured, eyeing the pistol at Jenivar’s side, “I do a small trade in such exotics and sundries myself...”

“Jenivar,” said Jenivar. “I am a Knight-Errant, called to serve the people. I am afraid I require only two things. First, directions to the nearest trading post or waystation. Second, the release of that child.”

“Child?” said Kandru, clearly offended. “This boy is my rightful property, though I was badly cheated by his former owners. The ungrateful brute disregards orders and shirks constantly. I would be better served by my donkey! I have no intention of losing him, not at the price I paid. He will learn obedience and loyalty soon enough. Isn’t that right, boy?”

“Yes, boss!” The boy’s accent was thick, lending an odd inflection to his words.

“I saw you beating him,” Jenivar said coldly. She drew herself up. “A Knight will not stand for injustice. A Knight defends the weak.”

“If I see any such notables, I shall promptly inform them of their duties.” Kandru spat over his shoulder, his expression as sour and unfriendly as it had previously been unctuous.

Jenivar bent to the boy. “Are you happy with your master? Does he treat you properly?”

“Yes, boss! Yes, boss!”

Jenivar was taken aback. “Really?”

“Don’t put too much stock in that. Those are the only two words he knows, likely by rote. I believe I mentioned that I was cheated on his price.”

“And yet you beat him for not understanding or following instructions?”

Kandru frowned. “I will treat my property as I see fit. The nearest trading post is Yellowcake, just over a day’s walk behind me. If you’ve no intent to barter or trade, be off with you, and be thankful I don’t demand payment for the water you’ve wasted.” He strode past, hauling at the reins of his donkey and tugging on the chain linked to the slave’s wrists. “Move, you worthless dracklespawn.”

But the chain slid free without the boy, who instead darted behind Jenivar to hide behind her legs. He had not been still or idle while he had lain in the dirt; Jenivar saw a bent piece of wire clutched in one scrawny hand. He babbled something in a

language she couldn't understand, but the urgent need in his expression was undeniable.

"This nonsense again?" Kandra flexed his hands. "Do you want to be tied to the donkey for the rest of the journey?"

"Yes, boss!" The boy stared at Jenivar, pleading.

Jenivar hesitated. Her course here was clear, but how would she complete her quest if she was saddled with the care of a helpless and frightened child?

"I wish to purchase your slave, Lord Kandru," she announced. She reached into her pouch and closed her gloved hand around a paper-wrapped packet. "I will pay a fair price. A Knight does not cheat or steal. I have rare herbs, Donnybell and Numb, other medicines."

Kandru turned back, his eyes now watchful and gleaming with excitement. "Medicines I have in plenty," he said, "but perhaps there are... more interesting artifacts in your possession."

Jenivar thought hard. "I have one or two gallons of fuel for a burn-engine."

"Does that weapon function?" Kandru said abruptly, pointing to the blaster.

"Why would anyone carry a weapon that did not?" Jenivar countered, feeling a twist of guilt. But really, it wasn't a lie, not exactly. And he had kicked the boy. She had seen it.

“A trade, then. The boy for the gun. The road is dangerous, and if you deprive me of my night-guard, you can at least arm me sufficiently against the dangers that remain ahead.” Kandru held out his hand.

Jenivar hesitated only a moment. Using her left hand, she pulled the blaster from its holster and offered it, upside-down.

“Would you be wanting a bill of sale?” Kandru asked, turning toward the packs on his donkey’s side.

“Is... is that necessary?” Jenivar asked.

“No,” Kandru said flatly. He turned back, the blaster’s power light glowing and the vents humming, and leveled it at Jenivar’s head. “I will be leaving here with my property. *All* of my property.” Kandru gestured at the boy.

Jenivar held up her left hand to halt him. This man had no honor, none whatsoever.

“Don’t think it,” Kandru warned. “I told you I trade in tech. I know how to wield a blaster.”

Jenivar did not move. She knew she would have only a moment to act once he discovered her ruse.

“Hands away from that sword, girl,” Kandru said again. “Now.”

“All right,” Jenivar said.

And she flung the paper packet of Hellflower extract into Kandru’s face.

He screamed and reeled backwards, dropping the blaster to clutch his visor and rip it away. Jenivar snatched it up, then shouted to the boy. “Run!”

She’d made it a few steps before Kandru’s mewling screams stopped her. “Rub sand in it!” she called to him. “Water only makes it worse.”

She wondered if she should go back to render aid; her herblore would at least ensure he didn’t lose his sight permanently. A Knight was merciful and would not leave even a fallen adversary helpless. But a Knight also had to protect her charge. She’d helped the slave-boy escape, but he would not last long alone. He was her responsibility. More than what she’d done to Kandru?

As she debated, Kandru lurched to his feet with an inarticulate roar of rage. Behind Jenivar, the slave-boy moaned in terror.

Jenivar fled, tugging the slave-boy after her.

* * *

Jenivar carefully scrubbed her hands with sand before removing her glove and folding it, inside out, into a spare pouch. The leather had protected her when she crushed the glass vial of Hellflower extract, but she didn’t want to risk any residue remaining on the glove’s palm. She had once rubbed absent-mindedly at her face while chopping Hellflower for processing;

her eyes had been swollen shut for a week, and that was fresh-picked Hellflower that hadn't yet had its potent chemical isolated and purified into crystals. Hellflower was a decent medicine, and in minute amounts made for fiery spiced meals, but it was a truly nasty weapon.

When she and the boy had run as far as they could—which wasn't terribly far, with the boy in the shape he was—Jenivar called a halt in the relative shade of a rocky outcropping and looked to the boy's wounds. He had had the forethought to grab one of the oversized waterskins from the pack-lizard as they fled. All Jenivar had thought to grab was her non-functional blaster.

“Smart boy,” she murmured.

“Yes, boss.”

Jenivar blinked. She had never been anyone's boss. “I know I was offering to buy you, but I don't want a slave. I want to help. I'm a Knight. It's part of the Code. You're free now.”

The boy stared at her with wide, dark eyes.

“I'm Jenivar, of the Spine. What's your name?”

The boy shook his head and gabbled at her in a language she didn't recognize.

“Jenivar.” She pointed to herself, then to him. “You?”

His eyes lit up with understanding. “Arturo!” he said, slapping his chest proudly.

Arturo was in completely inappropriate clothes, his arms and face almost entirely exposed. Jenivar set to work with a packet of Numb, dribbling the juice onto cuts and bruises, massaging it into the skin. She knew from experience that he would feel a faint tingle, then a spreading warmth and, as the name implied, numbness. Taken orally, it would knock a grown man out for hours. Jenivar saved half the packet and stowed it in her much-depleted herb wallet. She got out her spare jacket and draped it across Arturo's bony shoulders. It hung on him like a blanket on a fencepost. He looked down at himself clad in what was functionally a very baggy dress, then questioningly up at Jenivar.

"For the sun," Jenivar said, pointing overhead.

Arturo nodded. "Sohn," he said, mimicking her accent.

With some effort and a lot of gesturing and pantomiming, Jenivar managed to convey that she had come from the south, her home a place called the Spine. "Arturo?" she asked. "Arturo home?"

Arturo pointed vaguely toward the north, the sleeve of the jacket slipping over the ends of his fingers.

"That's where I'm going," said Jenivar. "Are there dragons there? Have you ever seen one?"

Arturo hesitated, his eyes darting anxiously. "Yes, boss?"

Jenivar sighed. The language barrier was proving troublesome. “Well, come on. We need supplies; with two of us drinking that water we’ll be lucky to make it to the trading post that... man mentioned.”

* * *

Arturo was a quick study and an insatiable learner. Only the relative barrenness of the landscape kept him from becoming a true nuisance, asking the names of every new feature they passed and trading Jenivar words in his own language. He laughed when she fumbled the unfamiliar sounds. Jenivar found herself feeling strangely happy. She had never had any siblings, and children at the Spine were rare enough that there was no one close to her own age. Most children took up their parents’ roles quite young and spent much of their time working. It was nice to have someone to talk to, even such an excitable and largely incomprehensible someone.

During the days of travel, Jenivar and Arturo made sufficient progress in mutual understanding that when they left the Yellowcake trading post—lighter by the weight of Jenivar’s sunshade and the now-useless fuel canisters but stocked with renewed provisions—Arturo was able to tell something of the town he came from.

“Home, gone! Bad. Very bad.” He flapped the arms of his too-long jacket like wings and growled deep in his throat. “Take

all. Gone! I only one. Men come and take me. Say ‘slave.’ Say ‘yes boss.’”

“Wings... a dragon? Was it a dragon that destroyed your home?”

Arturo shrugged. “Bad. Big bad. *Malochiones*.”

“Can you find your way back there?”

After some thought, Arturo nodded. “Many days.” He held up all his fingers.

“At least ten days, huh?” Jenivar frowned, hefting their bags of food and water.

“The men stop. Water. Food. I see.”

“Waystations? Caches of supplies?”

Arturo shrugged.

“Well,” said Jenivar. “I hope you’re right, because no Knight can refuse a request for aid against a dragon.” She hefted her pack and adopted her best forthright expression. “Come on, Art. We’re taking you home.”

“Yes, boss.”

* * *

It was twelve days, actually. The caches Arturo had indicated held stale water in wax-sealed casks, and food, primarily dried or heavily salted. Many of them were nearly empty, but there were clear signs of travel and something approximating a path. It seemed Arturo’s home had not been completely isol-

ated before the attack. Jenivar wondered if a rescue had already been mounted; if she was too late to slay the dragon herself. She wasn't even certain if she was allowed to hope that she wasn't, that the rescuers had failed and the dragon still menaced the area. It was Knightly to be bold and face danger alone, but it wasn't terribly Knightly to wish harm on people so she could save them from it. Arturo wasn't much help; even after Jenivar spent hours trying to explain her concerns, he only shrugged and smiled.

They passed a valley that had a familiar glassy sheen. How many Big Glasses could there be? Across the way, resting on the rim of the opposite side, Jenivar saw the open maw of a stone dragon skull. Behind it, the body humped, massive and threatening, and beyond that was a curiously squared pillar of gray stone, apparently hollow and riddled with jagged cracks.

Jenivar never knew what the town was called. She wasn't sure which of the words Arturo babbled was the name. It was a desolate place, whatever it had been called. The dragon had fallen splayed on the ground rather than curled, as the Spine was, and the gaping stone mouth led down a long, low tunnel to a massive city in the belly and below. Jenivar saw a waterworks that put the Spine's rope-and-pulley system to shame, several gardens, including an edible fungi farm and a smelting facility. There were also more esoteric workshops, full of steam

pipes and rusting gears, whose purpose Jenivar could only guess at. Filled to capacity, the enclave would have held triple the Spine's thousand occupants easily.

"But there's no destruction," she said to Arturo, who was pale and withdrawn. "I mean, things are knocked over and everything is dried up or run down, but how did the dragon get everyone without breaking open the ceiling?"

"Many," said Arturo. "Many flying. Big, but not so big." He shuffled his feet, sending echoes across the vast central area that still contained the detritus of what looked to have been a semi-permanent market.

"Big but not big, huh?" Jenivar poked at a fallen board with her toe, sending withered fruit tumbling away. Something skittered into the shadows.

Arturo huddled close behind her. "Yes."

What could that mean? A nest of hatchlings, perhaps? "Well, we just got here. Let's find a place to sleep and we'll start searching for spoor in the morning, okay?"

Arturo didn't answer. His eyes were black holes in the darkness.

* * *

Jenivar woke from a crushing dream in which Terk, grown to enormous size and sporting dragon wings, flexed hands made of crumpled cycle parts and gathered her up to swallow

her whole. His mouth opened to reveal a rushing torrent of water that wasn't water at all but the acrid rotgut Tymon favored, and at the bottom of Terk's gullet was Tymon himself, bloated and sweating, swallowing the flood as it poured down.

Jenivar fell, and came to herself amid a tangle of dusty blankets. Arturo's own sleeping roll lay crumpled on the floor. The room they had scrounged together was empty. A glowstone, nearing the end of its life, emitted a feeble radiance from the small ledge provided for that purpose. The heavy metal weapons rack they had pushed to blockade the door had been tugged laboriously aside, just enough for a slender form to creep out.

Jenivar frowned but could not muster much anger. She had lost her home voluntarily, but Arturo's had been taken from him in brutal fashion, and the only other person who cared that he was alive couldn't even speak the same language. Jenivar knew about needing to be alone and the healing that solitude could bring.

But she was a Knight, or she would be soon. And Arturo was her ward, her responsibility. She couldn't leave him out there alone; this place was not safe, not yet.

Outside, the dragon's central cavity opened up, darkness on every side. Jenivar was aware as she had never been in the Spine of how organic the dragon-stones were. The Spine was

old, and layered with tunnels, filled with platforms and rickety ladders, ropes and cubicles: the detritus of humanity. Here, in this place, Jenivar was only a speck of human life in the belly of an ancient beast, living in the holes left where its life had fled, scrounging the stones of its body for shelter. When the dragons had ruled the world, killing a dragon, even successfully wounding one, was sufficient to make a man a Knight, a hero whose name would live on in legend forever. The dragons had been so vast and so grand and so terrible. What, in comparison, was one human? How could a Knight have ever prevailed, alone against a dragon? It was not a comfortable feeling. Jenivar stared into impenetrable night with her hand on a stone that had once been the bones of a dragon and wondered if she really could slay a dragon if she met one. She wondered if she would even want to.

“The dragons are dead,” Jenivar said. Her voice bounced and echoed from the holes left by ribs and scales. “The dragons are dead, and there are no more Knights.” She felt something leave her with the words, and she could not tell if it was a loss or a relief.

Then she heard Arturo screaming.

She snatched up her sword and gun and fled half-clad into the darkness.

* * *

They'd taken him into a tunnel. Drackles, bigger than any she'd ever seen; some the size of rats or house-iguanas. They'd poured out of it like foul water and retreated just as quickly when she slashed at them with her blade. She waded into the fray, sword flashing, shouting a battle cry like the Knights of old. She'd killed two or three with every swing, but there were more, more, always more. Through the press, she caught glimpses of Arturo in the dimness ahead. At first, he'd clawed and flailed, but then he cried out and went limp. The bites were poisonous, after all, each one a tiny dose, but collectively...

That was the problem. Collective. The drackles moved as one swarm, and it gave them power beyond what any of them could have managed alone.

Now Jenivar crawled through the tunnel that was barely big enough for her scrawny frame, pushing her sword and gun forward. The empty cavern behind her hadn't been destroyed by some unknown terror; some nest of hatchling dragons breaking in. It had been eaten from the inside. By vermin. Nuisances. Pests.

Jenivar kept crawling through the dark, unable to see, unable to smell anything other than the fetor of the drackles and their slime on her sword; barely able to hear the ever-receding scraping and clattering of uncountable feet on rock, the slither of clothing and warm skin dragged by numberless pincers.

If they came back for her, they would swarm her, and she would be helpless. Her sword was almost useless in these narrow confines. They would bite and sting and smother her nose and lips with their shuddering carapaces, and she would sleep and die knowing that she had failed. There were no dragons to slay. Not anymore. There were only drackles and slavers and empty caverns. She would never become a Knight.

It seemed to be an endless nightmare crawl, but Jenivar had gone only fifteen or twenty meters when her sword tip dropped unexpectedly. She barely kept her grip on the hilt, scraping metal against stone. Echoes answered back from a much larger space ahead of her. She eased forward. The floor was only a few feet below the tunnel exit and stretched on farther than she could reach with her blade. Jenivar struggled out and stood in the dark. The surface below her feet had an unpleasant springy quality to it. Taking a risk, she thumbed the power on her blaster and held up the faint green glow to light her surroundings.

The walls were square, sharp corners forming a plain cubic shape. Jenivar, acclimated to the curves and bubbles of the Spine, found the shape of the room disturbing. Every surface, walls, floor, and ceiling, was covered with thin black fibers like roots. She reached to touch them and found them warm, al-

most hot to the touch. Ahead, a set of stairs rose out of the gloom. There was no sign of any drackles.

Jenivar stepped forward and heard a crunch. Something long and round moved under her feet. A bone, drained of every drop of nourishment and rendered brittle, either through age or some other mechanism. Tendrils grew into the sides of the thing, and she resolutely looked upward and gripped her sword more tightly.

Other than the thin coating of slime, the stairs were easy to climb. This had been a human place, once; the stone beneath was a different quality to anything Jenivar had seen and clearly not something the drackles had made. They were just occupying the space, filling in areas that someone else had built and abandoned. She refused to think about them any further.

Jenivar peeped over the lip of the staircase, her blaster growing warmer in her hands. She ducked back down immediately, quieting her retching as best as she could manage. Slowly, carefully, she moved again.

The floor above was the drackles' larder. Tendrils and slime coated everything, and the floor was pocked with shapeless lumps and uneven depressions. Every pile of extruded filth concealed one or more bodies, none of them moving. Drackles skittered haphazardly across the floor, pausing at this bundle or another to flense a bit of flesh with their jaws. The whole

room reeked of rot and drackle-spew. Jenivar stepped carefully out. The drackles here didn't seem to have noticed her yet. The bulk of the visible ones were busy at the far end, swarming over something Jenivar couldn't see. She thought she knew what it was. She walked, barely daring to breathe. The goal was everything.

Motion beside her foot broke her concentration. A dusky-skinned face with black, curly hair—just like Arturo's—stared sightlessly from one ruined eye socket. The rest of the face was covered in matted black crust, the color and texture of a drackle's body. Something moved in the inside of the head, a flicker in the tunnel of the macerated flesh. A miniature horde of pale, many-legged things burst out, swarming down the cheek and dropping to disappear in the layered crust of the floor.

It wasn't just a larder. It was also a nursery.

Jenivar didn't make the decision to start running forward. Her feet moved on their own. She would have told them to stop, but her mouth was busy screaming. Not pain, not fear, but anger. Drackles scattered from her path, a dozen crushed under her feet as she charged the mass at the far end of the room.

She launched herself at them and sprawled on the heap; punched out with the hilt of the sword, kicked and bit at the

endless wriggling forms. The largest one, its central body the size of her head, hissed and lunged at her with open jaws foaming with milky froth. Jenivar rammed her pistol down its throat and heard its insides sizzle from the overheating battery.

Suddenly, the swarm was gone, drackles scattering and receding into their hive. Jenivar lay across Arturo, whose skin was pale and unhealthy in the flickering light of the blaster's readout screen. He was covered with a thin glaze of the omnipresent tendrils.

She tore them away with cries of disgust. "Art! Arturo!" Jenivar shook him, but his head only flopped bonelessly with the motion. "We have to get out of here. We have to run!"

Arturo didn't move.

Around her, outside of the tiny ring of radiance, came the sounds of squelching and crackling. Drackles coming out of hiding. She saw the hive-substance heave and fracture by her feet, and a pincer as long as her forearm emerged. They were coming from every direction, and she had only a sword and a broken gun to face them.

She had two options. The Code told her that a Knight never gave in to despair.

That left one option.

She thought back to the lessons Groton had taught her about the care of a Knight's weapons and his admonishments

regarding the malfunctioning blaster. She then carefully broke every single rule he had laid out. She shoved every switch to full on the already-hot blaster, watched for the gauges to begin flashing red, and pulled the trigger.

The weapon clicked and squealed, unable to discharge the energy it had built up in its core. Jenivar tossed it to the middle of the room; the bodies squirmed beneath its crimson-lit arc. She tore Arturo from his half-made cocoon, threw him across her shoulders, and fled for the stairs.

Drackles boiled up after them, quickly filling the stairwell, but Jenivar had no intention of leaving that way. Instead, she sprinted up. There was a door at the top, which she shouldered through and slammed behind her.

The next level had less hive-stuff. The level after that had less still. Drackles, like the humans they had stolen, preferred the damp and cool of underground to the blistering sun. The frantic beeping sounded below, increasing steadily in volume and pitch.

Jenivar's legs burned and her arms ached, but she forced herself to run and recited the Knight's Code in her head. Another floor. Another. The walls had holes in them here, and she could see the sky, burning the red-orange of impending dawn. Jenivar kept climbing, so exhausted she was able to move only

at a walk now but knowing she had to get more distance before the blaster's power pack reached critical mass.

They burst onto the roof, she and Arturo, just as the sun crested the horizon. From below, the shrill alarm went silent, replaced with a subsonic rumble and the taste of copper in the back of Jenivar's throat. The explosion made a noise so loud it was like no noise at all, flaring orange light shining through the cracks and crevices at the base of the building like a second sun. Contained by the walls around it, it blossomed out of the cavernous belly and shot from the stone dragon's mouth. It looked like the dragon was breathing fire.

Just like the stories, she thought.

Beneath her, the pistol's blast vomited forth from the roof and shot up into the sky, a flare, a sign, a new-born star. Jenivar felt the heat rush through her, felt the stone beneath her threaten to melt away. *This must have been what it was like when there were dragons.* It was too much, and at the same time not enough. *This must be why we killed them, or why they went away.*

And then the blast was over. Half the building had been torn away behind her, and the smell of burning drackle wafted up on noxious black smoke. Jenivar stood with Arturo on the section of roof that remained, two tiny lives trapped on something far too large for either of them to encompass. The build-

ing trembled on its foundations, and Jenivar wondered if it would crumble. She held Arturo tightly and felt tears in her eyes when he stirred and mumbled incoherently.

They would walk down together, or she would carry him, and they would gather the dried seeds and hard-baked bread from the empty shell of Arturo's home, and then they would go. Back to the southwest, perhaps, or east or north, off to explore new lands and find a place where they could make a new home.

In the distance, something glinted in the dawn light; sand grains fused together into glass. The desert looked empty from here, but it wasn't. Not quite. There were no more dragons and humans lived in the holes left behind, but now she knew that there were monsters still, and heroes. Small monsters, perhaps, and small heroes, mean and petty and alone in scattered crevices. But the monsters hadn't stayed alone, and neither should the heroes. Out in the wastes was hidden life and unguessed danger. Even in the Spine, where the cold water appeared like magic and the herb gardens grew thick with secrets. Out there were people living in the jaws of dragons, thieves and cowards, merchants and guards, slavers and bullies, mothers and fathers, and every one of them the children of dragon-slayers. Knights, if they wanted to be.

"Look, Arturo," Jenivar said. "It's beautiful."

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Nathaniel Lee has an English degree and thus considers himself basically unemployable if he ever loses his current (unrelated) position. His short fiction has appeared in venues such as Penumbra, Escape Pod, Pseudopod, Flash Fiction Online, and Toasted Cake. His self-described sappy little story “The Alchemist’s Children” is in Alex Shvartsman’s Unidentified Funny Objects anthology.

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THE GODDESS DECEPTION, PT. 1

by Dean Wells

Chapter 1

Somewhere I've Never Travelled

They say home is a spiritual place. I've never been one to put much faith in that. Matters of the soul rarely mean a great deal in my chosen profession. Anarchists and sky pirates I can manage without a problem; it's selfless acts of the heart that vex me every time.

It was just after the Feast of Avalon, two weeks into what should have been a month of badly needed debauchery. I stormed into the *Victory's* helm room like a bandersnatch gone mad. One of the officers announced "Major on deck", to no great effect. Everyone else hurried about the toggles and the polished brass consoles as if I weren't there at all.

I dropped my satchel beside the ship's map table with a deliberately heavy thud. "Just once I'd like to finish a leave without somebody pulling rank on my backside." Captain-and-Master Johanna Marsh glanced up from the table, completely unfazed by my self-righteous bravado. She held a small prism of memory-glass in her hand.

“Agent Caul,” she said. “Welcome aboard. I do like the beard. You should keep it. Bathing wouldn’t kill you, though. If you need any help scrubbing the hard-to-reach bits, do give a shout.”

Johanna and I shared a long and decidedly labyrinthine history together; it’s the only reason she indulged the many variations of my moods. Tough as Bessemer steel, she was, and as history would have it, my former wife as well.

She tossed me the glass. I caught it easily in my mechanical grip.

“And this is what’s coming between me and two more weeks of rakish bliss?” I asked, peering at the ensorcelled pages deep within its crystal planes.

“Your new assignment. No protestations, Rom. We need you in the field as quickly as possible.”

“Ask me if I’m surprised.”

Gauges and dials confirmed that all three of the ship’s circumductors had been spooled and the lift-sails were fully deployed. Whatever had prompted the mission’s urgency had Johanna wasting no time. My reflection glowered in an unlit pane behind her, but I turned away. I knew what I would see: a grim amalgam of Man and alchemically forged Machine: unshaven, disarrayed, twin electrick orbs implanted where my eyes had once been. I didn’t care to see myself like that in Johanna’s

company, shouldering the reminders that I was nothing like the young and fully bodied officer she'd wed so many years before.

I'd been distracted since the moment I'd stepped aboard, and didn't like it. My gears were wound up like an eight day clock. I took a deep, pump-driven breath and only then noticed my partner, Special Agent Plio Plio Ah, leaning in the shadow of a bulkhead stanchion; stylish as ever, his arms folded in a pose that was thoroughly human. Not surprising since he had once again assumed a humanly form, his crimson skin bright against a black, exquisitely tailored suit. He looked far more like a decorated operative with Her Eternal Majesty's Special Investigation Branch than I.

"Plio, thank Heaven," I said. "What's this about?"

He raised a hairless brow. "Why yes, Romulus. I did enjoy my holiday. Thanks so much for asking."

Blast. "Nice togs, brother. You look sharp enough to shave."

He nodded at the belated acknowledgment. "Much better. I know earthly couture is a new statement for me, but my Gantish vestments were just so depressing."

The Symb'ral peoples of Gant, in their natural state, look like red-and-black centipedes, highly magnified. Ebony tendrils flowed from Plio's head like the lock-dreads worn by Jamaican

Maroons, woven throughout with beads and precious gemstones in the heraldic pattern of his birth-caste.

“If you darlings are quite finished....” Johanna rounded her station and dropped a photographic slide into the helm room’s projector. “We’re in deep shit, gentlemen. Have a look.”

An Engine-rendered portrait appeared in the light—the bust of a young woman in journeyman’s attire.

I stared. “Huh.”

“I thought that would shut you up. Kavita Patel, age twenty-three. Royal Company of Makers, Aetheric Telegraphy First-Grade, specializing in crystal resonance communications.”

She had flawless East Indian features: black hair brushed back and held in place with an ivory comb, eyes as black as the Aetherial Deep, a playful smile that rose just a bit higher on the right.

“A fortnight ago, the team of Makers that Patel was assigned to landed on Gamhanrhide to repair a series of ansible propagators. They separated to cover more territory. Six days into the mission, Patel vanished.”

“Reconnaissance divination...?”

“Has as yet found nothing.”

“That’s not possible.”

Marsh nodded. “Hence your conundrum.”

“Captain, is this not a matter best suited for the local constabulary?” asked Plio. “Why involve the Royal Flying Corps? Let alone Special Branch.”

“Whitehall is set upon keeping this in the family. The girl is affianced to Maxim Lysenko’s stepdaughter.”

I leaned back with the characteristic whir-and-clicks that accompanied my every movement. “And this Lysenko is...?”

“Adjutant Maxim Lysenko. Five-year veteran of the Neverland Campaign. And as of noontime tomorrow, my newly appointed Government Liaison. He’s transferring out from Muscovy as we speak.”

“Shit.”

“My word exactly. I don’t relish the idea of having the Queen’s eyes and ears aboard. For the crew’s sake I need to find Lysenko’s good side and stay there. We’ve just enough time to drop you two off and still make the rendezvous.” She pointed to the memory-glass. “Patel’s file, as compiled by the Seeing Stone. Her personal entries are included as well.”

I shook my head. “Something’s amiss, Captain. This smacks of calm before the storm.”

A wry smile I knew only too well lit Johanna’s face. “Mr. Beddington,” she said to one of her navigating officers, “show us Special Agent Caul’s drop site, if you please.”

“Right away, ma’am.”

She indicated the navigational display that dominated the center of the map table. “Watch....”

Beddington was already cranking the massive orrery of gears and globes that represented Great Albion and the known Aspects of the Aetherial Deep. Allies of Her Majesty’s Government were rendered in warm copper and bronze, adversaries in cold steel. Two adjacent globes swung into view before us: one representing the mighty orb Boru, the other its companion Gamhanrhide. The navigating officer focused a scrying-lens upon the latter.

In a flash we beheld the living surface of Gamhanrhide as if through a magick spyglass. Vast expanses of blues, magentas, and countless variations of earthly green rolled away in every direction. Farmland, enough to provide crops and botanicals to half the Outer Spheres. Yet far removed from the machines and automated processing centers that one would expect to find in such an environment, groups of men and women in stoic plainness worked the fields by hand, with scythes and hay forks and draft animals collected from Aspects throughout the Deep, and nary a steam nor motor-driven device of any kind to be seen.

“Hell and Damnation,” I muttered. “Luddites.”

“Renunciates,” Johanna corrected me. “Old Order. Funded by the Royal Society as a sociological curiosity.”

“Huh. I suppose they breed with their cousins and flog each other at every hour of oblation.”

Her eyes sparked with humor at the gibe. “They call themselves the Brethren of the Abiding Earth. And charming as your comparison is, I won’t argue it too strenuously. Wildcards *are* fostered here in the Outers. For all I know, Kavita Patel has run off and gone native. That’s why I need to send in two wildcards of my own.”

“It’s a moot point anyway.” I nodded at the amber waves of thaumically visible grain. “I’ve not been returned to active duty since Dr. Malign infected me with the rust.”

“Way ahead of you,” she said. “We’ve already conferred with the Medic-Elect’s office. Your internals have been successfully cleansed of mechanical pathogens for nearly a week now.”

“And?”

“You’re cleared for duty. There’s no time to test you in the field, of course, but they think you’ll acclimate just fine.”

“They think! I’ll take comfort in that when I’m swollen and dying from anaphylactic shock. There’s little enough left of me that’s flesh-and-blood as it is.”

“Whitehall wants the best, Rom. They want a Regulator. And I want you.”

“Well I for one,” said Plio, “think it’s a marvelous opportunity.” Cascading images reflected in his warm yellow eyes like

mirrors of polished gold. “My ancestors lounged about in salt-water bogs for half a million years. This will be a unique experience for me.”

“Not helping, brother.”

“Major Caul,” Johanna said, “my orders are to transport you to Gamhanrhide and to do so with haste. I strongly suggest you be ready when we arrive.” She reached up and patted my mechanized shoulders. “If not, I’m only too happy to bust your hard-wired bollocks back to Albion. The Queen still wants to present you with that knighthood. You can’t hide out here forever.”

No one used my actual rank unless they were displeased or gravely serious, and here I’d heard it twice in a handful of minutes. “Heaven’s Engines, you’re adorable when you blow your jets. How’s about marrying me again?”

Captain Marsh rolled her eyes and turned to leave, as a yeoman swung the heavy door open ahead of her. “Ask me again when you mean it, you bloody big Hero. Now go.”

* * *

Chapter 2

How Many Miles to Babylon?

Plio had already assembled our effects from ship’s stores, so we left as soon as I’d made myself more presentable. (I liked garments sewn with heavy Brobdingnagian silks, as I tended to

burst through fabrics of lesser strength with unfortunate regularity.) To my customary attire I added a heavy weapons harness, sapphire-loupe lenses for my eyes, and a black leather greatcoat and hat I'd won from a cardsharp on Ravenal. I was just glad to be out of there before meeting Johanna's new Government shadow. 'There's a New World to Put in Order' and all that Instrumentalist bullshit.

A new World.

Try 'all of Creation'.

HMS Victory tacked the aetheric winds clear of the realm beneath us and commenced the jump to Gamhanrhide. Ships-of-the-line were engineered to leap the eldritch void that separated the Aspects one from another, independent of the Instrumentality's great earthbound Mirrors. Our drop-vessel jet-tisoned immediately upon the disorienting lurch that carried us from Aspect to Aspect, then chewed up Heaven knows how many leagues in extreme gravitic deceleration before arcing about the giant orb of Boru to the docks high above Gamhanrhide. We arrived the next evening, local time.

Boru at first quarter loomed beyond the heavily riveted observation bays, half its colossal bulk ablaze in silver and ice-blue storms, the other half lost in darkness. A retinue of moons (of which Gamhanrhide was the largest) glistened within their shimmering baubles as they rolled across the great orb's night

side. Freighters and merchant rigs sailed between them with more than a few gun-brigs at the ready, armed to the teeth and bound for another border skirmish with the Umbrans. The Instrumentality's ever present show of force.

Our conveyance was waiting for us in the central berths, a Nash Ltd. Cloudshaker with Government insignia emblazoned on either side. The pilot introduced herself as Constable Eliza Gilhooley, standing ready next to a control chair wedged among levers and pedals.

“Welcome to Gamhanrhide, gentlemen,” she said in a chilly monotone. She was a slender young woman, blonde hair tucked under the cap of her standard-issue livery. “Chief Carmody inquires how long you plan to stay.”

Her tone made it clear that we were, in fact, not welcome at all.

“To be honest, Constable,” I said, “my partner and I shouldn't be here any longer than is necessary. But right now Journeyman Patel is hotter than a Symb'ral crèche in mating season, so for her sake let's you and I hope for a happy resolution.”

She didn't respond to my ribald analogy at first, then offered a slight nod. “We found Patel's flivver three days ago in Crannog Green, just after the Blessing of the Fields. There was no sign of a struggle inside or at the site. We have the vehicle in

custody now.” She said nothing more and busied herself with a list of preflight activities.

Plio winked at me. “Impressive. Diplomacy has never been your strong suit.”

I pulled a heavy sidearm from my weapons harness, a Navy variable-bore Persuader with deep scrollwork along the barrel and grip, as natural an extension of my mechanical hand as were wrist couplings and steel-jacketed fingers. “I’m a weaponsmith. I’ve got your diplomacy right here.”

“Let’s just hope you’re not compelled to use it.”

“No promises.”

With a gentle thrum the Cloudshaker rose and came about, trimmed for descent, with Gilhooley maneuvering us beyond the bright red warning banners. I settled back in a chair that was much too small and buckled my restraining belts.

“Caution,” reported the vehicle in its detached phonographic voice. “Extreme aetheric forces ahead.” Gilhooley silently mouthed the familiar phrase by rote. “Please maintain a constant velocity beyond the warning banners.”

Afterward, she leaned forward and spoke aloud into her annunciator. “Glencolumbkille Actual, this is Constable Two-One-Nine entering bauble periphery.”

“*Understood, Two-Nineteen. Is that you, Liza?*”

“Good morning, Hagan. How’s your brother?”

“Still kicking himself for letting you go at Charles and Miriam’s handfasting.”

“I’m sure there was wailing and the gnashing of teeth.”

“That there was, Two-Nineteen. See you down below in four, three, two....”

I felt the catastrophic shift in aetheric stress an instant before the Master Alarm blared.

Gravitation slammed us as if we’d sideswiped a giant wall. The force wrenched Gilhooley headlong into her flight console with a sickening thwack.

“Constable!” I bellowed. “Can you hear me?”

“She’s unconscious,” Plio shouted above the klaxon, his features distorting in the grip of mad centrifugal force. “I can’t see her flight instruments. Romulus, what’s happening?”

“Quaternary and tertiary Engines are nonoperational,” the vehicle said. “Please maintain a constant velocity beyond the warning markers.”

“Yeah,” I wheezed. “That.”

We were tumbling, the ship’s Engine masts threatening to shear off one by one in the violent torsion.

Vessels manufactured for passage through a buckler field were protected by no less than four Causality Engines. Lose your Engines, alter your speed or trajectory in any way, and the

bauble's elemental stresses will tear you apart in the blink of an eye.

Bolts securing Gilhooley's console were shaking loose; the massive thing would crush her bones if it wrenched free and fell—she being the only one amongst us with bones that actually *could* be crushed.

Another savage concussion outside the pressure hull.

“Secondary Engine is nonoperational,” the vehicle said. “Aetheric buffers have been reduced by three-quarters.”

“You really need to shut up now.”

“Please maintain constant—”

I drew the Persuader hand cannon and blasted the ship's speaker-horns.

“Romulus!”

“I was compelled.”

Analytical mechanisms implanted in my brain clacked defense scenarios while I forced my flesh-and-blood half to stave off blind panic. With mechanical strength, I ripped my restraints loose and climbed the pipes and ventilation ducts to the cabin's aft bulkhead, which was effectively now its ceiling. I grabbed the reinforced hatch and forced it open to access the air-lock, arguably the strongest part of the vessel.

“Get the constable, brother!”

Without a word Plio became elastic, stretching out of his clothes and restraining belts like red putty. He reformed naked beside Gilhooley—having no time for niceties or modesty—and began untangling her from her station.

With a final lurch, we dropped below the bauble periphery at last, but we were still falling freely. My augmented hearing picked up the hiss of pressurized air venting.

The hull had breached.

“Plio, on me! Now!”

He heaved himself upward, half his morphic body anchoring around my outstretched arm, the other half lifting Gilhooley. I hauled them both into the air-lock and sealed the hatch beneath us.

Gilhooley’s annunciator chimed. “—teen! Two-Nineteen! Glencolumbkille here. We’ve got you on the beam, Liza. Ambulances are at the ready—”

The rest was a blur of rapid-fire cause and effect: the final Engine collapsing, hull and flight deck tearing away from the air-lock in the furious blast of the wind. Emergency lift-sails deploying, slowing our descent just enough to prevent our splattering on Gamhanrhide’s surface.

“Hang on, brother!” I shouted, with Gilhooley cradled firmly between us.

We hit the ground in a fast tumble and rolled to a stop, plowing a soggy gouge through a bean field in the new and un-earthly World about us.

Silence.

Gilhooley's eyelids forced open, a trail of blood bubbling at her lips. "Please maintain a constant velocity," she sputtered, "beyond the warning banners...."

She was a fighter, with an admirable gallows wit despite her pain. I liked that.

Medical aid was seen to once the authorities and ambulance had arrived. Inquiries, debriefings, and analyses quickly ensued, occupying every moment of our ride into town, all focused on what in blazes had happened inside the buckler field.

Glencolumbkille-in-the-Spheres was the only city of any size to speak of on Gamhanrhide, built on and into the eastern slope of the Kilclooney Highlands. The Home Office was a two-story block of native graystone in the heart of the Government District, commanding an impressive view of the city and multi-hued woodlands below, with the crescents of Boru and its moons up above.

Executive Chief Constable Neville Carmody and his staff of tuppence rats greeted us with the static I've come to expect whenever Special Branch sticks its collective nose into local affairs. I had to point out that Kavita Patel was in service to Her

Eternal Majesty Gloriana the Everlasting, Empress-Queen of Great Albion and the Totality of Its Aetheric Possessions, and not part of Gamhanrhide's population. That made her my affair.

Hindering our investigation, of course, was the buckler event, which had proved to be much more widespread than first surmised. Reports were coming in via ansible from settlements all over Gamhanrhide. As nearly as could be ascertained, the aetheric forces that comprised the buckler field had surged beyond measure and decreased again just as rapidly, as if a colossal switch had been thrown. Vessels from every corner of the Aspect had been caught in-transit. My companions and I had been luckier than most. The bulk freighter *Princess Maud*—a crew of thirty and 365,000 tons of grain, stripped down to their base elements, trapped forever in orbital Hell. All in all, one hundred and twenty-six souls had perished. The search for Kavita Patel became little more than an inconvenience.

“The female is not here,” said Deputy Kuhl g’Gompta, an indentured native Gamhanid taurg. A hulking blue-and-green reptile with a slicked-back crest of feathers and razor-filled mouth; quick-tempered and mean as sin, as were the bulk of his race, but good to have on your side in a fight, or so I was told.

I shook my head. “There’s no certainty of that, Deputy.”

“Where is she, then?”

“That’s exactly what we’re trying to discern,” said Plio, sporting a new suit of clothes and none the worse for wear. “Perhaps if you were to focus that displeasure on the matter at hand instead of sparring with us, Special Agent Caul and I wouldn’t need to be here at all.”

“Enough! Prepare to be eaten.”

“And if you *ever* threaten to eat anyone again,” said Chief Carmody, “I’ll personally hoist you back to Albion in chains.” He was a seasoned veteran of the Second Umbran War; Acadia born, with a deep scar where Proletariat weaponry had cut to the bone.

Alongside him was the Most Reverend Brogan Thackerley, the Archbishop of Gamhanrhide and chief representative of the Earther Brethren—a rigid glacier of a man in an unadorned hat and stiff black frock.

G’Gompta stood there like a massive slab of scaly muscle, then muttered under his breath and retreated to a neutral corner.

Kavita Patel’s flivver was parked in an examination bay illuminated in bright electricks, ringed by forensic automata. Thaumic light coruscated over the surface of the vehicle while its interior was probed with x-ray and alchemic glass.

Plio joined me at the watch commander's station. Upon the main wall hung a map of Gamhanrhide's surface (which the locals had come to call "Harvest Home"), overlaid with a grid of the ansible network and Kavita's itinerary. Her confirmed stops were marked with red pins, only four out of her planned dozen stops: Fortingall, Watling, Crannog Green (where her flivver had been found), and Maeve. The next closest was in Ogham's Wood, but she'd never arrived.

I looked from the map to the flivver and back. Kavita's final journal entry wouldn't stop vexing me. *Lord of the Worlds Above, it's beautiful*, she'd written, in a hand surprisingly bold. What was beautiful?

"What do you make of this, brother?" I asked. "Her route couldn't have been any more random if she'd tried."

"Indeed. Not the regimented approach one would expect from an engineer." Plio's race had a natural affinity with the recognition of patterns, a handy talent for shape-shifters. "Perhaps 'random' isn't the correct word, Romulus. Try 'spontaneous'."

"As in...?"

"Consider what we know thus far." He counted off points one finger at a time, sprouting additional digits as needed. "Kavita was born in Indira Province, the second most densely mechanized conurbation on Albion. At the age of ten her family

immigrates to Whitehall, *the* most mechanized. She's never seen an environment as lush as Gamhanrhide, never been anywhere that was not irreparably blackened by industrial waste. She gads about the Aspect the moment she arrives—one day here, two days there....”

Realization hit me like a steel-toed boot to the head. “She was sightseeing.” I jumped into the examination bay. “Forget the map, people. Our girl could have gone anywhere, red pins or not.”

“That doesn't follow,” said Carmody. He pointed from various lenses and phosphor screens to the wall map. “She couldn't have travelled any further than Crannog. Her route was confirmed site by site in the fliv's hodometron.”

“Instrumentation can be compromised, Chief,” said Plio.

Eliza Gilhooley studied the map, bandaged and bruised from our ordeal aboard the Cloudshaker but still alert. “Who would have the means to accomplish that?” she asked. “The Brethren aren't rightly adept at such things. No offense, Archbishop.”

Thackerley nodded, though the effort seemed profoundly foreign to him. “Wisdom does not rebuke honest inquiry, child. Indeed, Agent Caul, whom amongst the faithful could possess such knowledge or skill?”

I had no answer for that, none at least that fit the parameters of a moon full of technological ascetics. I climbed into the flivver, an Empire Steamer with storage boxes strapped in back.

“She met a fine young lad on August Eve.” G’Gompta again, sliding his tongue over his teeth. “Likely servicing her tasty quim right now. Haw!”

Gilhooley glared at him. “Stick a sock in it, Kuhl.”

Plio glanced at me through the flivver’s windscreen. “With a fine young *lad*? Not bloody likely.”

Kavita’s Sapphic inclinations notwithstanding, I kept to the matter at hand. Gilhooley’s prior claim that there was no evidence of a struggle appeared to be true. I could find no sign of foul play, my eyes sweeping from one end of the magneto-electrick spectrum to the other, until I spied miscellaneous particulates beneath the dash. I focused my variable-loupe lenses into finer magnification and beheld botanical fibers and loose grains of soil. The constables’ analytical mechanisms had already concluded that none of the particles were remarkable. I looked back at the young fellow manning Deep Augury. “Break this down for me, son. What am I looking at?”

A kinetoscopic rendering of the plant fibers appeared in one of the phosphor screens. In flickering detail, it expanded to

reveal tissues of unearthly origin, each with accompanying text in a variety of languages, human and otherwise.

“*Tang’hng k’gud’ra*,” the constable said in the guttural croaks and hiccups that Gamhanids referred to as speech. “Still fresh, these. The essential oils have not yet begun to degrade.”

“And for those of us who don’t speak *Taurg*?” I asked.

Plio raised a red finger. “I speak *Taurg*.”

“Great thundering gear-trains, boy.” Carmody ushered the constable aside and took control of the kinoscope. Animation multiplied the tissues at highly accelerated speed. Tinted blue-green vines lanced and coiled across the screen, violet blossoms bursting opening at the end of each quickened stem.

“Once again, people,” I snapped. “I’m looking at what?”

“Twilight-fire,” grumbled Deputy g’Gompta. The mature plant spun slowly with the illusion of movement in the eldritch display, flowers bunched in clusters of deep luminescent purple radiating from cores of bright red.

“Twilight what?”

Gilhooley stepped between us. “The flowers, Agent Caul. They’re twilight-fire.”

“Tis a resinous vine native to Gamhanrhide.” Archbishop Thackerley again. “They spring up most everywhere this time of year. The tenant farmers find them quite the nuisance.”

“The early expeditionists weren’t too thorough when they cleared this Aspect for settlement,” agreed Carmody. “The orb’s covered in the dratted things. Hardly warrant a second glance at all.”

“You’re only saying that because you see them everyday.” I commandeered the machine and projected the floral display to every screen, scrying-lens, and exhibition device in the laboratory. The room was suddenly alive with twilight-fire, enveloping the space in bright constellations of purple and red. “What if you’d never seen them before?”

And suddenly Kavita’s words made an intuitive sense.

Lord of the Worlds Above, it’s beautiful.

The archbishop raised a bushy brow. “Why were none found in storage if the girl was collecting specimens?”

“Blessed be. She wasn’t collecting specimens,” Gilhooley answered.

“You’ve got something to say, Constable?” asked Carmody.

“Just that I like the agent’s sensibilities. Sir.”

“As do I.” Thackerley narrowed his eyes. “Within reason.”

I looked up at the big map of Harvest Home.

Plio leaned in. “You’re thinking again, aren’t you?”

“Humor me.”

“I always do.”

“Neville,” I said to the Chief. “I’d like a vehicle and the names of the officers you have in the field, please. Let them know my partner and I are coming.”

“Why?”

“We’re going sightseeing.”

* * *

Chapter 3

O Brave New World, That Has Such Bastards In’t

Chief Carmody, after several creative bouts of expletives and finger gestures, finally gave us his personal gyrodyne, a Peerless two-seat Speedtwin. We rose above Glencolumbkille on the pillar of dust kicked up by our rotors and circled the mountains in an ever-widening spiral. Our course would take us south and east through the Highlands, then north and west to the shore of the Great Ossian Sea and south again along the River Callanish. Since I was fabricating this plan from one moment to the next, Ogham’s Wood was as good a place as any to begin.

“I’m still humoring you,” said Plio.

“I appreciate that.”

“Aside from the missing woman, we’re looking for...?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll know when I see it.”

“This is that ‘gut’ thing again.”

“Afraid so, brother.”

“Ah. The cognitive power of human entrails. How is your headache?”

“Firmly entrenched between *dull throb* and *Merciful Engines of Heaven there’s an ice pick in my eye*, thanks for asking.”

Plio nodded. “I took the liberty of testing the air this morning on your behalf. The allergen-count is off the rails. You’re not acclimating as well as the doctors had anticipated.”

“Tell me about it. When we get home, somebody at the Medic-Elect’s office is going to pop his clogs.”

Despite the assurances of the Corps’ Most Learned and Distinguished Physicians, Plio and I both knew that I was still harboring aftereffects of the rust. The mechanical pathogen inflicted upon me by the mad alchemist Dr. Malign had taken a heavy toll, attacking the grafts and boundaries where my flesh and metallic augmentations joined together. Fighting the rust had so taxed my natural defenses that I’d since become vulnerable to the most common of secondary infections and allergies, maladies that able-bodied persons shrugged off with ease. And yet here I sat, returned to duty before I was ready and, worse still, fussed over by my partner like a mother hen.

I caught Plio staring at the immensity of forest and cropland below, the panorama broken only by steep hills and chains of lochs; native basilisks and other flying reptiles took to the

sky as we passed, sunlight glinting off iridescent wings. The Symb'ral race had even less experience with this type of environment than I, having come from an Aspect that was covered in swamps and steaming shallow seas.

Harvester mechanisms the size of houses criss-crossed the farms beneath us like great robotic armies. Every year the Instrumentality annexed more and more land from the Gamhanids, who, along with their great lizardy beasts of the field, had been nomadic herdsman for untold millennia. Virtually all crop automation on this moon was now tended by disenfranchised taurgs and their clockwork overseers in a myriad of ever-deepening tunnels, while the Brethren of the Abiding Earth were granted use of select tracts on the surface.

We arrived in Ogham's Wood and examined the ansible site, not finding what I'd hoped. Back again to Rannoch Mills and the Marches, then southeast following the forest roads to Senorach and Henge. It was the end of our first full day on Gamhanrhide, with false-night rapidly approaching—that period when the orb crept along its orbital rails into its companion Boru's great shadow, eclipsing the Sun from view. Plio was reading from the memory-glass when he cocked an ear to the ansible speaker-horn and adjusted the volume.

“—until first light tomorrow. Repeating: by order of the Home Office in Glencolumbkille, a wyvern advisory has been

issued to all provinces and municipalities bordering the River Callanish. All aircraft are ordered to land or secure safe mooring effective immediately until first light tomorrow. Repeating: by order of—

“A wyvern advisory?! What in Hell does that mean?”

Plio shrugged. “Here there be dragons?”

“This is bullshit. We’re not stopping.”

“I respectfully point out that we don’t know where we’re headed.”

“Special Branch has—”

“—the authority to supersede colonial laws, mandates, and customs. I’m aware. But consider, Romulus....”

“Here we go....”

“Perhaps, in the spirit of inter-departmental courtesy, it’s best we not alienate the locals any more than we already have.”

“They said ‘wyvern’, Plio. There’s a big difference between confronting giant flying reptiles and playing nice with the hay-seeds.”

“Exactly. And in that regard, perhaps it’s best we defer to both and not ignore the ban.”

“Perhaps.” I exhaled loudly with a few choice interjections, then pulled back on the throttle and banked us into a descending turn.

“Where are we going?” Plio asked.

“I’m deferring to your illimitable logic before I seize up from exasperation.”

“Ah. Very good, then. Perhaps—”

“Don’t push it, brother.”

We stopped at the river town of Dun Aenghus to wait out the flight advisory, setting down on a landing pad already filled with craft and moored airships. Gaslamps lit one by one as the luminous qualities of the Aspect’s native flora awakened, having long since adapted to frequent night and the shimmering aurora of Gamhanrhide’s buckler field.

We introduced ourselves to the local authorities with the intention of meeting their CO, one Chief Constable Marsallay Brome, but the constables-on-duty informed us that she’d been called to head off a possible situation, at a pub on the town’s main thoroughfare. I decided to seek her out, to use our forced downtime to glean anything, even if ancillary, that might aid our investigation. Plio opted not to join me, choosing instead to access the great analytical engine on Albion known as the Seeing Stone.

The night air carried the smells of wood-smoke rising from countless chimneys and the discordant hum of luminous motes the size of my thumb flitting about streetlamps and above the cold waters of the river. I kept thinking about the petals of twilight-fire we’d brought with us from Glencolumbkille. Kavita

had touched petals just like them; she'd picked them, held them in her hands. Those flowers were the key. I just couldn't recognize the lock.

Dun Aenghus after dark was full of farmhands and laborers from the granary docks intent upon getting drunk, rowdy, and rude. (Considering that most of them claimed to be ascetic renunciates, I was hard pressed to identify what exactly they'd renounced.) A public house named Hundred-Hand Harry's sat at the end of its block on High Street. Shouts and laughter pealed through the windows as I crossed the cobbled lane, weaving between heavily laden wagons and men on the backs of exotic riding-beasts.

Chief Brome was outside the bar looking in through the door, clearly preoccupied with the goings-on, her hand resting on her holstered sidearm. She was a full-figured woman, older than me but not by much, with hair the color of steel wool pulled back in a ponytail.

"Chief?" I asked. "I'm Special Agent Romulus Caul."

"One of the Regulators, yes. We were told you'd come to Harvest Home. Welcome."

Brome's demeanor was open and congenial enough, but I was feeling neither. "Special Branch is investigating a disappearance," I said. "I thought it best that you and I meet and come to an accord before I proceed any further."

“The vanished Maker, I know. Glencolumbkille sent us her dossier, and my people will offer any assistance, of course. But you’ve lost me, luv.” She cocked her head. “Exactly what kind of accord are you expecting? Dun Aenghus wasn’t on the woman’s itinerary. She had no reason to stop here.”

“And my only reason for stopping is in deference to your flight ban. You know I can countermand it.”

“Ah. In that case, I’d advise that you not,” she said. “Whatever happened in the sky last night spooked the local population of wyverns into a frenzy. One of those monsters alone can take down a gyrodyne. Three or more, a fully loaded dirigible. We don’t want to chance it happening again.”

“Horrrifying, I’m sure.”

She stepped back. “Are you a gambling man, Agent Caul? Wyverns are nocturnal and black as night. You’d never see them coming.”

In point of fact, I *was* a gambler, but baiting Chief Brome into a jurisdictional pissing match wasn’t the prudent thing to do. She knew it, and I myself had been down that road too many times with Johanna. I swallowed my sour disposition.

“Well, then,” I said. I held out my hand, and was relieved when she accepted it. “My partner and I are at your disposal for the duration.”

“I appreciate that,” she said. It was the first time she’d smiled since our conversation began. She looked back inside the bar, and I followed her cue.

It was a crowded little dive, heavy with the odors of roasted hob and cutty-fish. Her deputies had said there might be trouble here, but all seemed harmless enough. Simply furnished, with a herd of barmy young boozers, many of them pilots downed by the advisory. Most were clean shaven; only a few wore the traditional beards of men fully baptized into the community. On the other side of the room, keeping to themselves, were native taurgs downing drinks the size of wash tubs. A red symb in natural centipede form scuttled back and forth behind the counter—Harry, I presumed—serving up libations with five sets of his hundred hands.

“Lively place,” I said.

Brome shrugged. “Not customarily. They’re still winding down from Lughnasadh. August Eve,” she answered my unspoken question. “Old calendar. Beginning of the harvest season. Barn dances, thanksgiving for the grain, sturdy young men getting bladdered and pissed....” Hoots and the crash of breaking furniture accentuated her point. “The bishops turn a blind eye to it this time of year.” She looked me up and down with the shrewd eyes of a horse trader. “You’re quite the sturdy man yourself. The workmanship is remarkable. Does every—?”

She trailed off, but I knew the query all too well. *Does everything work?*

I'd first heard those words a decade before on Albion, in New Philadelphia, after three-quarters of my body had been blown to Hell and back. Arms, legs, and most everything in between.

I felt the pressure of the Chief's fingertips on the artfully scrolled chest plates beneath my garments (Plio wasn't the only one with a sense of style), which, in turn, housed the cardio-respiratory pumps, pistons, and valves that kept my human half alive; gifts from the Crown after I'd thwarted the would-be assassination of William, Lord McKinley, then the governor-general of Her Eternal Majesty's possessions in North Atlantica. Total rewire job. Industrial alchemy, a soul bound in burnished steel.

Our attention was thankfully drawn back to the pub before I could answer. A boy who looked like a weasel sat next to the staircase, loud and drunk off his ass. A serving girl in frills and black lace struggled in his lap. Her features were rendered in rich deep azure. A blue symb, in human guise. Her color and lack of heraldic beadwork marked her as having been born into Gant's lower castes, a menial in their Aspect's red-dominated culture. The weasel was all over her, his hands locked about her wrists.

“Laney’s a tough girl,” Brome said. “She can take care of herself....” But Brome’s hand tightened around her sidearm nonetheless.

I turned up my aural augmentations.

“You’re lookin’ powerful likely tonight, Laney,” the weasel said. “C’mon here an’ give us a snog.”

“Axel, keep it up and I’ll snap your twig from your berries.” Despite her retort, though, the tendrils writhing on her head belied her agitation.

He laughed. “You’d best mind that sass, girl. Me an’ my lads are gonna own this town. Our blessed Lady might not fancy me no symbie whore then.” He planted his lips on her smooth blue neck.

Laney cursed in the Shaper’s Tongue and drove a spiked heel onto the toe of Axel’s boot. He yowled and doubled over. She spun free and slammed her knee into his weasely face, then in the blink of an eye reverted to her true Symb’ral form. Black lace ripped to shreds as her spine stretched and arched into a long serpentine ‘S’, fifty pairs of blue segmented legs erupting from her sides.

The boy’s head snapped back, blood spraying from his nose. Another blink of the eye and Laney was human again, covering her nakedness with scraps of lace.

Axel's posse moved as one and pinned her. He jumped to his feet, hands over his face, gore streaming between his fingers.

"Get away from her, dammit! Get away!" He whipped a gun from his ratty overcoat and leveled it between Laney's golden eyes.

The weapon shone dully in the amber light: an Umbran Immolator. Dammitall! It was a blunt, ugly thing; its chitinous surface rough and scabbed over, as if it were made of materials that had once been alive. The pistol grip had been adapted for the human hand, but it was a device unmistakably manufactured by the Proletariat of Umbra-Nine.

What the bleeding Hell was it doing here?

"I knew it! Shit," Brome hissed. "Cover me, luv." She drew her sidearm and bolted round the corner into a side alley.

The mechanicals in my chest hummed into overdrive. Having been raised in the backwoods of Westsylvania, I'd seen my share of drunken indiscretions (and participated in more than I cared to admit). Most resulted in a bloodied nose or a night spent cooling off in the neighborhood lockup. But some of them turned nasty, and this one had "calamity" written all over it.

I pulled my Webley-Electrick Nullifier from my weapons harness, non-lethal but wickedly effective. The Immolator was

still trained on Laney's head, pyromantic energies building within the spinning parabolic mirror affixed at its end. I had to time this to the instant.

Chief Brome stepped in through a backroom door and inched forward, her sidearm fixed on the boy's head. "Axel Creevy. Don't be a fool, lad. Hand that dratted thing over."

"Bugger off, you old chook. I'm gonna learn this pretty blue bitch some manners!"

"I'd take the Chief's advice, son." I stepped through the front door, arm locked, the Nullifier trained upon his heart. "You've got exactly two seconds to get righteous. Put the gun down. Right now."

He flinched, turned his eyes to me but kept the heat-ray pointed at Laney. My steel-jacketed fingers tightened around the Nullifier. Precision wireworks give me perfect hand-and-eye coordination. I never miss.

Axel swung his weapon, and we fired. My leather greatcoat burst into flame at the same time as a stream of electrified flechettes from my Nullifier hit him dead center. The Immolator flew from his hand.

"Grab it!" someone yelled.

Axel's boys leapt from the right as the remaining farmhands dove from the left, two waves crashing together with the mystery gun as the prize. And me caught in between. They hit

from both sides and knocked me down, oblivious to the flames, the weapon rebounding from my fingertips. They wanted the Immolator, and I was simply in the way. I shoved back, which meant a good dozen of them went flying into walls and support beams.

“Go back to the scrap yard, Tin Man!” Fists and thrashing limbs hoisted me up in a concerted effort (despite the weight of my augmented mass) and hurled me through the front windows. I hit the walk in a cascade of flying glass. I leapt to my feet, tearing off my burning coat when earsplitting static burst into the center of my brain, followed by a voice I could not place:

“Caul! Get down!”

I dropped as the Immolator fired again, golden-white beams igniting what remained of the window casement above my head.

That did it. No one shot at me twice. “Marsallay!” I called. No answer.

I drew my Persuader hand cannon; loaded half a dozen pulse rounds and fired into the eclipse-blackened sky. If the Renunciates really were trading with Umbra, Heaven knew what other contraband was present.

Six sharp cracks roared, six alchemic pulses to overload wiring on either side of the thoroughfare (myself excluded, pro-

tected by military-grade fortifications). Most of the windows in Dun Aenghus went dark.

I dashed across the lane, grateful at having escaped near-certain immolation. My guardian angel had focused a tight audible burst directly into my aural implants. An impressive trick if you had the wherewithal to do so. My annunciator chimed—Plio.

“Your timing leaves much to be desired,” I said.

“If you could refrain from trouble for more than five minutes’ time, this wouldn’t be an issue. What in blazes is going on over there?”

“Barroom brawl out of control, brother, with a complication you won’t believe.”

“I’ve got Brome’s deputies with me. We’ll be there any moment.”

“Give them my thanks for the save.”

“What save? I’ve been with them all the while.”

“No one called?”

“Called whom?”

“Blast, never mind. Just keep your heads down. They’re armed and barking mad.”

“Heed your own advice, Romulus. My head will grow back. Yours will not. And don’t even think about unleashing the Gaze of Doom.”

“Nag, nag, nag.”

Brome’s officers hurried round the corner no sooner than I’d reloaded, some of them packed into steam lorries and others on the backs of riding-beasts: chirons, striders, galleytrots, claws and hooves scraping the damp cobblestones. Plio hopped down, his own weapon drawn. (Topped down was more like it, having never ridden a live mount in his life, but he recovered nicely.) Brome herself reappeared, battered but indomitable, with Axel in one hand and her sidearm in the other.

The brawl fell apart as quickly as it had come together, vanishing into lanes and alleyways thick with river mist and the dark glow of plant life. August Eve antics out of control, they all agreed. The taurgs had no such excuse; they just liked a good row. It was Brome’s business now, regardless, as was her insistence that none of her officers possessed the means to broadcast the warning that had saved my life.

The presence of Umbran weaponry in a tank town like Dun Aenghus was another matter entirely, one the constables wanted to keep quiet at all costs. The Immolator was nowhere to be found, spirited away in the confusion of the brawl—presumably the reason I’d been lobbed through the window in the first place. I put the question to our boy Axel as Chief Brome snapped a pair of electrick shackles on his wrists.

“You mind your place, cobber,” he said, still groggy from the Nullifier. “I got nothin’ to say to the likes’a you.”

“Keep yammering, son, and see if we don’t go a few more rounds.”

The front of his shirt was torn open. Tattooed in silver beneath the hairs on his chest was the circle of a full moon flanked by two crescents, one on either side.

“Come along, Axel,” said Chief Brome. “You’ve bodged up enough here already.”

“So that’s it, then?” he slurred. “The great Lady passes judgment and the very Earth trembles in awe and humility....” He made a grand show of bowing deeply at the waist, wrists still shackled, then rammed his head into Brome’s gut. “...but you gotta find me first, you sorry crone!”

I caught Brome, and Axel was gone, hooting and howling as he bolted up the thoroughfare.

Then the sky was torn by a deep harrowing screech.

It was upon him in an instant—swooping down on wings as black as night, the long serpentine tail slashing the air like a whip. The thing caught Axel in its talons before he could utter a word and soared upward again to be lost in the night, black-on-black. But not before I saw the boy ripped in two, viscera raining down from both halves of his torso.

Plio was beside me. I hadn't even realized he was there. "What...?" he stammered.

Sometimes there are no words. I couldn't say a thing.

He shook himself and brushed the dirt from his otherwise spotless attire. "I've had just about enough excitement for one outing, thank you very much. What in Niista's Name happened?"

"Lughnasadh," I finally answered, not knowing what else to say.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Old calendar."

"Ah."

The blue symb Laney watched us from Hundred-Hand Harry's, having wrapped herself in a tattered blanket. She caught Plio's eye, then backed through the broken door into the dim amber glow of gaslight.

Plio raised a brow and followed her inside. I trailed behind. Smashed furniture and glass covered the floor. Harry scurried about in a mad frenzy, whistling and clicking and pushing three brooms at once.

With tentative steps Laney approached Plio and knelt before him. His birth-caste held a queer theological significance that an iconoclast like myself couldn't begin to understand, though he was happy to drone on about it without end. The two

spoke in whispers. He reached down and touched her hands, his fingertips melting into hers, red into blue, in a ritual born thousands of years ago on Gant. Communion on a biological level. I looked away. Shit like that unnerved the Hell out of me.

Plio introduced us once their ritual was completed. “Special Agent Caul, this is Lan Ylan Ir.”

“Are you hurt, milord Romulus?”

“You know me?”

“Word gets around. The Earther Brethren aren’t as simple as they appear.”

“I’m fine, thanks. High and fly and too wet to dry.”

Laney stared.

“That’s alright,” Plio assured her. “I don’t understand what he’s saying half the time either.”

“You stood up to those cobbers by yourself,” Laney said. “It’s rare that anyone ever does that for me.”

I brushed debris from my high collar and necktie. “I was lucky.”

She hesitated, then pulled us away from the broken windows, away from prying eyes and monsters hunting in the dark. She wanted to share something, clearly, but was reluctant. Or afraid. Likely both.

“Laney, I’m looking for a girl who came to Harvest Home and never found her way back again. I need to find her. And

I'm counting on the expectation that word really does get around....”

She glanced outside to the horizon darkened by Boru's great shadow, at something only she could see. “I don't know where she is. But Baloq the Beatified may well guide you to where she *was*.” Laney offered us an empathetic smile. “I wish you both well. Good night, milords.”

Plio blessed her, then she knelt before him one last time and departed upstairs.

I rubbed the back of my neck; a force of habit, as most of my body no longer possessed the muscles with which to feel stress in the first place. “And Baloq the Beautiful is...?”

“Baloq the Beatified,” Plio said. “He was Fourth of the Seven Priest-Kings of Iy'samine during the Fifth Gantish Age. Exceptionally fierce in battle. It's believed his blades were the manifestation of Death itself. Paradoxically, he advocated charity for the poor and dispossessed. Castes like the one into which Ylan was born regard him as something of a patron saint.”

“And that helps us how?”

“It doesn't. As much as Ylan is of the opinion otherwise, our honored dead have no communicative powers from beyond the grave.”

“At this point, I’ll take any opinion I can get,” I said. “Talk and walk. I need to catch up with Chief Brome.”

I left a few pounds sterling on the countertop to help Harry cover his losses, and we stepped into the lane. Plio drew Kavita Patel’s memory-glass from his pocket and studied the glowing script within it.

“Whilst you were busy playing knight errant,” he said, “I confirmed that Kavita’s hodometron has indeed been compromised. I submitted my analysis to the Seeing Stone. The conclusion is certain.”

“Damnation. Now we’ll never get this put to bed.”

“Not necessarily. Shadows of past configurations are often left behind in a device’s clockwork movement. Fortunately, I have more than a passing familiarity with the interpretation of patterns.”

Touché. “So what was altered?”

“Unknown. Given enough time I can use the hodometron to back-trace her vehicle’s actual route, but at the very least it will take....” His voice trailed away as he read. “Orda’s Eyes.”

“What? What do you see?”

He waved me off. “Nothing. Honestly, my mistake.”

I snatched the prism from his hand. Displayed within the alchemically rendered ledger were the names of ansible sites Kavita had not yet inspected; among them Blasket and Ith

along the Callanish, and Myddleham-on-Tyne further eastward in Fianna Province.

I read the names again. Myddleham. Myddle....

“Plio. That patron saint. What did you call him?”

“I know where you’re going, Romulus. Ylan was mistaken.”

“Plio!”

“Right. He was Fourth of the Seven—”

I pulled him away from curious passersby and steered us next to the soot-covered bricks of a smokehouse.

“That’s it, brother. Kavita went to Fianna. That’s what Laney was trying to tell us.”

“And you’re basing that on Ylan’s turn of phrase? I can interpret ‘fourth of seven’ any number of ways, all of them equally valid.”

“Don’t interpret. Take her words literally. What is the fourth position of seven?”

Plio hesitated. He was caught in the double standard of a provincially driven symb assimilating into the modern age of Instrumental Enlightenment. His insular perspective wouldn’t allow Lan Ylan Ir to act beyond the limits of her station, even though his “humanity” was telling him quite the opposite.

He sighed. “It’s the middle.”

“Laney told us to go to Myddleham, brother. The only way she knew how.”

“And you believe her?”

“I do.”

He grumbled. “Entrails again.”

I looked down Dun Aenghus’s lanes to the river’s edge and the horizon beyond. Couldn’t see a thing. But past the deep blue and black was something Laney did see, and that was good enough.

* * *

Chapter 4

The Shape of Things to Come

We were on our way before second dawn—the Sun’s emergence from Boru’s shadow—flying above the northward road to Dalriada as if we were returning to Glencolumbkille. The thought of being followed hadn’t escaped either of us; at first opportunity we arced about and headed east through the Belagog Expanse to Fianna, speeding over patchwork fields large enough to swallow small nations. Plio was at the helm. My headache had returned with a vengeance, a continuous pounding throb behind my facial plates. I administered myself a liberal dose of laudanum and settled back, closing my eyes.

Umbran weapons and wildflowers. How in blazes were we supposed to find Kavita with that?

Plio woke me as the rugged hills of the Fenian Ridge rose beneath us. We followed the silos and docking masts of a grain

distribution facility to a nearby cluster of river towns, then dropped altitude and came about.

Myddleham-on-Tyne was one of the smaller of the Renunciate communities but we'd arrived on market day. The hillside lanes bustled with men and women in hook-and-eye plainness, most of them driving gigs and buckboards pulled by animals from Aspects scattered throughout Creation; domesticated rotchets and m'ugs tramped alongside them as would earthly dogs. The steep terrain inclined further, climbing into a group of high knolls.

"Plio, set us down!" I said. "There!"

He landed the Speedtwin on loose black dirt. I jumped out and ran for a better view. There it was. By Heaven, I was right after all.

Nestled in a glen of heavy native ebonyleaf was a chapel abandoned since the Before Time, its walls overgrown with blue-green vines. Broken windows reflected Boru and the baubled faces of its moons overhead.

The glen was covered in twilight-fire.

Plio caught up with me. "Sacred Provenance River...."

The grass was thick with them. Exotic flowers of purple and red blanketed three-quarters of the slope.

I stood there and heard Kavita Patel's voice as if she were alongside us, the wind rustling her long black hair.

Lord of the Worlds Above, it's beautiful.

"She was here, Plio. She was here, I know it."

"You never cease to amaze me, Romulus. Remind me to give Ylan due credit in my report."

I climbed into the gyro. "Now we begin the real work, brother."

We followed our map back to the ansible site, Kavita's most likely destination: a large tract of farmland in one of the high valleys overlooking the villages below. A half-timbered cottage stood in a clearing, surrounded by hawthorns and yew imported from Albion. A small barn and outbuildings in the back, along with silos and what looked like a fanning mill.

An elderly man sat on the porch, cooling his brow with a tattered hat. He was a long, gangly old gaffer with brown skin darker than mine and clothing patched many times over. A white beard hugged the lines of his jaw. He stood as we landed outside the open gate.

"This is not at all what I expected," Plio said.

"What has been? Commence with a full-circle sweep, radial increase every twenty yards or so. I want to know what's out here."

Plio reached behind the seat and withdrew a divining-assy from his field pack. "What about our friend over there?"

"I'll see to it. He might be more comfortable with me."

“Right. Says the mechanical man with electric blue eyes. Do me a courtesy and be nice. He looks like your great-great-grandfather.”

We stepped out of our conveyance as Plio focused his assay on the green Fenian countryside, wreathed in mist spilling through gaps in the ridge.

“Good day, sir,” I said. “If you don’t mind we’d like a moment of—”

The farmer bolted inside and slammed his door with a crash that shook the house.

Plio glared at me.

“I was nice!”

“You could’ve done without the silly blue lenses.”

The muffled scrape of claws on gravel sounded on the road behind us. A peace officer and his mount emerged from round a bend and slowed to a loping gait, the strider’s narrow tongue testing the air.

“Once more unto the breach, dear friends,” I muttered.

Plio followed with an all but invisible nod of his head.

A blonde youth in Government livery swung down from the saddle. Perspiration darkened his hat and riding cloak, and a badge of office was pinned to his vest. Despite the whiskers on his face, the boy barely looked old enough to shave.

“Mornin’, gentlemen.”

“Constable,” I said.

“Deputy Chief Constable, truth to tell. Thought I’d stop by and—blessed be.” He looked at the beadwork in Plio’s tendrils and lit up like a beacon. “Cor. Ascendant caste, innit?”

Plio raised an eyebrow in quiet appreciation. “Very good, Deputy. Fifth Sect of Gant, Chromatic Semitone. Keepers of the Sacred Stones of Veo Veo Vash.”

“Brilliant.”

I watched the bizarre exchange for a moment. “You’ve got quite an eye for Gantish heraldry, Deputy. Get out of these valleys very often?”

“What? Oh, no sir.” He blushed and stepped back. “My cousin Gilbert had him a scholarship to Oxford-on-Athene when he was younger. Sent me copies of his schoolbooks an’ such.”

“I’m Special Agent Caul. My friend with the stones is Special Agent Plio Plio Ah.”

“Hollis Foley, Junior.” He shook my hand. “Talk from the lads in Glencolumbkille says the Hero of New Philadelphia is on the loose. You’re a right long way from home.”

“We’re sightseeing,” said Plio.

“Tell you what. Glencolumbkille may as well be on the other side of Creation. I reckon I don’t have to say nothin’ to ‘em if you don’t.”

I nodded. “I appreciate a man who goes his own way.”

The boy smiled again and patted the strider’s sinuous neck. It was a handsome animal, a lanky feathered reptile built for speed. “Go get somethin’ to eat, Dejah. There’s a good girl.”

Foley’s overgrown lizard snapped its jaws and trotted off in the direction of the barn. Striders were carrion eaters. I didn’t want to think about what its meal might entail.

I looked out over the cropland instead. “So what’s the story, son? You find our girl yet?”

“Ain’t no one *to* find. It’s pretty quiet right now. Most of the fields are lyin’ fallow. Just finished up a harvest of witch’s minge to feed the livestock. Winter wheat’s next. I ain’t seen nothin’ to prove your bird made it this far at all.”

“Is that a fact.” I didn’t say anything about Kavita’s vehicle or the wildflowers. “What’s on your assay, Special Agent?”

“Minge.” He pointed to the phosphor screen.

“Brilliant.”

“Traces of field corn, chaff, assorted grains. I’m noting the presence of helium, however. Very faint. It could be an echo of noble gasses from the bauble periphery overhead. The stratum here is highly reflective.”

“Helium?” I read the gauges on his bewildering brass-and-wood apparatus. “We’re going about this backward. Run another assay, a deep one. Access the Seeing Stone again and cross-

reference all known constants in surroundings such as these. I mean all of them, native and imported. Factor out the common cause variables. We'll see what's left."

"That will take some time."

"Understood." I tapped the corner of my eye. "Telegraph the results directly through here. I want to review them firsthand. Deputy Foley?" I pointed my unshaven chin to the farmhouse.

"Name's Linus Caines," Foley said. "He's a harmless ol' sod. Been here forever."

I found myself wanting to pace, stroking the unaccustomed presence of whiskers on my cheek. We were getting nowhere very quickly.

"Deputy, I have it on good authority that my girl made it as far as the ansible propagator in Myddleham-on-Tyne. Which against all logic is apparently right here. So if you don't mind...."

Foley counted the stitches in his boots. I thought he might keep us at arm's length like the constables in Glencolumbkille had, but he turned and faced the house.

"Linus? It's Hollis Foley. Why don't you c'mon out here an' talk to these gentlemen." Silence. "Linus Caines! I don't want a have to come in there an' get you!"

“We just want to ask him a few questions, son. He’ll feel better if you’re alongside us.”

“These are my people, sir. Let’s go pay us a visit.”

The boy was turning out to be a stand-up fellow. I liked that. We approached the house.

“I’ve got the assay conjuring,” Plio said. “We’ll receive the results soon enough.”

We stepped onto the porch, and I knocked on the door.

“Mister Caines, this is Agent Romulus Caul from Special Branch. Deputy Foley is here with me.” I knocked again. “Please open the door, sir.”

Nothing.

I motioned to Plio that Foley and I would circle the house and come round from behind. He nodded and prepared to hold Caines’s attention from the porch.

“Mister Caines,” said Plio. “A young woman with the Royal Company of Makers may have passed this way. Anything you might know with regards to her whereabouts would help us immeasur—”

A shrill mechanical whine rose from inside the house, and the door exploded in wood and high-density shot. Plio flew backwards and crashed to the walk with a nauseating thud, wet goo spurting from a dozen holes in his chest. I grabbed Foley’s cloak and threw him sideways, diving after him as a second ex-

plosion thrummed. Railgun. A Goliathon 8-gauge, from the sound of it.

“To Hell with you!” A man’s voice, deep and heavy with years. “Sod off now while you’re still able!”

I pressed Foley between my back and the wall; drew the Navy Persuader, and fixed it on the gaping cavity where the door had been.

“Plio!” I yelled. “Plio! Status, brother!”

He lay sprawled on his back, immersed in a pool of the thick lavender ichor his race used as circulatory fluid.

“Well, that’s bloody wonderful,” he answered, his voice strained and gurgling. “I just bought this suit.”

He stopped twitching, and the gleam in his eyes went dark.

Shit! Shit, shit. I should have seen this coming. Damn my cocksure arrogance.

“Back me up, Hollis.”

I dove through the ruined door and rolled behind a quilt-draped settee. Another blast roared overhead and shattered a cupboard behind me. The old fool was packing a Hell of a wallop, I’ll grant him that.

Foley’s sidearm barked in response. I waited, my vitals pumping madly, then surveyed the room as best I could. It was finished as befit a simple country house: low ceiling, narrow

doors and windows, a wood-burning stove to heat the small space.

A door slammed in the cook room, followed by rapid foot-falls. I ran in. Breakfast dishes were drying in the basin. Through a kitchen window I saw Caines duck into the barn, the railgun cradled in his arms. I followed, charging across the yard in anger-fueled overdrive.

I slid to a stop beside the barn doors and weighed my options in the space between seconds. I spun inside...

...and was immediately confounded by the perspective-shift of dimensional transition. The walls and slate roof receded away faster than my electric eyes could follow.

The barn was a foldbox, thaumaturgically built to occupy more space inside than it did outside. Dammitall. Harvest Home was proving to be an endless pain-in-the-ass full of surprises.

It was dark, just a few shafts of sunlight beaming through gaps in the slate, and was thick with the brown odor of animals and dry grass. I expanded my eyes' capacity to see in shadow and fired the Persuader two or three times at random.

"Come on out, Pop," I said, circling the cavernous space, keeping my back to something solid at all times. Luminous motes flitted out of the straw underfoot with each heavy step.

“I’ll bring the whole place down if I have to. There’s nowhere you can go.”

Which was a lie, of course. There was no way to tell how many exits had been built into the foldbox. The space was taken up by threshers, grain cradles, and mountains of rolled hay; enough to service the entire community. Draft animals were lowing in stalls along the wall, most of them galumphers and great horned thunderbacks. All I could do was keep the old fool occupied while Foley took him out from behind. I cranked up my hearing.

“Let’s talk about the girl, Pop. Her name is Kavita. Did you know that? A happy girl, with a beautiful young woman at home waiting to marry her. You’ve seen Kavita, haven’t you. Couldn’t have missed her, a pretty thing like that. But we’ve got a problem, Pop. We don’t know where she is, and I’d truly like to believe that you do. So why don’t you tell me about it. I’ve got plenty of time.”

Timbers creaked, above and behind.

He was in the loft.

“Clear off!”

I turned, Persuader up, as a heavy cask of rainwater crashed down like one of the Hercules mass-drivers they use to drill tunnels in the Downbelow. I spun out of the way as it hit the floor and shattered. Metal bands whipped back, slicing

above my eyes, slamming into my shoulder. My arm rang like steel before I'd even hit the ground.

I lay there, hanging onto consciousness, blood trickling from my forehead; heard the rainwater draining through cracks in the split timbers, wet splashes echoing far away. There was an open space beneath the barn, a deep one.

Caines peered over the loft's edge, crying, the railgun shaking in his hands. He was older than I'd thought, his face like care-worn leather.

"I ain't touched that girl," he wept. "I just ran her off is all. Why cain't you buggers let me be?"

Dust and allergen-laden straw floated down about me, as if my less-than-perfectly attuned immunities weren't taxed enough already. I was sure my shoulder was broken. If I'd been any slower, my entire left side would have been crushed. I silently cursed the alchemic wirework in my mechanicals and their dratted capacity to relay pain.

A placement-marker blinked in my eyes—the telegraph from Plio's divining-assay, still functioning. The familiar dots and dashes of Mr. Morse's code slid across an exhibition display that only I could see:

Seeing Stone access/begin: Compositional cross-reference aborted. Target area obstructed by ionized helium, surface to minus thirty feet. Reconnaissance divination cannot

*penetrate. Adjust assay constants to include ionized particles.
Seeing Stone access/end.*

What the Hell was this? Helium....

Aw, shit. *Foley, you stupid, stupid bastard....*

The young deputy chose that moment to catch up with us. He ran into the barn through a side door and skidded to a stop three or four yards away. A nasty welt blemished the side of his face where I'd tossed him on Caines's porch. Blood matted his beard.

His weapon was drawn and pointed directly at me.

I thought it best not to move any more than was necessary. The electrick recoil was agonizing. I really wanted to be back on Johanna's ship.

"Nice to see you, Deputy," I said through clenched teeth, born of equal parts pain, anger at Foley's betrayal, and my own failure to reason it out sooner. "Where've you been, time enough for tea or did you need to use the loo?"

"I'm sorry, Agent Caul." Perspiration beaded on his brow. I could see straight down the barrel of his gun. "You should have left when I told you there was nothing here to see."

"That did occur to me, but then we would have missed all this country hospitality."

"Again, I'm sorry."

Think fast, Regulator. My weapons were mere inches from my fingertips but even I couldn't outpace a bullet. The pounding in my head increased by the second.

"I have to hand it to the old codger," I finally said.

"Meaning what?"

"I keep thinking about Kavita Patel, you know, and the ways in which she might have disappeared. It gnaws at me. You can bury her, chop her up, even burn her to ash with only bits of teeth and bone left behind for your trouble. But you know what really sparks the imagination? You can turn her invisible, so to speak. It looks as if your friend Caines here figured out a way to accomplish just that."

"What's goin' on down there, Hollis?"

"Linus, not now."

I had to keep their attention focused solely on me. "Know anything about glamours, Deputy?"

One of his eyes twitched. "Can't honestly say that I do."

"Neither do I, truthfully, not in the strictest sense. Now I don't mean glamours of a thaumaturgical nature, the sort that can hex a man into seeing something that isn't really there. I mean quite the opposite—a glamour within which you can't see anything at all."

"What's he on about, Hollis? He talks like a book."

"Linus, please!"

“You see, Deputy, if a steady current of electricks were to be administered to a gas—a noble gas—it could result in some very interesting military applications, which is something I do understand. The presence of, say, ionized *helium*, to pick a random example, can be manipulated to confuse reconnaissance divination, the same way a glamour can confuse the mortal eye.”

“Do tell.” His gun hand was trembling, his shirt soaked through the chest and down his sides.

“It’s all those charged particles swirling about each other like hornets, deflecting an assay’s line of sight as would a carefully aimed mirror. Now what do you suppose old Linus here would want to hide under all this hay?”

Foley said nothing.

“Not that it would be without some degree of difficulty. I imagine specialized schooling would be required, and the only place with a curriculum like that in the Outers is Oxford-on-A-thene. Your cousin, yes? Assuming he’s not just a figment of your imagination in the first place.”

Something dark passed over Foley’s face. “I’ll thank you to speak of my family with respect, sir.”

“Strike a nerve, son?”

“Gilbert met his end when he was fourteen. We were climbing atop one of the harvester automatons and he fell. I

watched him break his neck, Agent Caul. Don't dishonor him again."

I suddenly became aware that Foley's vocal pattern had changed. The thick rural inflection was gone, his bearing and manner more refined. When the Hell had that happened?

"One can argue," I countered, "that you're better connected to the Aspects outside Harvest Home than you let on, Deputy. Your interest in Agent Plio Ah was a bit too on the beam."

"It wasn't a problem to switch the University records from my name to Gilbert's. I had to."

"You use a dead boy to hide your identity, then lecture me about respect?"

"I said it wasn't a problem, damn you. I didn't say it was easy."

"He's talkin' bollocks, Hollis!" pleaded Caines. "Don't pay him no mind!"

"Shut it, Linus!" Foley said. "Sweet Mother Earth, both of you just shut it! I have to think this through."

A silhouette moved in my peripherals. Caines's callused finger tightened around the railgun's trigger. I needed just a few more seconds....

“Let me be honest with you, Hollis. I don’t understand what’s happening here. I truly don’t. But I will, I promise you that. Just as surely as I’m taking you down right now.”

“Drop the weapons!” Plio stood in the open barn door, thick purple fluid dripping from his ravaged torso. He had a Sharps Emancipator luminiferous carbine trained on Foley’s sidearm and looked transcendently inconvenienced.

Foley raised his pistol. Caines flinched sideways. A ruby flash sliced across the boy’s gun hand. He screamed and fell. I grabbed the Nullifier and fired into the loft. Caines was out before he hit the hay-blanketed floor.

I held on a beat, then collapsed back into the mud and started to breathe again. It felt good.

Plio dropped his Emancipator and knelt beside me, examining my arm and the gash above my eyes. The center of his body had been shredded in the railgun blast, but he’d managed to pull most of it back together. Thank Heaven for the resilience of his liquid physiology. You can’t keep a good metamorph down.

“Honestly, Romulus, look at this mess. I can’t take you anywhere.”

I wiped blood from my eyes and sighed. “I love you too, brother.”

I dosed myself with industrial-strength pain foggers and immobilized my arm in a make-shift sling. It would've been easier just to detach the arm altogether, but the flanges and swivel-joint in my mangled shoulder were bent out of true. Plio bound the men's wrists with electrick shackles and buckled a set of brain-obfuscators about their heads. An offshoot of shock therapy, the devices fed current through the cerebrum and played havoc with intelligible thought, rendering subjects quite docile in the process; provided, of course, they didn't chew through their own tongues.

I looked back at Foley, his eyes twitching and vacant. "They've got a glamour, Plio."

"I saw the analysis on my divining-assay. Romulus, these are hardly the adolescent pranks of harvest season. Something is going on. Something big."

"You can say that again."

"Any idea where the Engine is hidden?"

Rainwater trickled through the timbers of the barn floor, splashing down into the open space below.

"Yeah. A pretty damned good idea, at that."

* * *

[Concluded in Pt. 2, in Issue #143](#)

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Dean Wells's short fiction has appeared in Ideomancer, Eldritch Tales, ShadowKeep Magazine, 10Flash Quarterly, and The Nocturnal Lyric, as well as multiple times in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and he is a member of SFWA. Visit him online at www.darkapostle.net.

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COVER ART

“Sojourn,” by Ferdinand Dumago Ladera



Ferdinand Dumago Ladera is an acclaimed artist born in Iligan, the city of waterfalls, situated in the southeastern part of the Philippines. He was trained and received a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts at FEATI University in Manila, Philippines. He has a diverse background as a fine artist, graphic designer, and photographer. He specializes in fantasy and science-fiction illustration. View more of his work at his website, ferdinandladera.com.

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

ISSN: 1946-1046

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

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