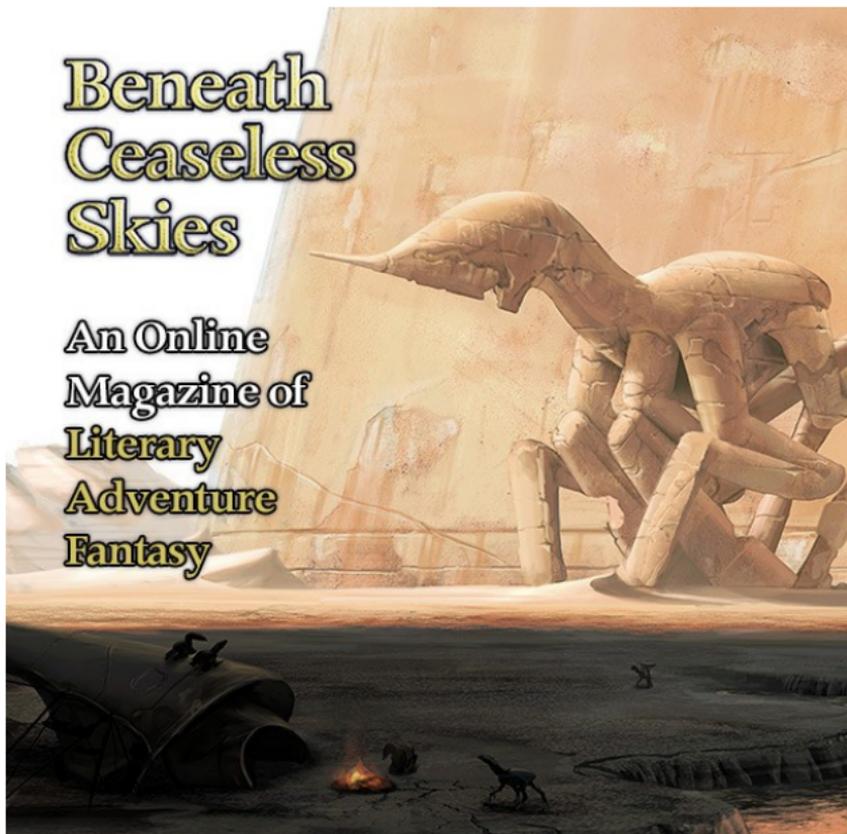


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THE USE AND THE NEED

by M. Bennardo

From three blocks away, Tom Brown could hear the big bass drum from the Women's Christian Temperance Union band as they thundered down Second Avenue. With each distant boom of the drum, something pinched him in a tender spot in his skull just behind the bridge of his nose.

Two blocks away, the loud notes on the Sousaphone tuba could be heard too, like a righteous foghorn warning every workingman and vagrant this side of the Bowery to mend his course from the shoals of sin.

At a distance of one block, Tom Brown could usually pick out the tune if the elevated wasn't rattling too loud outside his saloon windows. This morning, like too many others, the band had settled on "Bringing in the Sheaves". Tom Brown poured himself a finger of whiskey and emptied it down his throat in the vain hope it would dispel his gathering headache.

"I do detest that awful song," he said at last, to no one in particular.

Patrolman Cartwright jerked awake. He had slumped over a table shortly after his shift had ended at eight in the morning,

and now two hours later was the only other person in the saloon. For a moment, he looked around in alarm, then subsided contentedly as he heard the band approaching.

“Ah,” said the patrolman. “The W.C.T.U. approacheth. Do you think they’ll stop here, Tom?”

Tom Brown twisted his bar rag impotently in his hands. “They almost always do.”

* * *

A few moments later, the band came to a halt on the sidewalk outside the saloon in a confusion of clanging tambourines and pious, wavering voices. Outside the windows, the knot of marching women was just visible, white ribbon bows fixed to their hats.

As the song died away, a woman’s voice rose up in tones of exhortation. The stabbing in Tom Brown’s skull spread across his forehead, and he poured himself another finger of whiskey.

“That sounds like Sister Decker,” said Patrolman Cartwright, his ear straining towards the street.

Tom Brown let out a sigh. “It almost always is.”

* * *

As the sound of cheering rose from the sidewalk outside, the saloon door rattled open and two women stepped inside, stern-faced and unshrinking. The older carried a small yellow

book in her hands while the younger still bore her cornet, now blissfully silent.

“Good morning, Sister Decker,” said Patrolman Cartwright, as he boozily tipped his cap to the ladies. “Good morning, Sister Jute.”

“Patrolman!” said Sister Decker, the older. “You ought to be ashamed to be seen here, day after day.”

Patrolman Cartwright merely smiled and tugged down on his navy blue uniform tunic, puffing out his chest until the gold buttons strained precariously. “That’s a hard line to take with a productive citizen and officer of the peace, madam.” He extracted a handkerchief and hiccupped discreetly behind it. “Especially during a moment of off-duty relaxation.”

“In that case,” sniffed Sister Decker, “I’m sure Mrs. Cartwright would rather see you home.”

“She expressly forbids it, in fact,” said Patrolman Cartwright, with an air of satisfaction. “On account of my proclivity to be underfoot.”

Sister Decker opened her mouth to answer, then thought better of it. Turning instead to the bar, she peered down her nose at the saloon-keeper.

“I suppose I ought to be ashamed of myself as well,” drawled Tom Brown.

“It is you who have said so.”

Tom Brown sighed. “And I suppose I’m to get another lecture on the evils of drink and my contribution to the wreckage of mankind.” He motioned to the window wearily. “I didn’t make Second Avenue what it is—nor the Bowery neither.”

Sister Decker shook her head. “Sister Nation has showed us that mere words have their limits. Until the government makes an amendment banning all alcohol sales, we must take the enforcement of *moral* law into our own hands.” Sister Decker turned to the other woman and nodded. “Sister Jute...”

At once, Sister Jute opened the saloon door and beckoned outside.

Tom Brown crossed his arms over his chest. “That maniac that you call Sister Carry Nation is in Kansas—though I could wish she were somewhere hotter and more miserable yet. But seeing as she doesn’t seem inclined to visit New York anytime soon, may I be so bold as to inquire which one of you ladies will do the honors of the hatchetation?”

Sister Decker merely smiled curiously and indicated the door.

* * *

It took a few moments for anything to happen, but at last there came a sound like clanking from outside, followed by something like the whoosh of a steam valve. Then more

clanking followed at regular intervals, and at last—some minutes after Sister Decker’s dramatic flourish—the portal darkened as someone approached the door.

Or rather, *something*.

Clank. One foot crossed the threshold, heavy and square.

Clank. A second foot joined the first, taking small, clumsy steps.

Clank. Clank. Clank. Whooooooooosh. The body of the monster swayed through the door, huge and grey, knocking chips from the door frame on either side. A black hat perched on top of its great round head, the ends of a white ribbon bow streaming down its back.

Besides the hat, however, the thing wore no real clothes, so the circular stamp reading VULCAN IRON WORKS—WILKES-BARRE, PENNA. was perfectly visible on its boiler-like torso next to a W.C.T.U. badge. Below, a chain-link skirt preserved some amount of modesty, swaying and rattling awkwardly around its legs with every awkward step. Its thick metal arms were jointed and riveted, and it gripped a formidable hatchet in its clenched and rigid hands.

Just inside the saloon, it suddenly stopped, with a great gout of steam escaping from a stovepipe at its back, then reverted to regular puffing. As it stood, its head swung from side to side, as if surveying the saloon with its dead, painted

eyes, and its mouth sprang open mechanically like a cuckoo clock about to call the hour. From inside its metal head, a voice echoed out as if from a phonograph cylinder.

“There is going to be a change in my life,” said a woman’s voice, thin and ghostly through the open but unmoving mouth.

“Good God,” said Tom Brown at last.

* * *

“I present to you,” said Sister Decker serenely, “Sister Nation’s patented and improved Hatchetation Engine.”

Tom Brown called to Patrolman Cartwright. “Make them get that thing out of here!”

But the patrolman was slouched down in his chair, only his eyes and cap visible above the top of the table. “It is forbidden for an officer to execute his public duty,” he intoned solemnly, “while under the influence of intoxicating liquors.” He hiccupped. “Or so I assume.”

Sister Decker pointed to the puffing, clanking mechanical figure. She was reading from the small yellow book, which bore the inscription of “Instructions for the Just and Moral Operation of Your Steam-Powered Hatchetation Engine”.

“Just as this engine is driven by the hot coal-fire in its belly, so too does the liquor YOU peddle—” (and here, Sister Decker haltingly shifted her finger to point at Tom Brown instead) “—so too does the liquor YOU peddle drive the

violence, the apathy, the meanness, and every sort of immoral passion in the men who drink here!”

Tom Brown growled. “I tell you again—I’m not responsible for anybody after they leave my joint!”

Sister Decker drew herself up indignantly, her cheeks flaring red as she looked up from the book. “Why Sister Jute’s own husband—”

“To hell with Ned Jute! It’s not my business to tell him when to go home or what to do when he gets there!”

The infernal engine clanked forward a few more steps, its face gazing impassively over the top of Tom Brown’s head. Then its mechanical mouth popped open again. “I don’t want to strike you,” called the phonograph recording eerily, “but I am going to break up this den of vice.”

At that, the engine made a feint towards the bar, its arms puffing and straining upward on groaning pistons and then falling quickly, the blade of the hatchet whistling through the air.

Though nothing had been hit, Tom Brown leapt back and cursed. “Can that infernal steam woman see what’s she doing?”

“I suggest you vacate the area of the bar,” said Sister Decker coldly, “as it will soon be fully hatchetized.”

“Peace on earth,” scrolled the phonograph voice, as the engine’s arms pistoned up once more. “Good will to men!”

Then the hatchet dropped, the iron arms falling with the weight of an anvil upon the bar. Wood splintered and glass shattered, Tom Brown's empty tumbler exploding under the blow. The arms slowly retracted once more amid a great cracking as the blade of the hatchet unstuck itself from the dented planks of the bar.

* * *

"You still refuse to do anything, you gutless Cartwright?" called Tom Brown from where he was sheltering under the smashed bar. The infernal engine was whooshing again as it vented more steam, preparing for another swing of the hatchet.

"Out-of-control conveyances are the jurisdiction of the fire department," answered the patrolman's voice serenely from the other side of the saloon. "Though the owners may be liable for damages, and so I will secure these women." Next followed an incoherent mumble. "Presently...."

Another terrific blow fell, this one cleaving the bar in half, caving in the whole structure over Tom Brown's head. He yelped and scurried out from underneath, just in time to see the hatchet rising again—this time with his felt bowler stuck on the axe blade.

White-faced, Tom Brown reached up to pat the crown of his head, but he found it still intact. He turned furiously to

Sister Decker. “It’s no fault of yours that I’m not split like a cantaloupe!”

Sister Decker was quickly flipping through the instruction book. “Yes, well—hmmm.... Perhaps, having learned the moral, it would be better to end the lesson.... Somehow....”

“Peace on earth,” droned the Hatchetation Engine again. “Good will to men!”

At that, Tom Brown picked up his broomstick and vaulted over the ruined bar. He menaced the machine as best he could, jabbing at the thing’s painted eyes and its round iron chest. All that resulted were a series of dull clangs. With one final heroic jab, Tom Brown succeeded in connecting with the area roughly equating to the left armpit and was satisfied to hear a rivet pop off under pressure from the steam.

“I’ll teach you to hatchetize *my* bar!” bellowed Tom Brown. He jabbed again at the weak spot, dislocating part of the collar on the left shoulder and rocking the machine slightly on its feet. Still jabbing, he turned his head to roar at Sister Decker. “And don’t think I’ve said all I’m going to say to YOU either!”

Suddenly there was a snap, and the broomstick was torn out of Tom Brown’s hands as if by a cyclone. He whirled around just in time to see one half of it strike Patrolman Cartwright across the buttocks as he dove for cover and the

other half fly through his liquor shelf and into the mirror behind the bar.

But that wasn't what really transfixed Tom Brown's attention, nor was it what prompted a string of extraordinary profanities to issue from his mouth—and neither was it what caused Sister Decker's rebuke of the blasphemy to die unuttered upon her own lips.

The cause of all that, instead, was the Hatchetation Engine itself—now spinning around the saloon floor with a dislocated left arm, scalding steam pouring from the gap in the joint, hatchet swinging free and wide on the unrestrained right arm, flailing in every direction in wide, unpredictable sweeps.

Crack. The hatchet buried itself in the wall.

Smash. It broke free and flung six feet to the left, shattering what was left of the bar mirror.

Zing. It rang through the air, striking nothing yet fanning the face of Tom Brown as it passed.

Tom Brown and Sister Decker both wilted before the onslaught, driven back into a corner of the saloon as the hatchet whirled wildly before them—splitting tables, smashing chairs, and even knocking a shower of imitation crystals and brass fittings down from the chandelier.

“Peace on earth!” said the phonograph for a last time, as the Hatchetation Engine loomed close, the two victims dazzled

by the flash of the spinning blade before their very eyes. “Good will to men!”

* * *

Tom Brown was never really certain just what happened next. He was vaguely aware of being dragged away on jellified legs, duck-walking behind an upturned table as the Hatchetation Engine ricocheted around the saloon floor in a frenzied, jerky waltz.

He also had a somewhat less clear memory of something streaking past him a few moments earlier—something ducking and diving amid the whirling hatchet and the scalding steam, something quick and lithe that paused at the Hatchetation Engine’s stovepipe before jumping back to drag Tom Brown and Sister Decker safely away.

Catching his breath at last behind a wall of overturned tables and chairs, Tom Brown looked at the other three humans huddled near him—from the useless Patrolman Cartwright to the crestfallen Sister Decker to the suddenly flushed and bright-eyed Sister Jute, her breast rising and falling heavily.

“Why, Sister Jute,” asked Tom Brown, “what has happened to your hat? And your corset?”

But Patrolman Cartwright’s arm dragged him suddenly back towards the floor. “I recommend a more horizontal

posture, good friend Brown.” A loud bang suddenly came from the other side of the tables. It sounded like something was trying to get out from inside the Hatchetation Engine. “And a short moratorium on questions.”

The bang was followed by another, and then a more substantial clang, and then a rapid knocking, and a quick succession of sharp shots like the detonation of a string of fire crackers.

Then, finally, a loud sharp whistle pierced the air, like the boiling of a hellish tea kettle, followed by a deafening crack and a sudden rain of projectiles against every vertical surface of the bar.

“Steady, steady,” said Patrolman Cartwright, as a shower of flying rivets bounced around the saloon walls amid a chorus of tinkling glass. Then at last, after a few seconds of silence, the still-burning ends of a tattered white ribbon bow fluttered down from the air and landed next to Tom Brown’s hand.

And then, only then, did the four stand to survey the damage.

* * *

“Madam,” said Tom Brown shakily as he shoveled up a little pile of glowing coals and dumped them into the now-dented spittoon.

“Madam,” he said again, turning humbly to Sister Jute. “I don’t know how you learned to think or move so quickly in the face of such furious violence.... But if you hadn’t clogged that stovepipe with your hat and cornet....” Tom Brown’s face blanched. “Well, I hesitate to consider the outcome.”

Sister Decker cleared her throat tentatively and read out from the little yellow book again—but now in a far less assertive voice. “Just as this engine is driven uncontrollably by the hot coal-fire in its belly....”

Tom Brown waved her off. “Yes, yes,” he said. “I understand.” Turning to Sister Jute again, he hung his head. “I’ve been wrong, madam, and I’m ashamed to think I’ve had any part in your training for such an emergency. If I ever open this place again, Ned Jute will never drink here again.”

Sister Jute said nothing but simply smoothed her wrinkled dress.

“And neither will anyone else,” continued Tom Brown sullenly. Then added: “To excess, I mean.”

Again, Sister Jute said nothing.

“Aw, hell,” said Tom Brown, throwing down the shovel with a clatter. “There are saloons enough on Second Avenue. I’ll open a lunch counter instead.”

At that, Sister Jute smiled.

Patrolman Cartwright clapped Tom Brown on the back. “A noble and enlightened decision, sure to elevate this quarter and its inhabitants,” he intoned. “I only regret that I shall no longer have occasion to haunt the premises myself.”

“Perhaps,” said Tom Brown, “the ladies would not object to one final drink?”

“Yes, a valediction!” said Patrolman Cartwright. But then, as he surveyed the wreckage of the bar, his face fell. “If there is anything left with which to valedict....”

Tom Brown extracted the shattered remains of a bottle of brandy from the wreckage of the bar. Its top had been sliced off and most of the liquor spilled, but a couple fingers of brown spirits still sat in the bottom. Pouring it into two of the least damaged glasses, he passed one to the patrolman and kept one for himself. “What shall we drink to?”

“Why not drink to the original of the late Hatchetation Engine?” suggested Patrolman Cartwright. “Sister Carry Nation—whose work and writings are the occasion for this valediction.”

Tom Brown only sighed but lifted his glass.

“To the USE,” roared Patrolman Cartwright, holding his own glass high and proud. “And the NEED!”

* * *

But Tom Brown never drank, and even Patrolman Cartwright found a hand on his arm before he could bring his glass to his lips. For the saloon keeper's eyes had strayed from the officer to Sister Decker and Sister Jute—who were both now pale and shaking, the shock of the moment having worn off and the terrifying nature of the encounter catching up with their sober nerves in a rush of sensation.

“We’ve had our cups already this morning,” said Tom Brown, “or else we’d be as bad as they.”

“Hmph,” answered Patrolman Cartwright, in the tone of one not fully convinced.

But as Tom Brown passed his glass to Sister Jute, so too did Patrolman Cartwright gallantly hand his to Sister Decker.

“Mark my words,” added Patrolman Cartwright with a sigh as he eyed his swiftly diminishing valediction. “When the history of this day is written and published in pamphlets across the country—as you surely know that it will be—a discreet curtain shall inevitably fall *here*, lest a moment of honest humanity destroy the everlasting moral of the tale.”

But Tom Brown answered nothing at all, and instead merely watched as the last two drops of liquor he would ever serve disappeared forever from view.

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*M. Bennardo's short stories can be found in [Asimov's Science Fiction](#), [Lightspeed](#), and [Shimmer](#), as well as multiple times previously in [Beneath Ceaseless Skies](#). He is an editor of the *Machine of Death* series of anthologies; the second volume, [This Is How You Die](#), was published by GCP in July 2013. He lives in Cleveland, Ohio, but people anywhere can find him online at www.mbenardo.com.*

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CELESTIAL VENOM

by Garnett Elliot

Senjam Singh arrived at the plantation just as the sun was retreating behind the stone bulwark of Mount Muhundyana. Neat ranks of emerald-hued brush marched up the rolling foothills to disappear in a heavy mist descending from the mountain's slopes. Were Senjam a poet he might have spared a moment to appraise Muhundyana's stark profile against the failing light. But he had a singular task set before him, and he hurried among the plantation's whitewashed buildings to find their owner.

A sun-browed man came hobbling up, bearing the ochre mark of the Vaishya caste on his forehead. "There you are! I received word you'd be traveling all the way from Prashkatvi, by foot."

Senjam bowed. He had similar markings, though in truth he belonged to a caste so low that to utter its name required ritual purification afterwards. "You are Bhejit, owner of the famous Muhundyana Plantation?"

"I am he. Come, and we'll share a cup of my best."

“It would be my honor to sample the famous tea of your plantation.”

They retired to a portico at the rear of Behjit’s grand house, Senjam pausing first to wash the dust from his feet and hand his baggage to a servant. Freshly-cured leaves were steeped in steaming water and the resulting pale green brew poured into cups. A few sips, and Senjam felt the dull ache in his muscles vanish.

“You like it?” Bhejit asked. “Wait until the monsoons are over. We harvest peony flowers then, and mix the petals with a special combination of young leaves....” Servants brought in flatbread and pickled vegetables as he went on about the intricacies of tea production.

“I do not wish to seem forward,” Senjam said, after his host had finished speaking, “but I represent a buyer who compresses tea into bricks, and thereby conveys them to the steppe-lands. This buyer has expressed an interest in your leaves.”

He did not lie overmuch. There *was* such a buyer in Prashkatvi, though that buyer would not have known Senjam from a stranger.

“We have plenty of time to talk business,” Bhejit said. “For now, consider yourself at leisure. I’ll take you on a tour of the

grounds tomorrow. Tonight, you'll sleep on a real pallet, in a house next to my own."

"Your kindness exceeds your reputation." Senjam feigned a look of mild fear as he gestured at the darkening fields. "I've been told many snakes roam this place...."

"Worry not. Few are actually dangerous."

"Still, workers must be bitten from time to time."

Bhejit shrugged narrow shoulders beneath his linen robe. "What are the lives of a few lowborn Shudras, when there's profit to be cultivated? Eh, to keep morale up I've hired an old snake-charmer. He traps the little wrigglers, and I've seen him successfully draw poison from a wound."

"A charmer?" Senjam had to bite down to keep the eagerness from his voice. "I'd like to see him at work."

Bhejit's eyes narrowed for a moment. "I'd imagine there must be plenty of such charlatans in the streets of Prashkatvi."

"Oh, there are," Senjam agreed, inwardly cursing his lack of subtlety, "but the serpents they perform with have all been de-fanged, or had their mouths sewn shut. Just once, I'd like to see the charmer's art practiced on a *real* snake."

The answer seemed to mollify Bhejit's suspicions. They finished the tea and flatbread as darkness settled around the portico. Bhejit rose, took up a clay lamp, and led Senjam a short distance to the neighboring house. "I'll have the servants

bring over a fresh change of clothes,” he said, fumbling with the door. “In the morning...”

His voice trailed off as two women came stepping out of the shadows. They passed by without a word; a young high-caste wearing a checkered sarong of green and gold, guided by an older Shudra in humble clothing. The former walked with head downcast, unusual for someone of her station. Both women clutched a handkerchief between them, so the lowborn’s touch would not contaminate her better’s.

“She’s blind, the poor thing,” Bhejit whispered, after the pair were out of earshot.

“Another guest?”

“A Brahmin. Arrived an hour just before you did. Perhaps you’ll meet her tomorrow.”

The timing fired Senjam’s curiosity, but he felt he had already let too much slip in asking about the snake-charmer. Where was his restraint? His courtly training? He kept his face an impassive mask as Bhejit opened the door to the guest house.

* * *

Most unworthy Grandsire, debased Taker of Lives, you are charged to travel to Mount Muhundyana and there obtain that rarest poison, the venom of the Gopti Serpent. No great

quantity is required. Be aware that agents of the Raj may have already been dispatched to thwart you in this matter.

Within the privacy of his room, Senjam contemplated the message he'd read and then hastily destroyed five days earlier. As usual, the Grandfathers had given him little information to work with. What was the purpose of obtaining this poison? Would he be required to use it at some point? And above all, what in the Nineteen Hells was a 'Gopti Serpent?' He had studied toxins for most his life and had never come across mention of such a creature.

With teeth grit in frustration he rose and went to the open window. A hunter's moon spilled out over the terraced rows of tea-plants, now gray and heavy with shadows. He could've sworn someone had been following him on the road to Muhundyana, drawing closer with each nightfall. Only near-constant movement had kept him feeling safe. Now....

He drew the shutters and lit a taper before returning to his table. Bhejit had left him a pot of yellow tea, alongside which Senjam placed a small paper packet. Duty to the Grandfathers brought many stringent obligations, but this one he loathed most. Muttering, he shook a few grains of crimson powder from the packet into a cup, followed by a splash of tea. This he swirled until the powder had dissolved completely. A sip brought bitter reeling pain.

He gripped the table's edge to steady himself. As his blood seethed just below his skin, he drew a deep breath and repeated a mantra taught to him since childhood. The pain lessened by fractions. He pared his concentration to a dagger's point and allowed his mind to expand, breaking the restraints of the cruder senses. With supreme effort, his inner eyelid opened a crack—no more, but enough to turn his perceptions outward, beyond the walls of the house.

There were two hunched shapes just outside, silhouettes approaching on wary feet. With his physical eyes still closed, Senjam drew a razor-edged *chakram*, or throwing hoop, hidden within his sash. A sharp movement of the wrist sent the steel ring twirling around his index finger, building momentum.

The shuttered window crashed inwards as a black-garbed body hurtled through.

Senjam threw the *chakram* overhand, to bury the circular blade in the soft flesh of the intruder's throat. A knotted strangling-cloth dropped from the man's grasp as he fell.

Without pause, Senjam vaulted atop the table and leapt upwards, all four limbs shooting out when he was inches from the ceiling. His hands and feet made contact with the rafters to either side, spaced closely enough that with muscles straining to the utmost he could pinion himself between them.

Suspended thus, he waited. The door rattled faintly. From his spider's vantage, Senjam watched as the wavy blade of a *kris* emerged between door and frame, sliding upwards until it struck the bar. A muffled grunt, and the short blade flipped the heavy bar from its holdings.

The door swung open, kicked by a burly figure swathed in black hillman's robes. He held the *kris* low in a pale-knuckled grip. His gaze traveled from the dead man on the floor to the flickering taper, and thence to the empty sleeping pallet.

Too late he looked up. Senjam dropped from the rafters and planted a knee in the man's broad back. One arm reached from behind to seize the knife-bearing wrist; the other snaked around the muscled neck in a chokehold.

Senjam squeezed with all his strength, but the larger man fought like a bull. Their locked bodies collided with the table. By sheer force the *kris* came wrenching backwards towards Senjam's face. He abandoned his chokehold and groped along the table's surface until his fingers touched the packet of crimson powder. Blindly, he flung the contents in the direction of his assailant's mouth. A cough, a sputter, and he knew the man had breathed some of it in.

Scant moments later he could feel the straining muscles beneath him begin to spasm. The man uttered a retching sound and pitched forward face-first. Senjam threw himself off the

body, then stooped to snatch up the *kris* where it had fallen. A quick stab beneath the left shoulder blade spared his would-be assassin further pain.

For the space of ten heartbeats, Senjam waited. No sound carried through the open doorway, and there was no flicker of approaching light to indicate that anyone had heard the fighting. He re-barred the door and took up the still-burning taper.

By the feeble glow he examined both bodies. They were dressed as simple hillmen, but hillmen did not use such weapons as the *kris* or strangling-cloth. He stripped their clothing and found a tattoo beneath the armpit of the larger man: a stylized flame, before which danced a six-armed figure. The mark of thuggee.

Could they have been paid agents of the Raj? Very likely. If so, he may have dispatched the immediate threat. But there was the matter of two corpses, and their abundant blood; on his hands, his clothes, and seeping into the clay floor. He would need to remove all traces before dawn. Discovery would be considered failure. And failure, among the Grandfathers, exacted only one price.

* * *

“You did not sleep well? The pallet was not to your liking?”

Bhejit had arranged a light breakfast on the portico as the Shudra laborers filed out among the fields to stoop and pick.

“I’m always restless in unfamiliar places,” Senjam said. He had been up the length of the night finding a remote spot to bury the thuggee corpses. His disciplined mind could function for days without sleep, but he couldn’t hide the dark hollows beneath his eyes.

“I know a hibiscus blend that’s good for the nerves. Remind me again this evening, and I’ll have my servants brew you a pot.”

“That’s gracious of you.”

They finished eating while the golden chariot of Shuryu, the sun, rose steaming over verdant hills and burned away the morning fog. As pledged, Bhejit conducted a tour of the plantation, including the stone courtyard where fresh-cut leaves were spread to dry. Senjam felt disappointed to not glimpse any snakes. Towards noon, his host complained of gout pain and retired to the grand house, leaving Senjam to wander the fields alone.

A wheezing, high-pitched noise drifted over on the breeze. He recognized the characteristic notes of a gourd pipe, or *pungi*. Hoping this was Bhejit’s snake-charmer, he followed the droning music to the base of a knoll shaded by tall tea trees.

There, a shriveled man squatted in the dirt, playing his double-necked pipe. Coiled next to his toes lay a hooded cobra.

Unlike street performances Senjam had witnessed, the charmer did not wave his *pungi* from side to side as he blew. Neither did the cobra sway. With eyes fixed on the old man, its only movement was an occasional flicking of the tongue. As Senjam watched, the charmer's left hand blurred out and seized the snake behind the head. He thrust the creature into a wicker basket and placed a lid over it, all the while continuing to play with his other hand.

"Impressive," Senjam said, when the music had ceased. "What do you do with them after they're caught?"

The charmer's lips twitched back in a toothless smile. He wore only a turban and ragged breechclout. "When I've gathered enough of the little brothers, I release them far over there—" He gestured with his skinny brown arm, "—and tell them never to return."

"You *talk* with snakes?"

"If they're in a mood to listen."

Someone cleared their throat nearby. Senjam had not seen the woman sitting with her back against a stump; his attention must have been focused solely on the charmer. She was the Brahmin he'd glimpsed from the night before, dressed in a silk

shawl despite the heat. Taut across her eyes stretched a blindfold made of like material.

“The Pavandra Texts make mention of those who can commune with animals,” she said in a flat voice. “It’s a mark of spiritual advancement.”

“I did not mean to offend, Lady....”

“My name is Rhadma Cholee.”

“I’m called Senjam, if it pleases you. I’m a merchant, traveling from—”

“I’m sure you are.” She swayed to her feet, reaching out to seize a cane of polished rattan leaning against a trunk. With brisk, sideways-sweeping movements, she tapped her way along the path leading back to the plantation.

“A proud woman,” the charmer said, after she had paced a fair distance.

“What was she doing here?”

“She told me she liked the music of the *pungi*.” The charmer rose on stiff legs. “If it’s not too much to ask, do you have something to eat? I’ve not had my rice this morning.”

“Ah. . .” Senjam fumbled through his clothing and offered a fennel bulb he’d intended for lunch. The charmer swallowed it whole without any pretense of chewing. A slight bulge slid down his wrinkled throat.

“Many thanks.” He balanced the wicker basket atop one shoulder. “Now to find the rest of my errant little brothers.”

“A moment. In your travels, have you ever heard of a snake called the Gopti Serpent?”

“The Gopti, eh? A rarity, if I remember correctly.”

“Could you show me where to find them? I can pay you.”

“Them?” The charmer shook his wizened head. “There is only one Gopti Serpent.”

Senjam managed to keep his own features blank, though inside he fought confusion. Had the Grandfathers sent him to look for some mythological beast? A legend?

“It’s none of my affair,” the charmer went on, “but why would a Vaishya merchant be interested in such a thing?”

“Just a curiosity of mine. Nothing more.”

“I see.” The charmer slid the pipe into his breechclout, tight against slat ribs.

“Will you not help me?” If he had to, Senjam could force information from the man. He knew hundreds of ways to induce compliance, through pain and fear, though it was not in his nature to practice such arts on the elderly.

“You did show me a kindness, just now,” the charmer said. “When I’ve finished with my work, we can discuss the matter further. Look for me after Shuryu has driven his chariot beyond the rim of the world.”

“How will I find you?”

The charmer gestured at his gourd pipe. “Use your ears.”

* * *

Over a dinner of saffron-tinged rice, Senjam asked his host about the Lady Cholee.

“She came here on pilgrimage, she told me. There’s supposed to be an ancient shrine atop Mount Muhundyana, somewhere.”

“Where is her entourage?”

“She said they’re still several days behind, on the road.”

Senjam set aside his bowl. “She arrived alone? A blind woman of high caste traveling the countryside?”

“I thought it extraordinary as well. The poor creature. You see why I couldn’t refuse her my hospitality.”

Senjam excused himself and went looking for Rhadma. He searched through the outbuildings, then the Shudra’s quarters. No trace. The woman’s arrival, he thought grimly, was far too ‘extraordinary’ to be coincidence. Likely she was another agent of the Raj. Her sightlessness could be an asset; it provided a ready excuse to wander anywhere, her ears pricked. Assuming she truly *was* blind.

He gave up his search as the sun descended. Remembering the old charmer’s invitation, he slipped back to his room and took a punch-dagger, or *katar*, from its hiding place beneath

the pallet. Whatever other dangers were waiting among the darkened fields, having the dagger snug beneath his sash brought a measure of comfort.

* * *

The moon had tracked a quarter-length across the night sky when he again heard the discordant notes of the *pungi*. His wanderings had taken him to the very edge of the plantation, where a wall of wild banyan trees stood like a dark barrier, alive with whirring cicadas. The pipe-music was coming from somewhere beyond the trees. After a moment's hesitation, he stepped into the foliage. The *pungi's* notes grew louder as he pushed his way through. Gnarled banyans yielded to the spreading blooms of sacred ashoka trees, which in turn thinned to form a small clearing. Here he halted, his senses in revolt at what he saw.

The old charmer sat cross-legged in the clearing's center, surrounded by at least a dozen prostrate Shudra workers. They wriggled against the dirt and each other as he played his pipe, emulating entwined serpents. Senjam's vision blurred for a moment; when it cleared, the branches of the ashoka now dripped with sinuous, dark-banded snakes, so thick the trees appeared to be swaying. He let out a gasp and leapt backwards, his hand reaching for the hilt of the *katar*. Not two feet in front

of him a serpent came undulating down a branch, to rear up and bare fangs.

Senjam's vision blurred again, before the hissing creature could strike. The serpent vanished, and the limbs of the ashoka were empty as before.

A trick of the moonlight, his mind warned. *That's all it was.*

But something bright glimmered out of the darkness. His trained hand acted on its own accord, drawing the dagger from his sash and deflecting the object with a shower of sparks. It lodged in a nearby tree; the sharp-edged ring of a *chakram*.

"The Grandfathers sent you," said a familiar voice.

Rhadma Cholee stepped from the shadows of a giant banyan. Her left hand twirled a second *chakram*, ready to fling. Given the accuracy of her throw, he would've judged she had been feigning her blindness. But the silk ribbon was still tight across her eyes. *How...?* Then he saw the ochre-painted bindi on her forehead, and understood. She could sense him using her third eye, just as he had sensed the two thuggee the night before.

"I know who you are, Senjam Singh. I know why you're here, though I doubt if you truly understand, yourself."

Senjam gauged the distance between them. Not quite close enough to leap and stab, but if he could keep her talking... “You’re with the Raj, I surmise.”

“I have that honor.”

“There’s precious little honor in what we do, woman.” He edged closer; she glided back just as smoothly.

“Did they tell you *why* they want the venom of the Gopti Serpent?” she asked. “Did they tell you what it does?”

He lowered the *katar* by a finger’s breadth. “Are you trying to spin words around me?”

“I thought you might want to know what you’re about to lose your life for.”

“Go on.”

“This is no ordinary venom we seek. The Gopti’s poison is so virulent, it travels across the invisible threads linking blood relations. Poison an uncle and his nephews die, as do his siblings, his mother, his father. Whole lineages are wiped out. Do you understand the implications?”

Senjam shook his head. “If such a poison existed, which it does not... the Grandfathers could kill the Raj, and all his potential heirs, by striking at a less-protected member of the family.”

“You *do* understand.”

He'd crept forward half a pace, and this time she did not move back. One more step would put him within striking distance. But he hesitated. "The Raj wants the venom as well. Does that make him less monstrous than the Grandfathers?"

"He wants it for protection. Out of the hands of people like your masters."

Senjam laughed, marveling at her naiveté. "More likely, he would use it to slay the royal families of rival kingdoms. Or his enemies in court."

Her lips drew back, as if in defiance of the idea. But she twirled the *chakram* slower than before.

"Enough!" The old charmer's voice rattled off the ashoka branches. He stalked into the space between them, arms outstretched. "There is no bloodshed in this sacred place. As you both came seeking the Gopti Serpent, I will show you to Him. But draw no blood in His presence, unless you would like to sample the venom you speak of so covetously."

Senjam glanced behind the charmer into the clearing; his congregation of Shudra had dispersed. "I'll put my weapon aside if she does hers," he said.

"Agreed." Rhadma made the *chakram* disappear between the folds of her clothing. Senjam did likewise with his *katar*, and together they followed the charmer across the clearing.

“Quiet, on your lives,” he said, “and show the utmost respect.” He drew aside branches to indicate an ancient banyan. Senjam saw only shadowed outlines at first. Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the dimness, and fear iced the back of his neck. A fat cobra curled around the banyan’s trunk, easily as long as two tall men. But it wasn’t the serpent’s size that made Senjam doubt his perceptions. The Gopti’s sinuous neck split off like the branches of a tree to accommodate five separate heads, all with hoods flared.

How, in the Nineteen Hells, was he supposed to harvest venom from such a creature?

He took a tentative step forward, just as the tip of Rhadma’s cane appeared between his feet and wrenched with sudden force. He stumbled. Rattan smacked the top of his head, so hard it brought scarlet flashes of pain.

“I promised no bloodshed,” Rhadma said. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t strike you.”

She shifted and struck again, her curled toes slamming beneath his chin, knocking him backwards. As he tried to rise, she came hurtling down on his chest with all her weight, pinning him beneath two slender knees. His head lolled forward; she bent and brushed her lips against his own. For the briefest moment he felt her tongue slide between his teeth, then retreat.

Too late, he realized the significance. Searing fire spread across his throat. He rolled to one side and spat, trying to clear his mouth of all saliva.

“*Vish Kanya*,” he choked. “Poison woman.”

There was no pleasure in Rhadma’s cold smile as she pushed herself off and regained her feet.

Senjam had heard legends during his training with the Grandfathers; stories of girls selected at youth to ingest ever-greater quantities of poison. Those who survived into womanhood were able to slay with their own bodily fluids. A century before, the Raj of Thanjavir had been killed by one of his concubines in this way.

Now Rhadma’s poison was clawing through his veins, seeking to still his heart. But he, too, had been taking doses of toxins over the years, with the intention of building an immunity. The crimson powder he sipped with his evening tea mixed several of the deadliest types. He forced his mind to calm and let his body’s acquired defenses take over. At the same time, he thrashed and coughed as if near death. Rhadma paid little notice. She stood poised before the Gopti Serpent, her head cocked to one side as if contemplating how to best obtain the venom.

Another few heartbeats and he felt his pain lessening. Yes, the counter-toxins were doing their work.

He crept closer to where Rhadma stood, taking advantage of her attention on the serpent. He kicked from his prone position, sweeping Rhadma's ankles out beneath her. He pounced as she fell, his limbs still feverish with poison, and managed to slide an arm around her wiry neck. She wriggled and tried to bite his forearm, but he simply increased the pressure against her throat. No amount of esoteric training could circumvent the need for air.

After several long moments she went limp beneath him. He maintained the hold until he felt satisfied her unconsciousness was genuine, then drew the *katar* and cut several strips from her sarong. These he used to bind her, using a series of intricate knots as proof against the double-jointed.

"You're sparing her life?" the charmer said, watching with raised eyebrows.

"I intend to question her later." Senjam again regarded the Gopti Serpent. He still faced the quandary of extracting venom from a five-headed snake. Killing it seemed like the safest option, though such an act would likely enrage the charmer. He started to reach under his sash for his own *chakram*... and stopped. The serpent held the same position as from before, motionless, not even flicking its various tongues. And there was something odd about the sheen of its scales in the moonlight. Too flat.

On impulse, he reached out to touch a coil. Wooden. He started with the realization: the monstrous serpent had been carved from the banyan's exposed roots.

Behind him came soft laughter.

"Deception breeds deception," said the charmer's voice. Something in his timbre had changed, and Senjam felt a sudden loathing to turn around. "Look at me, oh Taker of Lives." There was compulsion in that voice. Senjam's head turned as if forced by invisible pressure. A humble brown snake lay coiled where the charmer had stood.

"Neither you, nor the woman are worthy of my venom," the snake said. "It was intended to kill gods and asuras, not to be used in the petty squabbles of humanity. Still, you have both impressed me with your qualities, which are akin to my own brethren. For this reason I will spare your intrusion. Now observe."

The snake spread its hood as it raised up from the ground. Senjam felt a falling sensation in his stomach as the serpent *kept* rising, looming over him in an eye-blink, then towering above the ashoka grove. Now it appeared to dwarf Mount Muhundyana itself. Calm ophidian eyes, larger than the moon, gazed down at him with serene patience. The distance from one end of its flared hood to the other seemed to encompass all Creation.

Senjam, no longer able to doubt the reality of his own senses, gazed back. He did not feel small in relation to the snake, or to the universe itself.

He felt part of it.

* * *

When he woke, it was with the dull ache of Rhadma's poison still in his joints. Sunlight flickered down through the banyan leaves, making a pattern of crescent-shaped shadows on the forest floor. There was no disorientation, no momentary panic as he recalled the events of the previous night, though he could not remember falling asleep.

How long had it been since he slept like that? So deep and dreamless, without startling awake at the faintest sound?

He rose, muscles pleasantly stiff, and wiped warm dew from his neck and shoulders. Rhadma lay half-trussed a short distance away, engaged in the act of chewing through her bindings with nimble teeth. She stopped when she heard him draw close. Behind her, the carving of the five-headed serpent kept its quiet vigil.

"If you're going to kill me," she said, "do it now. You'll find torture a waste of effort."

"I'm not going to kill you." Senjam drew the *katar* and cut away the rest of her bindings.

She did not spring to attack. "You're setting me free?"

“The snake-charmer said we were unworthy of the Gopti Serpent’s venom. He’s gone, and I doubt if we’ll see him again.”

“But...” Rhadma scrambled over to the carving. After a moment’s hesitation her hands reached out and touched the wooden scales. “I thought something seemed wrong. I could sense no movement; only the spirit of an old tree.”

“A trick. The charmer was testing us.”

The painted skin of her brow furrowed. “Perhaps you’re trying to trick me now. Perhaps you’ve already obtained the venom and left me alive so that I’ll return to the Raj and tell him all is safe.”

“Believe what you want.” Senjam turned his back to her and began walking from the grove. He felt the stab of old fears, knowing any moment she might decide to hurl a *chakram* into his spine. But subterfuge suddenly started to weary him. And worldly concerns seemed smaller against the grandeur of the mist-shrouded morning. Strange, that he could have come to this beautiful place and not truly *seen* any of it.

“Where are you going?” she called.

“Not back to the Grandfathers. Failure equates to only one thing with them. I suspect it is the same among agents of the Raj.”

“But can you forget all your obligations? Your years of training?”

He stopped. She couldn't see the modest smile he knew was on his face, but perhaps she could hear it in his voice. "The old charmer showed me the larger scheme of things. I came here seeking poison, but instead I have found...."

"Found what?"

"Enlightenment, I think. I will contemplate further."

His feet began walking again, away from the banyan forest, the plantation, following an unseen path towards the white peaks of Muhundyana.

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Garnett Elliot lives and works in Tucson, Arizona as a trauma clinician. Previous work has appeared in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Heroic Fantasy Quarterly, and numerous online and print anthologies.

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