



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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[“A Salvaging of Ghosts,” by Alette de Bodard](#)

[“The Mountains His Crown,” by Sarah Pinsker](#)

[“Blood Grains Speak Through Memories,” by Jason Sanford](#)

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A SALVAGING OF GHOSTS

by Alette de Bodard

Thuy's hands have just closed on the gem—she can't feel its warmth with her gloves, but her daughter's ghost is just by her side, at the hole in the side of the ship's hull, blurred and indistinct—when the currents of unreality catch her. Her tether to *The Azure Serpent*, her only lifeline to the ship, stretches; snaps.

And then she's gone, carried forward into the depths.

* * *

On the night before the dive, Thuy goes below decks with Xuan and Le Hoa. It's traditional; just as it is traditional that, when she comes back from a dive, she'll claim her salvage and they'll have another rousing party in which they'll drink far too many gems dissolved in rice wine and shout poetry until *The Azure Serpent's* Mind kindly dampens their incoherent ravings to give others their sleep—but not too much, as it's good to remember life; to know that others onship celebrate surviving one more dive, like notches on a belt or vermilion beads slid on an abacus.

One more. Always one more.

Until, like Thuy's daughter Kim Anh, that one last dive kills you and strands your body out there, in the dark. It's a diver's fate, utterly expected; but she was Thuy's child—an adult when she died, yet forever Thuy's little girl—and Thuy's world contracts and blurs whenever she thinks of Kim Anh's corpse, drifting for months in the cold alien loneliness of deep spaces.

Not for much longer; because this dive has brought them back where Kim Anh died. One last evening, one last fateful set of drinks with her friends, before Thuy sees her daughter again.

Her friends... Xuan is in a bad mood. No gem-drinking on a pre-dive party, so she nurses her rice wine as if she wishes it contains other things, and contributes only monosyllables to the conversation. Le Hoa, as usual, is elated; talking too much and without focus—dealing with her fears through drink, and food, and being uncharacteristically expansive.

“Nervous, lil' sis?” she asks Thuy.

Thuy stares into the depth of her cup. “I don't know.” It's all she's hoped for; the only chance she'll ever get that will take her close enough to her daughter's remains to retrieve them. But it's also a dangerous dive into deep spaces, well into layers of unreality that could kill them all. “We'll see. What about you?”

Le Hoa sips at her cup, her round face flushed with drink. She calls up, with a gesture, the wreck of the mindship they're going to dive into; highlights, one after the other, the strings of gems that the scanners have thrown up. "Lots of easy pickings, if you don't get too close to the wreck. And that's just the biggest ones. Smallest ones won't show up on sensors."

Which is why they send divers. Or perhaps merely because it's cheaper and less of an investment to send human beings, instead of small and lithe mindships that would effortlessly survive deep spaces, but each cost several lifetimes to build and properly train.

Thuy traces, gently, the contours of the wreck on the hologram—there's a big hole in the side of the hull, something that blew up in transit, killing everyone onboard. Passengers' corpses have spilled out like innards—all unrecognisable of course, flesh and muscles disintegrated, bones slowly torn and broken and compressed until only a string of gems remains to mark their presence.

Kim Anh, too, is gone: nothing left of Thuy's precocious, foolhardy daughter who struggled every morning with braiding her hair—just a scattering of gems they will collect and sell offworld, or claim as salvage and drink away for a rush of short-lived euphoria.

There isn't much to a gem—just that familiar spike of bliss, no connection to the dead it was salvaged from. Deep spaces strip corpses, and compress them into... these. Into an impersonal, addictive drug.

Still... still, divers cannibalise the dead; and they all know that the dead might be them, one day. It's the way it's always been done, on *The Azure Serpent* and all the other diver-ships: the unsaid, unbreakable traditions that bind them all.

It didn't use to bother Thuy so much, before Kim Anh died. "Do you know where she is?" Xuan asks.

"I'm not sure. Here, perhaps." Thuy points, carefully, to somewhere very near the wreck of the ship. "It's where she was when—"

When her suit failed her. When the comms finally fell silent.

Xuan sucks in a sharp breath. "Tricky." She doesn't try to dissuade Thuy, though. They all know that's the way it goes, too.

Le Hoa attempts, forcefully, to change the subject. "Two more dives and Tran and I might have enough to get married. A real couple's compartment, can you imagine?"

Thuy forces a smile. She hasn't drunk enough; but she just doesn't feel like rice wine: it'll go to her head, and if there's any point in her life when she needs to be there; to be clear-headed

and prescient... “We’ll all get together and give you a proper send-off.”

All their brocade clothes retrieved from storage, and the rice wine they’ve been saving in long-term compartments onboard the ship taken out, sipped at until everything seems to glow; and the small, round gem-dreams dumplings—there’s no actual gems in them, but they’re deliberately shaped and positioned like a string of gems, to call for good fortune and riches to fall into the newlyweds’ hands, for enough that they can leave the ship, leave this life of dives and slow death...

Kim Anh never had a chance for any of this. When she died, she’d barely begun a relationship with one of the older divers—a fling, the kind that’s not meant to last onboard *The Azure Serpent*. Except, of course, that it was cut short, became frozen in grief and regrets and recriminations.

Thuy and Kim Anh’s ex seldom speak; though they do get drunk together, sometimes. And Cong Hoan, her eldest son, has been posted to another diver-ship. They talk on comms, and see each other for festivals and death anniversaries: he’s more distant than she’d like, but still alive—all that matters.

“You’re morbid again,” Xuan says. “I can see it in your face.”

Thuy makes a grimace. “I don’t feel like drinking.”

“Quite obviously,” Le Hoa says. “Shall we go straight to the poetry?”

“She’s not drunk enough,” Xuan says before Thuy can open her mouth.

Thuy flushes. “I’m not good at poetry, in any case.”

Le Hoa snorts. “I know. The point isn’t that you’re good. We’re all terrible at it, else we would be officials on a numbered planet with scores of servants at our beck and call. The point is forgetting.” She stops, then, looks at Thuy. “I’m sorry.”

Thuy forces a shrug she doesn’t feel. “Doesn’t matter.”

Le Hoa opens her mouth, and then closes it again. “Look...” she says. She reaches inside her robes and withdraws something—Thuy knows, even before she opens her hand, what it will be.

The gem is small, and misshapen: the supervisors won’t let them keep the big, pretty ones as salvage; those go to offworld customers, the kind rich enough to pay good money for them. It glistens like spilled oil in the light of the teahouse; and in that light, the dumplings on the table and the tea seem to fade into the background; to recede into tasteless, odourless insignificance. “Try this.”

“I—” Thuy shakes her head. “It’s yours. And before a dive...”

Le Hoa shrugs. “Screw tradition, Thuy. You know it’s not going to change anything. Besides, I have some stash. Don’t need this one.”

Thuy stares at it—thinking of dropping it in the cup and watching it dissolve; of the warmth that will slide down into her stomach when she drinks; of the rising euphoria seizing all her limbs until everything seems to shake with the bliss of desire—of how to step away, for a time; away from tomorrow and the dive, and Kim Anh’s remains.

“Come on, lil’ sis.”

Thuy shakes her head. She reaches for the cup of rice wine, drains it in one gulp; leaving the gem still on the table.

“Time for poetry,” she says, aloud. *The Azure Serpent* doesn’t say anything—he so seldom speaks, not to the divers, those doomed to die—but he dims the lights and the sound as Thuy stands up, waiting for words to well up from the empty pit in her chest.

Xuan was right: you need to be much drunker than this, for decent verses.

* * *

Thuy knows where her parents died. The wreck they were scavenging from is on her ancestral altar, at the end of the cycling of holos that shows First and Second Mother go from newlyweds flushed with drink and happiness, to older, greyer

women holding their grandchild in their arms, their smile cautious; tentative; as if they already know they will have to relinquish her.

Aboard *The Azure Serpent*, they're legends, spoken of in hushed tones. They went deeper, farther into unreality than anyone else ever has. Divers call them The Long Breathers, and they have their own temple, spreading over three compartments and always smelling of incense. On the temple walls, they are depicted in their diving suits, with the bodhisattva Quan Am showing them the way into an empty cabin; where divers leave offerings praying for good fortune and prosperity.

They left nothing behind. Their suits crumbled with them, and their bodies are deep within the wreck of that mindship: two scatterings of gems in a cabin or a corridor somewhere, forever irretrievable; too deep for anyone to survive retrieval, even if they could be located anymore, in the twenty-one years since they died.

On the altar is Bao Thach: her husband, not smiling but stern and unyielding, as utterly serious in death as he was mischievous and whimsical in life.

She has nothing left of him, either.

Kim Anh... Kim Anh is by her father's side; because she died childless and unmarried; because there is no one else who

will mourn her or say the prayers to ease her passage. Thuy isn't the first, or the last, to do this onboard the ship.

There's a box, with enough space for a single gem. For what Thuy has earned the right to salvage from her daughter's body: something tangible, palpable that she can hold onto, not the holos or her own hazy-coloured and shrivelled memories—holding a small, wrinkled baby nursing at her breast and feeling contentment well up in her, stronger than any gem-induced euphoria—Kim Anh at age ten, trying to walk in a suit two sizes too big for her—and a few days before her death, the last meal she and Thuy had in the teahouse: translucent dumplings served with tea the colour of jade, with a smell like cut grass on a planet neither of them will ever live to see.

Kim Anh isn't like Thuy's mothers: she died outside a different mindship, far enough from the wreck that it's possible to retrieve her. Tricky, as Xuan said; but what price wouldn't Thuy pay, to have something of her daughter back?

* * *

In the darkness at the hole in the ship's hull, Thuy isn't blind. Her suit lights up with warnings—temperature, pressure, distortions. That last is what will kill her: the layers of unreality utterly unsuited to human existence, getting stronger and stronger as the current carries her closer to the wreck of the

mindship, crushing her lungs and vital organs like crumpled paper when her suit finally fails.

It's what killed Kim Anh on her last dive; what eventually kills most divers. Almost everyone on *The Azure Serpent*—minus the supervisors, of course—lives with that knowledge, that suspended death sentence.

They would pray to her ancestors—to her mothers the Long Breathers—if only she knew what to ask for.

They closes her hand over the gem. She deactivates the suits' propulsion units and watches her daughter's remains, floating beside her.

Gems and more gems—ranging from the small one she has in her hand to the larger, spherical ones that have replaced the organs in the torso. It's a recent death compared to that of the mindship: the gems still form something vaguely like a human shape, if humans could be drawn in small, round items like droplets of water; or like tears.

And, as the unreality readings spike, the ghost by her side becomes sharper and sharper, until she sees, once more, Kim Anh as she was in life. Her hair is braided—always with the messy ends, the ribbon tied haphazardly; they used to joke that she didn't need a tether, because the ribbon would get caught in the ship's airlock in strands thick and solid enough to bring

her back. Her eyes are glinting—with tears, or perhaps with the same oily light as that of a gem.

Hello, Mother.

“Child”, Thuy whispers, and the currents take her voice and scatter it—and the ghost nods, but it might as well be at something Thuy can’t see.

Long time no see.

They’re drifting apart now: hurtling down some dark, silent corridor into the wreck that dilates open like an eye—no no no, not after all of this, not after the certainty she’ll lose her own life to the dive—and Thuy shifts, making the propulsion units in the suit strain against the currents, trying to reach Kim Anh; to hold her, to hold *something* of her, down there in the dark...

And then something rushes at her from behind, and she feels a sharp, pressing pain through the nape of the suit—before everything fades away.

* * *

When Thuy wakes up—nauseous, disoriented—the comms are speaking to her.

“Thuy? Where are you?” It’s Xuan’s voice, breathless and panicking. “I can help you get back, if you didn’t drift too far.”

“I’m here,” she tries to say; and has to speak three times before her voice stops shaking; becomes audible enough. There

is no answer. Wherever she is—and, judging by the readings, it's deep—comms don't emit anymore.

She can't see Kim Anh's body—she remembers scrabbling, struggling to remain close to it as the currents separated them, but now there is nothing. The ghost, though, is still there, in the same room, wavering in the layers of unreality; defined in trceries of light that seem to encompass her daughter's very essence in a few sharp lines.

Thuy still has the gem in her hand, tucked under the guard of her wrist. The rest of her daughter's gems—they've fallen in and are now floating somewhere in the wreck, somewhere far away and inaccessible, and...

Her gaze, roaming, focuses on where she is; and she has to stop herself from gasping.

It's a huge, vaulted room like a mausoleum—five ribs spreading from a central point, and racks of electronics and organics, most of them scuffed and knocked over; pulsing cables converging on each other in tight knots, merging and parting like an alchemist's twisted idea of a nervous system. In the centre is something like a chair, or a throne, all ridges and protrusions, looking grown rather than manufactured. Swarms of repair bots lie quiescent; they must have given up, unable to raise the dead.

The heartroom. The centre of the ship, where the Mind once rested—the small, wilted thing in the throne is all that’s left of its corpse. Of course. Minds aren’t quite human; and they were made to better withstand deep spaces.

“Thuy? Please come in. Please...” Xuan is pleading now, her voice, growing fainter and fainter. Thuy knows about this too: the loss of hope.

“Thuy? Is that your name?”

The voice is not Xuan’s. It’s deeper and more resonant; and its sound make the walls shake—equipment shivers and sweats dust; and the cables writhe and twist like maddened snakes.

“I have waited so long.”

“You—” Thuy licks dry lips. Her suit is telling her—reassuringly, or not, she’s not certain—that unreality has stabilised; and that she has about ten minutes left before her suit fails. Before she dies, holding onto her daughter’s gem, with her daughter’s ghost by her side. “Who are you?”

It’s been years, and unreality has washed over the ship, in eroding tide after eroding tide. No one can have survived. No one, not even the Long Breathers.

Ancestors, watch over me.

“*The Boat Sent by the Bell,*” the voice says. The walls of the room light up, bright and red and unbearable—characters start

scrolling across walls on all sides of Thuy, poems and novels and fragments of words bleeding from the oily metal, all going too fast for her to catch anything but bits and pieces, with that touch of bare, disquieting familiarity. “I—am—was—the ship.”

“You’re alive.” He... he should be dead. Ships don’t survive. They die, just like their passengers. They—

“Of course. We are built to withstand the farthest, more distorted areas of deep spaces.”

“Of course.” The words taste like ashes on her mouth. “What have you been waiting for?”

The ship’s answer is low, and brutally simple. “To die.”

Still alive. Still waiting. Oh, ancestors. When did the ship explode? Thirty, forty years ago? How long has the Mind been down here, in the depths—crippled and unable to move, unable to call out for help; like a human locked in their own body after a stroke?

Seven minutes, Thuy’s suit says. Her hands are already tingling, as if too much blood were flooding to them. By her side, Kim Anh’s ghost is silent, unmoving, its shape almost too sharp; too real; too alien. “Waiting to die? Then that makes two of us.”

“I would be glad for some company.” *The Boat Sent by the Bell’s* voice is grave, thoughtful. Thuy would go mad, if she were down here for so long—but perhaps mindships are more

resistant to this kind of thing. “But your comrades are calling for you.”

The comms have sunk to crackles; one of her gloves is flickering away, caught halfway between its normal shape and a clawed, distorted paw with fingers at an impossible angle. It doesn't hurt; not yet. “Yes.” Thuy swallows. She puts the gem into her left hand—the good one, the one that's not disappearing, and wraps her fingers around it, as if she were holding Kim Anh. She'd hold the ghost, too, if she could grasp it. “It's too deep. I can't go back. Not before the suit fails.”

Silence. Now there's pain—faint and almost imperceptible, but steadily rising, in every one of her knuckles. She tries to flex her fingers; but the pain shifts to a sharp, unbearable stab that makes her cry out.

Five minutes.

At length the ship says, “A bargain, if you will, diver.”

Bargains made on the edge of death, with neither of them in a position to deliver. She'd have found this funny, in other circumstances. “I don't have much time.”

“Come here. At the centre. I can show you the way out.”

“It's—” Thuy grits her teeth against the rising pain—“useless. I told you. We're too deep. Too far away.”

“Not if I help you.” The ship's voice is serene. “Come.”

And, in spite of herself—because, even now, even here, she clings to what she has—Thuy propels herself closer to the centre; lays her hand, her contracting, aching right hand, on the surface of the Mind.

She's heard, a long time ago, that Minds didn't want to be touched this way. That the heartroom was their sanctuary; their skin their own private province, not meant to be stroked or kissed, lest it hurt them.

What she feels, instead, is... serenity—a stretching of time until it feels almost meaningless, her five minutes forgotten; what she sees, for a bare moment, is how beautiful it is, when currents aren't trying to kill you or distort you beyond the bounds of the bearable, and how utterly, intolerably lonely it is, to be forever shut off from the communion of ships and space; to no longer be able to move; to be whole in a body that won't shift, that is too damaged for repairs and yet not damaged enough to die.

I didn't know, she wants to say, but the words won't come out of her mouth. The ship, of course, doesn't answer.

Behind her, the swarms of bots rise—cover her like a cloud of butterflies, blocking off her field of view; a scattering of them on her hand, and a feeling of something sucking away at her flesh, parting muscle from bone.

When *The Boat Sent by the Bell* releases her, Thuy stands, shaking—trying to breathe again, as the bots slough away from her like shed skin and settle on a protuberance near the Mind. Her suit has been patched and augmented; the display, flickering in and out of existence, tells her she has twenty minutes. Pain throbs, a slow burn in the flesh of her repaired hand; a reminder of what awaits her if she fails.

On the walls, the characters have been replaced by a map, twisting and turning from the heartroom to the breach in the hull. “Thirteen minutes and fifty-seven seconds,” the ship says, serenely. “If you can propel fast enough.”

“I—” She tries to say something, anything. “Why?” is the only thought she can utter.

“Not a gift, child. A bargain.” The ship’s voice has that same toneless, emotionless serenity to it—and she realises that *The Boat Sent by the Bell* has gone mad after all; cracks in the structure small and minute, like a fractured porcelain cup, it still holds water, but it’s no longer *whole*. “Where the bots are... tear that out, when you leave.”

“The bots could have done that for you,” Thuy says.

If the ship were human, he would have shaken his head. “No. They can repair small things, but not... this.”

Not kill. Not even fix the breach in the hull, or make the ship mobile. She doesn’t know why she’s fighting back tears—

it's not even as if she knew the ship, insofar as anyone can claim to know a being that has lived for centuries.

She moves towards the part the bots have nestled on, a twisted protuberance linked to five cables, small enough to fit into her hand, beating and writhing, bleeding iridescent oil over her fingers. The bots rise, like a swarm of bees, trying to fight her. But they're spent from their repairs, and their movements are slow and sluggish. She bats them away, as easily as one would bat a fly—sends them flying into walls dark with the contours of the ship's map, watches them bleed oil and machine guts all over the heartroom, until not one remains functional.

When she tears out the part, *The Boat Sent by the Bell* sighs, once—and then it's just Thuy and the ghost, ascending through layers of fractured, cooling corpse.

* * *

Later—much, much later, after Thuy has crawled, breathless, out of the wreck, with two minutes to spare—after she's managed to radio Xuan—after they find her another tether, whirl her back to the ship and the impassive doctor—after they debrief her—she walks back to her compartment. Kim Anh's ghost comes with her, blurred and indistinct; though no one but Thuy seems to be able to see it.

She stands for a while in the small space, facing the ancestral altar. Her two mothers are watching her, impassive and distant—the Long Breathers, and who’s to say she didn’t have their blessing, in the end?

Kim Anh is there too, in the holos—smiling and turning her head to look back at something long gone—the box on the altar awaiting its promised gem; its keepsake she’s sacrificed so much for. Someone—Xuan, or Le Hoa, probably—has laid out a tray with a cup of rice wine, and the misshapen gem she refused back in the teahouse.

“I didn’t know,” she says, aloud. *The Azure Serpent* is silent, but she can feel him listening. “I didn’t know ships could survive.”

What else are we built for? whispers *The Boat Sent by the Bell*, in her thoughts; and Thuy has no answer.

She fishes inside her robes, and puts Kim Anh’s gem in the palm of her right hand. They allowed her to keep it as salvage, as a testament to how much she’s endured.

The hand looks normal, but feels... odd, distant, as if it were no longer part of her, the touch of the gem on it an alien thing, happening to her in another universe.

Her tale, she knows, is already going up and down the ship—she might yet find out they have raised her an altar and a temple, and are praying to her as they pray to her mothers. On

the other side of the table, by the blind wall that closes off her compartment, her daughter's ghost, translucent and almost featureless, is waiting for her.

Hello, Mother.

She thinks of *The Boat Sent by the Bell*, alone in the depths—of suits and promises and ghosts, and remnants of things that never really die, and need to be set free.

“Hello, child,” she whispers. And, before she can change her mind, drops the gem into the waiting cup.

The ghost dissolves like a shrinking candle-flame; and darkness closes in—silent and profound and peaceful.

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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. She has won a Nebula Award, a

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THE MOUNTAINS HIS CROWN

by Sarah Pinsker

The Royal Surveyors drove their machine through my fields at midday; it took six hours to put all the fires out.

They didn't stop. A flag depicting the new Emperor's crest, depicting his own face in profile, whipped and snapped in the wind. They came from the direction of our farm's northern border, from Ommen Birku's land, at the same plodding pace as my two-horse plough, but taller, wider, spitting fire like a storybook dragon, armored like a beetle.

Catastrophe can happen at any speed. I thought of that as I watched the machine cut its slow ten-meter swath through my sunflowers. A horse could trample someone quickly, but that person might take weeks or years to die. A swarm can descend overnight and leave nothing for the harvest come morning.

This was a slow catastrophe. I had time to estimate the rows. Time to check which way the wind was blowing, if it would spread in the direction of our home. Time to spare a thought for Birku, to wonder if his own cover crop had met the same fate. Time to be thankful that this was the season of soil nourishment, of secondary crops. Twenty-five rows of

sunflowers was a smaller catastrophe than twenty-five rows of hay or redwheat. Burning enriched soil too.

I stood at the kitchen window, clutching the mug of mint tea I had put to steeping just before my eye caught movement in the field. The mug cooled in my hands.

“What are you watching?” Lara asked me, coming into the room. When I didn’t answer, she followed my gaze. “What is that? What are you standing here for? We need to put out the fires before they spread!”

I shook my head, pointed to the banner. “Better not to get in their way. Wait until they’re gone.”

“Then at least we could prepare buckets. Take the horses somewhere.”

She was right. Those were the words needed to break the window’s spell. We set the children to fetching water.

“Go out the front door,” I told them. “Don’t let the machine see you.”

“The people in the machine,” Lara said, giving me a look. Right again. No need to scare them with invented monsters.

I went out the front door with them. There was no way to stay hidden and get to the barn, but the monster was already past the barn and the house. No way to know if anyone was watching from the machine’s side or back.

The horses greeted me with agitation, stomping feet and swishing tails. They smelled fire. Star was the cleanest, so I saddled him and haltered the others. Leading three horses while mounting a fourth wasn't easy in the best of times; I was glad I had taken the time for a saddle instead of trying it bareback. They were all half-draft beasts, all calm by nature, but the fire and my own clumsy distraction added to their restlessness. It would all have been made easier if I had brought one of the kids. I wasn't thinking. My mind wasn't on the fire but on the crest that flew atop the machine.

The road was wide enough to perhaps act as a firebreak if we didn't keep the flames under control, if the wind picked up. If we needed to, we could send the children across. That was what I told myself as I led the string up our drive, then across the way to the Maris place.

We'd never gotten on with the Maris family, but Ellum took one look at me and opened the gate to an empty corral.

"What's burning?" Ellum asked as I unsaddled Star and dumped the saddle beside the gate.

"My sunflowers, but I don't think only mine. Big machine, flying the royal crest."

He nodded. "Boys!" he called back toward his house. The door opened and his oldest, Ianno, leaned out. "Get your shoes on. Fire at Kae's place. She's going to need us all."

The air behind our house was thick with smoke. We hurried back together, saying nothing. It didn't matter that we disliked each other's farming methods, or that he still resented our refusal to sell him our land. An unchecked fire at my place could destroy his as well.

By the time we had the hose unwound and pumping from the pond, the machine was at our property's southern end. It took six hours to put out the main fire, even with all of the Marises and all of our family working on it. We drained half the pond, a problem we'd have to deal with later. We were lucky; the fire didn't want to spread.

"Thank you," I said to the Marises, knowing they would feed and water our horses from their own stores when they returned home. "I'll get them in the morning."

"Nothing you wouldn't do for us."

All that was left to do was spend the night walking the burned swath, putting out any embers that flared. Darkness made the chore easier, despite the exhaustion creeping in around the edges. Lara took the children indoors to put them to bed; she was better at settling them.

She came back out after a short while. "They were both asleep on their feet before we got in the door."

We walked down to the southern perimeter, the great stones of the ancient border broken and scattered like pebbles. To the south, the sky was lit with flame.

“What are they doing?” Lara asked as we turned north again.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“It was so precise.” She kicked a burning stalk we had missed, ground it into the soil with his boot. “Did you notice that nothing has burned outside these rows? If we hadn’t put the fire out, I think it would have burned out on its own. Taken these rows but none of the others.”

“You’re saying we wasted all our effort?”

“Not necessarily. I might be wrong. And they might have a way to keep the adjacent rows from burning, but if they can’t control the wind, we’re still better off being careful.”

We walked, kicking divots, grinding embers. My feet ached, my back, my shoulders. Not the familiar aches I went to bed with most nights; these were the kind that would have me waking sore.

* * *

The fires were the only subject of conversation at the next market day. At the first stall, Shin Davi caught my wrist in her firm grip as I reached to scoop from her barrel of dried brownbeans.

“Is it true?” she asked. Her knuckles stood out like mountain peaks, bones visible beneath paper-thin skin. “The Conqueror’s troops, here again?”

I pried her fingers loose one by one, squeezed her hand and put it down. Even after fifteen years here, the people always touched a little too easily for my northern comforts.

“They flew his crest, but I don’t know if they were his soldiers or his magicians or his dogs run loose. They set fires, they kept moving. They didn’t stop to talk.”

“Tsk. Dogs.”

“Have you spoken with any of the others? Do you know how many lost crops?”

“Birku, as you know, and the next three farms to the north. At least four to the south of you as well. All in a row.” She drew a line in the air, north to south.

“Beyond that?”

She shrugged. “Who knows? Information only carries so far.”

“They never wavered?”

“Not on the path they took through this area. If they turned somewhere, or stopped to eat or piss or sleep, it wasn’t here. Kae, remind me, you’re not from the same place he came from, right?”

He. The Emperor, the Conqueror. “No. He came from somewhere to the west, over the sea. He came to us in the mountains first, though. Sixteen years ago, long before he came here the first time. Built his fortress there.”

“He’s why you left?”

“He’s why I left when I did, yes. But I was twenty-five and antsy, and I likely would have gone anyway, sooner than later. I’d always wanted to live somewhere it would be easier to farm. Not that it’s ever easy, but the soil is better here, and the winter isn’t as cold.”

She dumped an extra scoop of beans into my sack and waved away the payment I offered.

I walked through the market, wondering as I always did at how the offerings here differed from those of my childhood. Back then there had been stalls full of electronics now no longer permitted outside the emperor’s own walls. In the north our markets had been full of dried goods, anything that traveled well; when someone arrived from the sea with salted fish or from the south with fresh fruit or vegetables, their wares would be gone in minutes.

Here, people grew their own produce, but the rows were lined with a different sort of practical. Anything someone might find it easier to buy than to make, we could find here. Textiles and clothing, jewelry, pots and pans, bits and bridles.

Lara and I made our own clothing, but we understood how hands that ached from shelling might not want to knit or churn or stitch leather at the end of the day.

At every stall, the vendors wanted to speak to those of us who had lost crops. Some of the interest was prurient, some practical: if the machine had come once, it could come back. They all put extra portions in my bags, and I revised my feelings about southerners for the hundredth hundredth time. They stood too close when they talked, but nobody wanting was left to struggle, nor even to ask for help.

“I didn’t buy extra,” I said when I returned home, dropping my overladen saddlebags on the kitchen floor. “Everyone wanted to give something.”

“I remember when you would have been too proud to let them give.” Lara hefted the beans. “When I met you, you would have refused anything that might be construed as charity.”

I put my arms around her, buried my face in her thick hair. It smelled like sweetgrain. “When you met me, I didn’t have a family to feed.”

“I should hope not!”

Her teasing always lifted me. I let her swat me, and we set to putting the food away.

“Anyway,” I said after a moment. “I was too young to understand that sometimes people need to give.”

* * *

Lara and I were working in the kitchen garden when they arrived the second time, a month later. We both had our heads down, our knees in the dirt, and the ground was soft from recent rains. We didn't even hear them until they were nearly upon us, their horses' hooves churning up the rows between the sunflowers.

The lead horse reached out and broke off an entire stalk as they reached the field's edge. That's how they approached us: three riders, three black horses, one dragging an enormous yellow flower.

We stood, dropping our tools in the soil so we wouldn't look aggressive. Not that they looked aggressive either. No banner, no machines, but their saddlecloths and jackets bore a crowned head in profile, red on gold. This ruler didn't waste time on symbolic representation. He was his own lion, his own castle, his own symbol of power.

"Are these your fields?"

Lara nodded.

"You are to keep the burn barren and free of weeds, by order of the Emperor."

I fixated on the sunflower. The horse was still chewing the stalk, the flower bobbing up and down, up and down. It made the soldiers less intimidating. "How do we survive without the

revenue those fields would have brought? This is a small farm. Twenty-five rows are not insignificant.”

The soldier shrugged. His look was almost sympathetic. “I can’t say. But I wouldn’t defy the order if I were you. Better to pretend that land is gone than to waste time and money planting only to have it burnt again.”

They turned back toward the fields. I would have liked to tell them to take the road, to stop trampling our remaining crops, but I knew better than to rile them. The speaker’s horse dropped his flower as they disappeared back between the rows.

“What possible reason could they have to do this?” Lara asked when they were out of earshot. “Is it to be a new road? We already have a road.”

“I don’t know. Better to do what they say than have them come back with machines and magicians, I suppose.”

She knelt and picked up a spade, attacking the roots of a weed that had sprung up among the winter greens.

“Can we do it?” I asked, still looking at the abandoned flower. “Can we afford to leave that much land unplanted in the spring?”

“We can if we don’t lose anything at all to blight or weather or insects. The margins will be thinner, and none of that is within our control. But I guess it could be worse.”

With soldiers, with emperors, it could always be worse. After a moment I knelt beside her.

* * *

The Marises came to dinner that night. We'd tried to be friendlier with them since the night of the fire had brought us together, and it seemed to be working, mostly. Ellum had baked redwheat loaf, sour and sweet, and we all tore hunks to dip in my bean soup.

"I don't understand what they're doing," Tari Maris said. "Why don't they simply take the land?"

"It's smart," Lara said. "If they take the land, they have to find people to maintain it. This way they leave us to do the maintenance, and they still collect taxes from us as the owners."

I hadn't even thought about the taxes. "Can they do that? Tax us at the same rate we were paying when it was considered arable land?"

"They can do anything they want." Ianno Maris made faces at our twins, who giggled. He spoke like an adult now, even if he still acted the child when he was with the younger ones.

"I'm just glad they came through our land, not yours," Lara said. "You have so many more mouths to feed. And with less to plant, maybe we'll have more time to help you when you start to need it."

Tari smiled and rested her hand on her belly, where she was just beginning to show. “We’ll help each other.”

* * *

The third visit came in the dead of winter. I was in the barn oiling harnesses when the twins came running.

“It’s a THING,” said Ash.

“In the SKY,” said Sable.

I took another swipe at a dried sweat spot on the girth I’d been cleaning. “A bird?”

“A thing,” Ash repeated. “It’s shaped like a fat fish. And it flies different from a bird.”

“How big is it?”

Sable held up her fingers. “But it’s in the sky. A greathawk far away looks like a sparrow, and then it comes close and...” she spread her fingers wide until they were greathawk wings.

“Smart girl. Show me the thing in the sky.”

I dropped my rag and followed them out into the gray daylight. We hadn’t seen sun in a week. It was cold enough we’d had to break ice to water the horses, but no snow had fallen.

“See?” Sable asked. Something large and fish-bellied was sinking below the tree line to the north. I caught a glimpse of a red-on-gold profile.

“You’re both clever to have called me. That’s an airship.”

“An airship.” Ash tested the word. “Why have we never seen one before? Can you ride on it?”

“In it,” I said. “You’ve never seen one because the Emperor keeps technologies for himself. He has airships and all kinds of things that he’s taken away from us, some of which are quite useful. Some of them are good things and some are very bad things. And what I need you both to do is run across to the Maris house, and stay there until I come and fetch you. Run now, extra fast. Tell them I was testing to see how fast you could run together. Stay with each other!” I added the last bit as they took off.

I knew they would tell Ellum and Tari about the airship, and the two of them would figure out I had sent the children for safekeeping. I went to clean myself up for the visitors.

They took several hours to arrive. The Emperor’s party came from the road this time, by hovercar. I hadn’t seen a hovercar in years, not since the annexation, just after I had come south.

We were outside waiting when they arrived; better to meet them there than to let them in the house when we didn’t know their intentions. There were six in their party, three women and three men, one small and dark, from my region or near it. Another woman wore the Emperor’s red and gold, though it wasn’t the infantry uniform we had seen in past years. She

alone among them stood with military bearing, and she alone had a visible sidearm.

The man who spoke was stooped and angular, with a long narrow jaw that left his teeth crowded and his speech slightly forced. “The Emperor requests your assistance.”

“Requests or requires?” I asked.

Lara shifted her weight to step on my toe. I stood my ground. I knew better than to goad them; this was clarification, not goading.

Narrow-Jaw folded his arms. “Requires, yes. The Emperor requires your assistance. He has sent his Royal Surveyors up in his airship, and—”

I couldn’t help it. “That’s you? The Royal Surveyors?”

“Yes.”

“Love, why don’t you stop interrupting His Majesty’s emissary, so he can explain his purpose?” Lara had given up on subtlety.

“Sorry,” I said. “I won’t interrupt again.”

He started over. “The Emperor requires your assistance. He has sent his Royal Surveyors up in his airship, and determined that your lands must be kept in sunflowers in all seasons possible.”

“All of our lands? What reason could he have for that?” I couldn’t help it. “And does he know that isn’t even possible? Crops have seasons.”

“All seasons possible,” he repeated.

Lara tried to be more diplomatic. “I think what my partner is trying to ask is whether the Emperor understands that the flowers will naturally follow cycles of growth and decay? Or that they won’t grow in winter, even here?”

“The Emperor understands. You’ll still be able to grow a kitchen garden, and you won’t be expected to raise flowers in winter. The Royal Agriculturists will provide a schedule so that you and your neighbors achieve peak bloom simultaneously and repeatedly.”

“Repeatedly. We’re not allowed to grow redwheat or grasses for hay at all? How are we supposed to survive on sunflower income alone? Or feed our animals? We can’t feed horses on a kitchen garden or sunflowers.” I tried to match Lara’s calm tone, but my questions felt shrill even to my own ears.

Narrow-Jaw held up his hands and shrugged. He looked uncomfortable. How many farms had he been to already that his own message still made him uncomfortable?

I continued. “For that matter, how are those of you in the mountains going to eat without our farms producing redwheat and beans for your markets?”

“Not everyone will be growing sunflowers. There will be a large group of redwheat growers to the west of your stripe.”

Lara’s turn to be incredulous. “Our stripe? And are they expected to grow redwheat all year long, while we grow sunflowers? Your Royal Agriculturists know that soil can’t sustain more than one crop of redwheat a year, right? That without cover crops or burning in between, the nutrients in the soil will disappear and future growth will be stunted?”

“Our Royal Agriculturists are working on the answers to all of these questions.”

“Why?” I asked. “What’s the point of all of this? We’re the Emperor’s farmers. There’s been no sedition. We don’t need to be broken or proven.”

Narrow-Jaw had done all of the speaking until then, but now one of the women in the group stepped forward. She held out her hand to reveal a small button, which flowered into a map projection.

“This is a view of the Emperor’s lands from his airship. He was travelling in late summer last year with his children, when his daughter pointed out that a particular stretch of rocky coastline in the north looked rather like his nose. See, here?”

She zoomed the map in on an outcropping that did indeed look like a nose. “And then both children began to expand the idea. A mountain lake, his blue eye. The northern mountains themselves, his crown. Once they showed him the resemblance, he was delighted. ‘You see, these lands were meant to be mine,’ he said.

“He insisted on touring the whole continent to see how far the resemblance carried. Here in the south, the areas that would be the edges of his robe were lined with gold—your sunflowers—as is his favorite robe. He determined that everything would stay just so: red cloak with gold lining, for as much of the year as will grow.”

Neither Lara nor I spoke. We stared at the map, dumbfounded. The rocky nose and chin, the eye, the mountains his crown, the fields his robes. Our family’s ruin laid out in gold. A question grew in me throughout the surveyor’s explanation, but I couldn’t quite bear to ask it. I didn’t want to know the answer, even if I needed to.

Lara had apparently been thinking the same thing, and gave it voice. “You say we’re the outer lining of the robe. What happens to those outside the border? There are further lands within his empire to the east. Neighbors in our community.” She traced a line down the map.

The woman shook her head. “The Emperor isn’t interested in maintaining lands outside of his image. Those places no longer exist as part of his empire.”

“No longer exist?” I asked.

“Their land is not part of his empire. Those people are no longer citizens. There aren’t many. The border is remarkably clean.”

“Clean,” I repeated, thinking of our own fields east of the line, and our neighbors beyond that. “And is there any risk that the Emperor will choose to, um, cleanse those lands further? If their crops interfere with his colors or lines?”

Another woman in the group, the slight one, spoke. Dark skinned as me, dark eyeglasses, and with an accent I hadn’t heard for years, not that distant from my own. “Would you doubt it for a second?”

The military woman gave her a jab in the ribs, and she amended her comments. “Our new Emperor is a master of consistency. We should all commend him for this brilliant idea, which will bring glory to all of his people.” She didn’t sound like she believed it.

“We’ll be the planet’s largest work of art,” said one of the men. “Glory to the Empire.”

“Glory to the Empire,” I said drily.

Lara shook her head. “Please convey our thanks to the Emperor for this opportunity. You’ll be going now?”

Narrow-Jaw nodded.

“When will you be back?” I asked. “Do we have time to harvest the redwheat we’ve already planted?”

“Depends on when you harvest. The Emperor has given us seven more months to create the complete tapestry. As long as your fields are gold by the time we survey again...”

As they turned to go back to their vehicle, the small woman stepped toward Lara and clasped her hands. “Good luck too, yes,” she said, as if we had made the same wish to her.

The military woman had waited and took her arm. It wasn’t a gentle gesture, and I couldn’t quite tell whether she was guiding a woman who couldn’t see well or escorting a prisoner. “You know you can’t do that,” I heard her say as they walked away.

We watched them drive down the road and turn toward the Maris house.

“Ellum will be taken by surprise,” I said. “Everyone’s assumed only the farms on the burn line would be affected.”

“I wonder if she has the same good wishes for everyone she encounters,” Lara said.

“Who? What?”

She glanced toward the road, then opened her hand to reveal a handful of small seeds. “The woman with the glasses. She slipped them into my hand. Do you recognize them?”

I took the seeds from her and rolled one between my thumb and palm. Nodded. “They’re from a northern plant. Lavaflower. We grew it all over the sides of mountains where nothing else took root. Why would that woman give the seeds to you?”

“She may have guessed—correctly—that you’d have withdrawn your hands if she had grabbed them.”

“Okay, yes, that’s true. But why lavaflower?”

“What color are its blooms?”

“Blood red, red-orange, red-gold, gold,” I said. “Hence the name. It looks like rivers of lava. It’s hardy as anything—it’d probably grow down here too—but it only blooms every eighteen years.”

“And? You’re a farmer now, Kae. How’s it useful?”

I sighed and thought back. “I saw it bloom twice before I left home, once when I was a small child, and once just after I’d reached adulthood. My mother took me up into the mountains to harvest it by the armload.”

“For?”

“For my father to turn the fibers into cloth. It makes lovely cloth. Smooth as a horse’s summer coat. And then my mother

boiled the flowers for dye. If the dye was made right, it took on all the colors of the blooms. Our Queen herself bought cloth from my family before the Emperor drove her away.”

“Why would that woman give us seeds that flower red if we’re not allowed to grow red?”

I shrugged. “Her own small rebellion?”

“She picked the wrong people if that’s the case. We have children to look after. And we’re too old to cause trouble.”

“She didn’t know we have children.”

She gestured at the swing hanging from the tree.

Fair point. “All right. She knew we had children.”

“Maybe she saw in you a fellow northerner.”

Lara walked toward the house, and I followed. In the kitchen, I placed the seeds in a bowl. Looked out the window at the winter growth of our redwheat, scrubby and green still.

“I wonder,” she said. “How fast does your lavaflower grow, did you say?”

“Sixty days? Ninety days? Quickly, I think. The bloom comes in the first days of summer in its first season, but then doesn’t return again for eighteen years.”

“And it can grow beneath the crops? Between the aisles, or beneath the wheat or the sunflowers? Would it interfere?”

“Interfere with what, love?”

“Will it choke the crops? If we introduce it here?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“We could make him a new cloak, out of your lava plant. A fine cloak with all those colors mixed in...”

I considered. “I think there’s a serious risk it could take over, but if we planted and harvested it before we plowed the whole field under, and cleared all the individual roots by hand, we might be able to kill it again after a single season. Or—wait.”

“Wait?”

I sat down at the table, closed my eyes. Tapped my fingers on my forehead.

“Love, what are you doing?”

“Math, Lara.” I kept my eyes closed a minute longer, double checking my figures. Looked up, grinned. “She didn’t say ‘good luck too, yes’. She said ‘good luck, two years.’ Two years. In two years the lavaflowers in the mountains will bloom for the first time since his arrival.”

“And?”

“If she’s giving seeds to other northerners scattered from their homes, I think she wants everyone to plant for a bloom in two years’ time, to coincide with the bloom in the mountains.”

I closed my eyes, picturing the bloodstains rising everywhere on the map-portrait, spots blooming on his majestic nose, his golden hem.

Opened my eyes again to Lara's frown. "And what if he punishes those who do it? Or misses the bloom? What you're talking about is a symbolic action, like your tomatoes. If he doesn't understand the significance, it will all be for nothing."

She was right. The other idea appealed to me, but hers held promise too. "You're right, love. We'll plant the seeds now. We'll make the emperor a cloak."

* * *

The lavaflower seeds took well. By the time they bloomed, our last redwheat had grown tall enough to conceal them. I taught Ash and Sable how to harvest the stalks and flowers, as I had for my mother when I was a child. We saved the seeds in case we would need them again.

The Marises made a brocade, trading at the winter market to get silver thread and black dye. They came over often to help with the tedious process of converting fiber to textile.

We had just enough to make a cloak worthy of an Emperor. If we couldn't get him to change his plan, perhaps we could get him to change his taste in clothing. Our gifts, not only to the Emperor but to all of our neighbors as well.

* * *

The Emperor's festival fell at the beginning of autumn, in the season of peak sunflowers. We were all sick of sunflowers by then.

We curried our horses until they looked palace-kept. I put Ash and Sable to work shining the harness and sweeping the wagon. Lara wrapped the cloak in a blanket to keep it free of road dust. Tari Maris was ready to birth her baby at any moment, so she and Ellum stayed home, sending only their son Ianno with us.

For the last ten years, since he had instituted this tradition, the Emperor had arrived in a fine horse-drawn carriage, to show he was a man of the people. This time, we saw his airship tethered in a field near the festival.

“To inspect his artistry from above, no doubt,” Lara said with no small trace of bitterness. The horses pulling us were grass-fat and sleek now, but we both wondered how they would survive winter without stored summer grains and hay.

“Can we go closer?” Sable asked, leaning out of the cart. “I want to see it!”

I grabbed her collar and pulled her back into her seat. “Not now. Enjoy it from this distance. We have to get in line.”

We left Ianno to watch the horses and ventured into the market square, made over with garlands and banners for the Emperor’s visit. The line for giving tribute was already long.

“Why aren’t we leaving the cloak in the gift depository?” asked Ash. In the past, we had always left our gifts there, since

we hadn't wanted or needed an audience. I'd never had any desire to meet the Emperor face to face.

"We've never made anything worthy of giving him in person before," Lara said, a far more diplomatic answer than mine would have been. Better not to give the children the idea we were ever less than happy with the Emperor, lest they turn around and say as much. When they were old enough to have discretion, we could explain. Assuming the thing we were about to do didn't get us all killed.

When we took our place in line, we let the children run off to play in the market aisles. We stood behind Shin Davi and her grandson, who were holding a basket of sunflower seeds between them. The type of gift we had given every year in the past: seeds, oils, hulled redwheat for the Emperor's winter stores.

There wasn't much point to standing in line with such a gift, unless you wanted to catch a glimpse of the Emperor himself. Or maybe it was a better gift than I thought: the grandson shifted it in his arms at one point, and I saw that the basket itself was adorned with the words "He Who Is The Land And The Land is He." Grammar aside, it was decent flattery.

"What do you have there?" the old woman asked, leaning over me to catch a glimpse of what I had wrapped in my arms.

"A cloak, Shin Davi," Lara told her.

The day was hotter than usual for this time of year, and the insides of my elbows sweated under the blanket and cloak. I held it away from my body so I wouldn't soak it.

Another hour passed, and we reached the last straightaway. The line ended at a table of inspectors. Beyond that, the tent in which the Emperor sat, waiting to receive those who were chosen to present their tributes in person. Lara kissed me on the cheek and left me to deliver our gift on my own. That was what we had decided, that we wouldn't risk both of our lives to deliver the message. She had offered to be the one—"You aren't the most tactful person, Kae"—but I insisted on doing it myself.

One more hour, and I reached the inspectors' table.

"Name?" asked my inspector.

"Kae Bakari. I carry a gift from my family and the family Maris. We made it together."

I unfolded the blanket and shook our tribute free. A red and gold cloak, soft as a horse in summer, with colors intermingled. A red and gold cloak with silver and black brocade, colors we could never duplicate in the land. A red and gold cloak with a shape that billowed to encompass all the farms cleaved and set loose by the narrow cut of a gold-trimmed robe.

The inspector rocked back in his seat. “That’s a fine garment,” he said, his tone suggesting surprise. “You may deliver it to the Emperor in person.”

I nodded, swallowing back my fear.

I was ushered past the table and into another, much shorter line, just outside the Emperor’s tent. I took my place behind a woman carrying a thirteen-strand braided bread in the shape of a sunflower. There were only two people ahead of her, then one, and then I stood alone before the closed tent, staring at a frowning guard.

The tent flaps parted, and the guard nodded to me. Inside, the tent was both cooler and brighter than I had expected. I knelt, careful not to let the cloak touch the ground.

“Rise, and let me see what you’ve brought.”

I rose, and lifted my eyes. The Emperor sat on a golden throne, on a dais. My first thought was how heavy that throne must be, to be carried around from town to town. Electric lights in the corners lit the space. Fan machines pushed air past him, rustling his hair beneath his crown.

The years had been kind to him. I had last seen him riding a hovercar through city streets, a glimpse long enough to take aim at him. He’d been young and haggard then, a warrior with a warrior’s concerns. I still recalled the look on his face when the first tomato hit his head, fear and fury and embarrassment.

His face was softer now. The profile on his banner made him look taller and leaner than he actually was. I supposed nobody could live up to the frozen perfection of a portrait at every moment of their life, even an Emperor.

Two children sat at his feet, playing with mechanical horses that galloped on their own when released. They were about the same age as Ash and Sable; I tried to imagine how an offhand remark by children of that age could be allowed to dictate the fates of thousands of farmers.

I pushed the thought from my mind and unfolded the cloak again, setting the blanket down. With my arms stretched wide, I held it aloft. The electric lights shone through the lavaflower reds and golds and oranges. I couldn't see past the cloak, but I heard his intake of breath, and when the tiny horses stopped galloping, they weren't wound again.

"Look, Father!" One of the children said. "It's like stained glass."

"It's beautiful, Father!" said the other. "You'll take it, won't you? You should take it. It's nicer than the one you have now."

My arms shook, but I didn't dare lower them.

"Thank you," the Emperor finally said, and someone arrived to take the cloak from me. I was left standing empty-handed. "That is a tribute of remarkable quality. I've never seen

anything like it. I shall wear it with pride, and remember your region with favor. Thank you.”

He lifted one soft hand and flicked two fingers. A guard appeared beside me and took my elbow.

I gathered my nerve.. The cloak itself might be enough, even without me saying anything else. It might be enough to convince him to decree different colors the next year, allowing us to rotate our crops and harvest enough to survive, but how could we rely on that?

“Your Royal Highness,” I said. “If I may.”

His hand still hung in the air in front of him, as if he’d forgotten to return it to his lap. The guard tugged at my elbow again.

“Please,” I said.

The Emperor’s daughter paused in winding her mechanical horse and looked up. “Nobody ever stays—”

“—after Father does that finger thing.” Her brother got to his feet as well, looking at me like a toy that had done something unexpected. “Why are you still here?”

“I... I have twins too, about your age,” I said. “They sometimes finish each other’s sentences like you do. I’m worried they’re going to starve.”

“What’s starve?” asked the girl.

I risked a glance at the Emperor. His hand no longer floated in midair, which I took as a good sign. I took another deep breath and began.

“This idea of turning your whole Empire into a portrait of yourself. I’ve seen the coastline myself, in my youth, and I think the resemblance is remarkable. But if you accept that you are the land, or the land is you, you’ll have to accept the ravages of bad seasons as well as the beauty of the good ones.”

He looked angry for a moment, but didn’t speak. I continued.

“There will come winter, and a corner of your cloak will grow ragged. A year of drought or locusts, and your robe will look threadbare. A bad storm might change the coastline and disfigure your chin, or cause the lake of your eye to flood your entire face. And the mountains, your crown, the mountains have secrets. I come from the mountains, and I can tell you that there are things there that can’t be tamed.

“This idea to carve your Empire in your image is a wonderful one”—I glanced at his children—“but wouldn’t it be truly special to say that this land was briefly a portrait, and to draw maps and paintings to celebrate your likeness, but then to allow the land to do what land does, and to let farmers plant according to their needs, according to the needs of your

citizens? Something fleeting is often more valuable than something lasting.”

I knelt again, begging leave, then fled before he could say anything. I realized when the flap had closed behind me that I had left our blanket inside. I wasn't going back for it. The expression on his face had suggested he was considering my words; it was all I could ask.

If the cloak didn't convince the Emperor to let us return to our proper crops, in two years the lavaflowers in the mountains would bloom for the first time since he had arrived from across the sea. In two years, the mountains would run red, a bloody crown to shame him, and the surveyor's flowers would stain his robes. If he hadn't changed his mind by then, or abandoned the idea altogether, perhaps that would change it. That was the seed I had come to plant; now we just had to wait for it to take root.

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BLOOD GRAINS SPEAK THROUGH MEMORIES

by Jason Sanford

Morning's song of light and warmth glowed on the horizon as the land's anchor, Frere-Jones Roeder, stepped from her front door. The red-burn dots of fairies swirled in the river mists flowing over her recently plowed sunflower fields. Cows mooed in the barn, eager to be milked. Chickens flapped their wings as they stirred from roosts on her home's sod-grass roof.

Even though the chilled spring day promised nothing but beauty, the grains in Frere-Jones's body shivered to her sadness as she looked at the nearby dirt road. The day-fellows along the road were packing their caravan. Evidently her promises of safety weren't enough for them to chance staying even a few more hours.

Frere-Jones tapped the message pad by the door, pinging her fellow anchors on other lands so they knew the caravan was departing. She then picked up her gift sack and hurried outside to say goodbye.

As Frere-Jones closed the door, a red fairy wearing her dead lifemate's face flittered before her eyes. A flash of memory

jumped into her from the fairy's grain-created body. One of Haoquin's memories, from a time right after they'd wed. They'd argued over something silly—like newlyweds always did—and Haoquin had grown irritated at Frere-Jones's intransigence.

But that was all the fairy shared. The taste of Haoquin's memory didn't show Frere-Jones and Haoquin making up. The memory didn't show the two of them ending the day by walking hand-in-hand along her land's forest trails.

Frere-Jones slapped the fairy away, not caring if the land and its damned grains were irritated at her sadness. She liked the day-fellows. She'd choose them any day over the grains.

The fairy spun into an angry buzzing and flew over the sunflower fields to join the others.

Frere-Jones walked up to the caravan's wagons to find the day-fellows detaching their power systems from her farm's solar and wind grid. The caravan leader nodded to Frere-Jones as he harnessed a team of four horses to the lead wagon.

"We appreciate you letting us plug in," the man said. "Our solar collectors weaken something awful when it's overcast."

"Anytime," Frere-Jones said. "Pass the word to other caravans that I'm happy to help. Power or water or food, I'll always share."

Pleasantries done, Frere-Jones hurried down the line of wagons.

The first five wagons she passed were large multi-generational affairs with massive ceramic wheels standing as tall as she. Pasted-on red ribbons outlined the wagons' scars from old battles. Day-fellows believed any battle they survived was a battle worth honoring.

Adults and teenagers and kids smiled at Frere-Jones as she passed, everyone hurrying to harness horses and stow baggage and deploy their solar arrays.

Frere-Jones waved at the Kameron twins, who were only seven years old and packing up their family's honey and craft goods. Frere-Jones reached into her pocket and handed the twins tiny firefly pebbles. When thrown, the pebbles would burst into mechanical fireflies which flew in streaks of rainbow colors for a few seconds. The girls giggled—firefly pebbles were a great prank. Kids loved to toss them when adults were sitting around campfires at night, releasing bursts of fireflies to startle everyone.

Frere-Jones hugged the twins and walked on, finally stopping before the caravan's very last wagon.

The wagon stood small, barely containing the single family inside, built not of ceramic but of a reinforced lattice of ancient metal armor. Instead of bright ribbons to honor old battles, a faded maroon paint flaked and peeled from the walls. Large impact craters shown on one side of the wagon. Long scratches

surrounded the back door from superhard claws assaulting the wagon's armored shutters.

An ugly, ugly wagon. Still, it had bent under its last attack instead of breaking. The caravan's leader had told Frere-Jones that this family's previous caravan had been attacked a few months ago. All that caravan's ceramic wagons shattered, but this wagon survived.

Frere-Jones fed her final sugar cubes to the wagon's horses, a strong pair who nickered in pleasure as the grains within their bodies pulsed in sync to her own. Horses adapted so perfectly to each land's grains as they fed on grasses and hay. That flexibility was why horses usually survived attacks even when their caravan did not.

"Morning, Master-Anchor Frere-Jones," a teenage girl, Alexnya, said as she curtsied, holding the sides of her leather vest out like a fancy dress. Most kids in the caravan wore flowing cotton clothes, but Alexnya preferred leather shirts and vests and pants.

"Master-Anchor Frere-Jones, you honor us with your presence," Alexnya's mother, Jun, said in an overly formal manner. Her husband, Takeshi, stood behind her, holding back their younger daughter and son as if Frere-Jones was someone to fear.

They're skittish from that attack, Frere-Jones thought. A fresh scar ran the left side of Jun's thin face while Takeshi still wore a healing pad around his neck. Their two young kids, Miya and Tufte, seemed almost in tears at being near an anchor. When Frere-Jones smiled at them, both kids bolted to hide in the wagon.

Only Alexnya stood unafraid, staring into Frere-Jones's eyes as if confident this land's anchor wouldn't dare harm her.

"I've brought your family gifts," Frere-Jones said.

"Why?" Jun asked, suspicious.

Frere-Jones paused, unused to explaining. "I give gifts to all families who camp on my land."

"A land which you protect," Jun said, scratching the scar on her face. As if to remind Frere-Jones what the anchors who'd attacked their last caravan had done.

Frere-Jones nodded sadly. "I am my land's anchor," she said. "I wish it wasn't so. If I could leave I would... my son..."

Frere-Jones turned to walk back to her farm to milk the cows. Work distracted her from memories. But Alexnya jumped forward and grabbed her hand.

"I've heard of your son," Alexnya said. "He's a day-fellow now, isn't he?"

Frere-Jones grinned. "He is indeed. Travels the eastern roads in a caravan with his own lifemate and kids. I see him

once every four years when the land permits his caravan to return.” Frere-Jones held the gift bag out to Alexnya. “Please take this. I admit it’s a selfish gift. I want day-fellows to watch out for my son and his family. Lend a hand when needed.”

“Day-fellows protect our own,” Jun stated in a flat voice. “No need to bribe us to do what we already do.”

Alexnya, despite her mother’s words, took the canvas gift bag and opened it, pulling out a large spool of thread and several short knives.

“The thread is reinforced with nano-armor,” Frere-Jones said, “the strongest you can find. You can weave it into the kids’ clothes. The short knives were made by a day-fellow biosmith and are supposedly unbreakable...”

Frere-Jones paused, not knowing what else to say. She thought it silly that day-fellows were prohibited from possessing more modern weapons than swords and knives to protect themselves, even if she knew why the grains demanded this.

“Thank you, Frere-Jones,” Alexnya said as she curtsied again. “My family appreciates your gifts, which will come in handy on the road.”

Unsure what else to say, Frere-Jones bowed back before walking away, refusing to dwell on the fact that she was the reason this day-fellow caravan was fleeing her land.

* * *

That night Frere-Jones lit the glow-stones in the fireplace and sat down on her favorite sofa. The stones' flickering flames licked the weariness from her body. A few more weeks and the chilled nights would vanish as spring fully erupted across her land.

Frere-Jones didn't embrace spring as she once had. Throughout the valley her fellow anchors celebrated the growing season with dances, feasts, and lush night-time visits to the forest with their lifemates and friends.

Frere-Jones no longer joined such festivities. Through the grains she tasted the land's excitement—the mating urge of the animals, the budding of the trees, the growth of the new-planted seeds in her fields. She felt the cows in the fields nuzzling each other's necks and instinctively touched her own neck in response. She sensed several does hiding in the nearby forests and touched her stomach as the fawns in their wombs kicked. She even felt the grass growing on her home's sod-roof and walls, the roots reaching slowly down as water flowed by capillary action into the fresh-green blades.

The grains allowed Frere-Jones, as this land's anchor, to feel everything growing and living and dying for two leagues around her. She even dimly felt the anchors on nearby lands—Jeroboam and his family ate dinner in their anchordom while

Chakatie hunted deer in a forest glen on her land. Chakatie was probably gearing up for one of her family's bloody ritualized feasts to welcome spring.

Frere-Jones sipped her warm mulled wine before glancing at her home's message pad. Was it too soon to call her son again? She'd tried messaging Colton a few hours ago, but the connection failed. She was used to this—day-fellow caravans did slip in and out of the communication grid—but that didn't make it any less painful. At least he was speaking to her again.

Frere-Jones downed the rest of her drink. As she heated a new mug of wine over the stove she took care to ignore the fairies dancing outside her kitchen window. Usually the fairies responded to the land's needs and rules, but these fairies appeared to have been created by the grains merely to annoy her. The grains were well aware that Frere-Jones hated her part in the order and maintenance of this land.

Two fairies with her parents' faces glared in the window. Other fairies stared with the faces of even more distant ancestors. Several fairies mouthed Frere-Jones's name, as if reminding her of an anchor's duty, while others spoke in bursts of memories copied by the grains from her ancestors' lives.

Fuck duty, she thought as she swallowed half a mug of wine. *Fuck you for what you did to Haoquin.*

Thankfully her lifemate's face wasn't among those worn by these fairies. While the grains had no problem creating fairies with Haoquin's face, they knew not to push Frere-Jones when she was drunk.

As Frere-Jones left the kitchen she paused before the home altar. In the stone pedestal's basin stood three carved stone figurines—herself, her son, and Haoquin. The hand-sized statues rested on the red-glowing sand filling the basin.

In the flickering light of the glow stones the figures seemed to twitch as if alive, shadow faces accusing Frere-Jones of unknown misdeeds. Frere-Jones touched Haoquin's face—felt his sharp cheekbones and mischievous smirk—causing the basin's red sands to rise up, the individual grains climbing the statues until her family glowed a faint speckled red over the darker sands below.

The red grains burned her fingers where she touched Haoquin, connecting her to what remained of her lifemate. She felt his bones in the family graveyard on the edge of the forest. Felt the insects and microbes which had fed on his remains and absorbed his grains before dying and fertilizing the ground and the trees and the other plants throughout the land, where the grains had then been eaten by deer and cows and rabbits. If Frere-Jones closed her eyes she could almost feel Haoquin's

grains pulsing throughout the land. Could almost imagine him returning to her and hugging her tired body.

Except he couldn't. He was gone. Only the echo of him lived on in the microscopic grains which had occupied his body and were now dispersed again to her land.

And her son was even farther beyond the grains' reach, forced to forsake both the grains and her land when he turned day-fellow.

Frere-Jones sat down hard on the tile floor and cried, cradling her empty wine mug.

She was lying on the floor, passed out from the wine, when a banging woke her.

"Frere-Jones, you must help us!" a woman's voice called. She recognized the voice—Jun, from the day-fellow family which left that morning.

Frere-Jones's hands shook, curling like claws. The grains in her body screamed against the day-fellows for staying on her land.

No, she ordered, commanding the grains to stand down. It's too soon. There are a few more days before they wear out this land's welcome.

The grains rattled irritably in her body like pebbles in an empty water gourd. While they should obey her, to be safe Frere-Jones stepped across the den and lifted several ceramic

tiles from the floor. She pulled Haoquin's handmade laser pistol from the hiding spot and slid it behind her back, held by her belt. She was now ready to shoot herself in the head if need be.

Satisfied that she was ready, Frere-Jones opened the door. Jun and Takeshi stood there supporting Alexnya, who leaned on them as if drunk but stared with eyes far too awake and aware. Alexnya shook and spasmed, her muscles clenching as she moaned a low, painful hiss, unable to fully scream.

Frere-Jones looked behind the family. She reached out to the grains in the land's animals and plants and soils. She didn't feel any other anchors on her land. If any of them found the day-fellows here ...

"Bring her inside," she told Jun. "Takeshi, hide your wagon and horses in the barn."

"Not until later," Takeshi said, wanting to stay with his daughter.

Jun snapped at him. "Don't be a fool, Tak. We can't be seen. Not after everyone knows our caravan left."

Frere-Jones took Alexnya in her arms, the grains powering up her strength so the teenage girl seemed to weigh no more than a baby. Takeshi hurried back to the wagon, where the family's two youngest kids stared in fright from the open door.

Frere-Jones carried Alexnya to Colton's old room and placed her on the bed. Alexnya continued to spasm, her muscles clenching and shivering under her drained-pale skin.

"Please," Alexnya whimpered. "Please..."

As Jun held her daughter's hand, Frere-Jones leaned closer to the girl. The grains jumped madly in Frere-Jones's blood, erupting her fangs like razors ready to rip into these day-fellows' throats. Frere-Jones breathed deep to calm herself and gagged on Alexnya's sweaty scent. It carried the faintest glimmer of grains inside Alexnya's body.

"She's infected," Frere-Jones said in shock. "With grains. My grains."

Jun nodded, an angry look on her face as if Frere-Jones had personally caused this abomination. "The further we travelled from your land, the more pain she experienced. She didn't stop screaming until we left the caravan and began making our way back here."

Frere-Jones growled softly. "This is unheard of," she said. "Grains shouldn't infect day-fellows."

"Day-fellow lore says it happens on rare occasions. Our lore also says each land's anchor has medicine to cure an infection."

Frere-Jones understood. She ran to the kitchen and grabbed her emergency bag. Inside was a glass vial half-full of powder glowing a faint red.

She hadn't used the powder since Colton became a day-fellow. The powder's nearly dim glow meant it had weakened severely over the years. Chakatie had taken most of her remaining medicine after Colton left, worried about Frere-Jones killing herself with an overdose. Now all that was left was a half-vial of nearly worthless medicine.

But she had nothing else to give. She held the vial over her altar—letting it sync again with the coding from her land's grains—then mixed the powder in a mug of water and hurried back to Alexnya.

“Drink this,” she said, holding the mug to Alexnya's lips. The girl gasped and turned her head as if being near the liquid hurt her.

“Why is it hurting her?” Jun asked, blocking Alexnya's mouth with her hand so Frere-Jones couldn't try again. “I thought the medicine helped.”

“It does, but the grains always resist at first,” Frere-Jones said. “When I gave it to my own son years ago he... went through some initial pain. We usually only give small doses to new anchors at puberty to calm the explosive growth of the

grains in their bodies. But if we give Alexnya a full dose for the next few days, it should kill the grains.”

Jun frowned. “How much pain?”

“I... don’t know. But if we don’t do something soon there will be too many grains in her body to remove.”

Frere-Jones didn’t need to tell Jun what would happen if Alexnya became anchored to this land. The anchors from the lands surrounding Frere-Jones’s wouldn’t take kindly to a day-fellow girl becoming one of them.

“We shouldn’t have come here,” Jun said, standing up. “Maybe if we take Alexnya away from here before the grains establish themselves...”

“Taking her from the land will definitely kill her—the grains have already anchored. We need to remove them from her body. There’s no other way.”

“I’ll drink it,” Alexnya whispered in a weak voice. She glared at Frere-Jones in fury. Frere-Jones prayed the grains weren’t already sharing the land’s stored memories with this day-fellow girl. Showing Alexnya what Frere-Jones had done. Revealing secrets known by no one else except her son and Chakatie.

Despite her hesitation, Jun nodded agreement. She held her daughter’s spasming body as Frere-Jones poured the liquid through the girl’s lips. Alexnya swallowed half the medicine

before screaming. Splashes and dribbles on her leather shirt and pants glowed bright red as she thrashed in the bed for a moment before passing out.

Frere-Jones and Jun tucked Alexnya under the covers and stepped into the den. Takeshi stood by the fireplace holding their youngest son and daughter.

“Will she make it?” Jun asked.

“I don’t know,” Frere-Jones said. “She’ll need another dose before the medicine wears off or she’ll be as bad as ever. And that was all I had in the house.”

Frere-Jones glanced at the altar, where the red sands squirmed in a frenzied rush, climbing over the figurines as if outraged they couldn’t eat stone. She noticed Jun staring at her back and realized the woman had seen the laser pistol she carried.

Frere-Jones handed the pistol to Jun. “Use this if needed,” she said. “Make sure none of you touch the grains in the altar—if you do, every anchor for a hundred leagues will know there’s a day-fellow family here.”

Jun nodded as Frere-Jones pulled on her leather running duster. “When will you be back?”

“I don’t know,” Frere-Jones said. “I have to find more medicine. I’ll... think of something.”

With that Frere-Jones ordered the grains to power up her legs and, for the first time in years, she ran across her land. She ran faster than any horse, faster than any deer, until even the fairies which flew after her could barely keep up.

* * *

At the land's boundary Frere-Jones paused.

She stood by Sandy Creek, the cold waters bubbling under the overhanging oaks and willows. Fairies flew red tracers over the creek, flying as far across as they dared without crossing into the bordering land. On the other bank a handful of blue fairies hovered in the air, staring back at Frere-Jones and the red fairies.

Usually boundaries between lands were more subtle, the grains that were tied to one anchor mixing a bit with the next land's grains in the normal back and forth of life. But with Sandy Creek as a natural land divide—combined with Frere-Jones's isolation from the other anchors—the boundary between her and Chakatie's lands had grown abrupt, stark.

One of Chakatie's blue fairies stared intensely at her. Chakatie knew she was coming. Frere-Jones wished there was a caravan nearby to trade for the medicine. Day-fellow pharmacists were very discreet.

Still, of all the nearby anchors Chakatie was the only one who might still give her medicine. Chakatie was also technically

family, even if her son Haoquin was now dead. And she had a large extended family. Meaning a number of kids. Meaning stocks of medicine on hand to ensure the grains didn't overwhelm and kill those kids when they transitioned to becoming anchors.

Still, no matter how much Frere-Jones had once loved Chakatie she wouldn't go in unprepared. She was, after all, her land's anchor. She stripped off her clothes and stepped into the cold creek, rubbing mud and water over her skin and hair to remove the day-fellow scent. She activated the grains inside her, increasing her muscle size and bone density. Finally, for good measure, she grabbed a red fairy buzzing next to her and smashed it between her now-giant hands. She smeared the fairy's glowing red grains in two lines down both sides of her face and body.

Battle lines. As befitted an anchor going into another's land in the heart of the night.

Satisfied, she walked naked onto Chakatie's anchordom.

* * *

Frere-Jones hated memories. She hated how the grains spoke to her in brief snatches of memories copied from Haoquin and her parents and grandparents and on back to the land's very first anchor.

But despite this distaste at memories, they still swarmed her. As Frere-Jones crossed the dark forest of trees and brambles on Chakatie's land, she wondered why the grains were showing her these memories. The grains never revealed memories randomly.

In particular, why show her Haoquin's memories, which the grains had so rarely shared up to now? Memories from the day she met him. Memories from their selecting ceremony.

Frere-Jones tried to stop them, but the memories slipped into her as if they'd always existed within her.

Frere-Jones's parents had died when the grains determined it was time for their child to take over. Like most anchors they'd gone happily. First they drank medicine to dull the grains' power to rebuild their bodies. Then they slit each other's throat in the land's graveyard, holding hands as they bled out and their grain-copied memories flowed into the land they'd protected.

At first Frere-Jones had accepted her role in protecting the land. She safeguarded the land from those who might harm it and carefully managed the ecosystem's plants and animals so the land was in continual balance.

But a few years after becoming anchor a small day-fellow caravan defiled her land by cutting down trees. Frere-Jones eagerly allowed the grains to seize control of her body. She

called other anchors to her side and led an attack on the caravan. Memories of the pains her land had suffered before the grains had arrived flowed through her—images of clear-cut forests and poisoned soil and all the other evils of the ancient world. In her mind she became a noble warrior preventing humans from creating ecological hell just as her family had done for a hundred generations.

Only after the caravan was wiped out did she learn that a day-fellow child, gifted with a new hatchet and told to gather dead branches for a fire, had instead cut down a single pine sapling.

Outraged at what she'd done, Frere-Jones attacked the other anchors who'd helped savage the caravan. The anchors fought back, slashing at her with claw and fang until a respected older anchor, Chakatie, arrived, her three-yard-tall body powered to a mass of muscle and bone and claw.

Chakatie's land neighbored Frere-Jones's land, but Chakatie hadn't aided in the attack on the caravan. Now this powerful woman had stepped among the fighting anchors, a mere glance all that was needed to stop the other anchors from attacking each other. A few even powered down their bodies.

Chakatie had paused before the remains of the caravan and breathed deeply. As the other anchors watched nervously,

Chakatie leaned over and tapped the tiny child-size hatchet and examined the cut sapling. She sniffed each day-fellow body.

With a roar, Chakatie told everyone but this land's anchor to leave. The others fled.

Once everyone was gone Chakatie bent over the dead bodies and cried.

After Chakatie finished, she stood and wiped her tears. Frere-Jones forced herself to stand still, willing to take whatever punishment Chakatie might give for this evil deed. But the older woman didn't attack. Instead, she stepped forward until her hot breath licked Frere-Jones's face and her fangs clicked beside her ear like knives stripping flesh from bone.

"The grains speak only in memories," Chakatie said. "But memories only speak to the grains' programmed goals. A good anchor never lets memory overwhelm what is right and what is wrong."

With that Chakatie walked away, leaving Frere-Jones to bury the caravan's dead.

Ashamed, Frere-Jones had locked herself in her home and refused to listen to the grains' excuses. The grains tried to please her with swirls of memories from her parents and others. Memories of people apologizing and explaining and rationalizing what she'd done.

But she no longer cared. She was this land's anchor and she'd decide what was right. Not the grains.

A few years later the grains gave her an ultimatum: marry another anchor to help manage this land, or the other anchors would kill Frere-Jones and select a new anchor to take her place.

The selecting ceremony took place on the summer solstice. Hundreds of her fellow anchors came to her home, setting up feasting tents along the dirt road and in fallow fields. Frere-Jones walked from tent to tent, meeting young anchors who spoke eagerly of duty and helping protect her land. She listened politely. Nodded to words like "ecological balance" and "heritage." Then she walked to the next tent to hear more of the same.

Frere-Jones grew more and more depressed as she went from tent to tent. If she didn't choose a mate before the end of the day all the celebrating anchors would rip her to pieces and chose a new anchor to protect her land. She wondered if day-fellows felt this fear around anchors. The fear of knowing people who were so warm and friendly one moment might be your death in the next.

Frere-Jones was preparing for her death when she spotted a ragged tent beside her barn. The tent was almost an

afterthought, a few poles stuck in the ground holding up several old and torn cotton blankets.

Frere-Jones stepped inside to see Chakatie sitting beside a young man.

“Join us in a drink?” Chakatie asked, holding a jug of what smelled like moonshine. Chakatie’s body when powered down was tiny, barely reaching Frere-Jones’s shoulder.

“Do I look like I need a drink?” Frere-Jones asked.

“Any young woman about to be slaughtered for defying the grains needs a drink,” Chakatie said.

Frere-Jones sat down hard on the ground and drank a big swallow of moonshine. “Maybe I deserve to be killed,” she thought, remembering what she’d done to that day-fellow caravan.

“Maybe,” the young man sitting next to Chakatie said. “Or maybe you deserve a chance to change things.”

Chakatie introduced the man as her son Haoquin. He leaned over and shook Frere-Jones’s hand.

“How can I change anything?” Frere-Jones asked. “The grains will force me to do what they want or they’ll order the other anchors to kill me.”

Instead of answering, Haoquin leaned over so he could see outside the tiny tent. He was a skinny man and wore a giant wool coat even in summer, as if easily chilled. Or that’s what

Frere-Jones thought until he opened the coat and pulled out a small laser pistol.

Frere-Jones froze at the sight of the forbidden technology, but Chakatie merely laughed. Haoquin aimed the pistol at a nearby tent—the Jeroboam family tent, among the loudest and most rambunctious groups at the selection ceremony. Haoquin pulled the trigger, and a slight buzzing like angry bees filled the tent. He shoved the pistol back in his coat as the roof of the Jeroboam tent burst into flames.

Drunken anchors, including Jeroboam himself, fled from the tent, tearing holes in the fabric walls in their panic. Other anchors howled with laughter while Jeroboam and his lifemate and kids demanded to know who had insulted their family and land with this prank.

Haoquin grinned as he patted his coat covering the hidden pistol. “A little something I made,” he said. “I’m hoping it’ll come in handy when I eventually spit at the grains’ memories.”

Frere-Jones felt a flash of memory—her parents warning her as a kid to behave. To be a good girl. She shook off the grains’ warning as she stared into Haoquin’s mischievous eyes.

Maybe Haoquin was right. Maybe there was a way to change things.

* * *

Frere-Jones leaned against a large oak tree, her powered body shaking as red and blue fairies buzzed around her. The grains had never shared such a deep stretch of Haoquin's memories with her. The memories had been so intense and long they'd merged with her own memories of that day into something more. Almost as if Haoquin was alive once again inside her.

Frere-Jones wiped at her glowing eyes with the back of her clawed right hand. Why had the grains shared such a memory with her? What were they saying?

She pushed the memories from her thoughts as she ran on through the forest.

Frere-Jones found Chakatie in an isolated forest glen. Countless fairies rose into the dark skies from the tiny field of grass, stirring up a whirlwind of blue grains in their wake. Naked anchors jumped and howled among the blue light, their bodies powered up far beyond Frere-Jones's own. Massive claws dug into tree trunks and soil. Bloody lips and razor fangs kissed and nipped each other. Throats howled to the stars and the night clouds above.

And throughout this orgy of light and scent swirled the memories of this land's previous anchors. Memories of laughing and crying and killing and dying and a thousand other

moments of life, all preserved by the blue grains which coursed through these trees and animals and enhanced people.

Frere-Jones stepped through the frenzied dance, daring anyone to attack her. The red lines on her face burned bright, causing the dancers to leap from her like she might scorch them. As the anchors noticed her the dance died down. They muttered and growled, shocked by Frere-Jones's interruption.

In the middle of the glen sat two granite boulders. On the lower boulder lay a dead stag, its guts ripped out like party streamers of red meat. On the higher rock sat Chakatie, her body and muscles enlarged to the full extent of the grains' powers, her clawed fingers digging into the dead stag beneath her. She sat naked except for a bloody stag-head and antlers draped over her head, the fresh blood dribbling down her shoulders and muscular chest.

"Welcome, my daughter!" Chakatie boomed as she jumped down and hugged Frere-Jones. "Welcome indeed. Have you come to join our festivities?"

Frere-Jones stared at the silent anchors around her. Several of them twitched their claws and fangs. But none dared attack her, remembering that she'd once been married to their blood.

“I won’t join in,” she said, the grains deepening her voice so she sounded more intimidating. “But I need speak with you. It’s urgent.”

Chakatie waved her family and relatives away.

“I need medicine,” Frere-Jones said. “Five doses.”

Chakatie glared at Frere-Jones, her happiness at seeing her vanishing as fast as a gutted deer bleeding out. “I will not have you killing yourself. If you’re seeking a painful death for what you did to my grandson, there are far better ways than overdosing on medicine.”

Chakatie raised one bloody claw as if offering to slash Frere-Jones to pieces.

Frere-Jones glared back at her mother-in-law. “It’s not for me. My land infected a new anchor.”

Chakatie lowered her claws and stared at Frere-Jones in puzzlement before a grin slowly emerged around her fangs. “I guess that’s... good news. Who is it?”

“I’d prefer to see if she survives before naming her,” Frere-Jones said, bluffing. Chakatie’s blood-and-musk scent was stomach-gagging strong in her nostrils.

“Of course.” Chakatie powered down her body slightly. “I apologize for saying that about Colton. If my land had betrayed me like yours did with Haoquin, I may have done as you.”

This was the closest Chakatie had ever come to saying she agreed with Colton becoming a day-fellow. Frere-Jones thanked her.

“Don’t thank me yet. The senior anchors have been saying you’ve lost your ability to protect your land. A few even suggest we... select a new anchor.”

Frere-Jones snarled. “And I’m sure you didn’t have someone in mind? Perhaps one of your other sons or daughters?”

Chakatie tensed at the insult before smirking with a knowing nod. “You know I want nothing but love and happiness for you. But if the other anchors become intent on killing you, I’d prefer my own benefit.”

Frere-Jones sighed at her mother-in-law’s logic. There was a reason no one ever challenged Chakatie. She was likely the mightiest anchor in this part of the world.

Chakatie waved for her oldest son, Malachi, who trotted over. “Run home and bring six vials of medicine to Frere-Jones.” She nodded to Frere-Jones. “One extra in case it’s needed.”

Frere-Jones thanked Chakatie and turned to go, but Chakatie dared to place one of her giant clawed hands on her shoulder.

“Two warnings,” Chakatie whispered. “First, don’t be lying about what the medicine is for. If you try overdosing on it, I’ll make sure the grains keep you alive long enough for me to kill you.”

Frere-Jones nodded. “And?”

“The grains on your land have become increasingly agitated since Haoquin died. I fear they’re building to something which will harm you.”

“If they do, wouldn’t that be your fault? After all, you introduced me to Haoquin.”

Even as Frere-Jones said this she regretted the words. If she’d never met Haoquin her life would have been far poorer, assuming she’d even lived past her selecting ceremony. But Chakatie had avoided Frere-Jones ever since Colton became a day-fellow. Frere-Jones still loved Chakatie but also wanted to rip the woman apart for abandoning her, a feeling influenced no doubt by her grain-powered body’s fury.

Chakatie nodded sadly. “I think every day about the paths of Haoquin’s life. Still, what else can we do? We are ingrained in the land...” she said, beginning the most sacred oath of anchors.

“...and the grains are our land,” Frere-Jones finished.

Yet afterwards as Frere-Jones ran back to her land she wanted to claw her own tongue out for uttering such a lie. If it

was within her power, she'd destroy every grain in both her land and body.

Not that such dreams mattered in the real world. And if Chakatie and the other anchors learned she was sheltering a day-fellow family, her dreams—and Haoquin's—would never have a chance to come true.

* * *

“Don't trust my mother,” Haoquin had said one morning a few weeks after they were married. He'd been bedridden that day as the grains from his old land deactivated and Frere-Jones's grains established themselves. She'd given him several doses of medicine, which helped, and stayed by his side the entire time.

Since they couldn't do much else, they lay in bed and talked. Frere-Jones had forgotten the joys of hearing someone talking to her in words instead of memories.

“I like your mom,” Frere-Jones said. “I mean, she did bring us together.”

“Oh, I like her. Hell, I love her. She's the one who taught me to be wary of the grains. But she's also not afraid to work the grains and the other anchors to her own advantage. Never forget that.”

Frere-Jones snuggled closer to Haoquin, who hugged her back. She remembered how Chakatie had been disgusted by

Frere-Jones killing the day-fellows. Which had pushed Frere-Jones into a new attitude toward the grains. Which had eventually resulted in her marrying Haoquin.

No, she thought, pushing those memories from her mind. She refused to believe her life was merely a plaything of either Chakatie or the grains.

“You okay?” Haoquin asked.

“Just thinking about memories.” Frere-Jones ran her fingers across Haoquin’s bare stomach, causing him to shiver. “Like the memory of my fingers on you. The touch of my skin on yours. Someday all that will remain of these moments are the copies of our memories stored in the grains’ matrix.”

“I can live with that, Fre,” Haoquin said, calling her by that nickname for the first time. “Can you?”

Instead of answering Frere-Jones kissed him, her lips touching lips before fading into memory.

* * *

Frere-Jones gasped as she paused outside her house with the vials of medicine in her pocket.

She could hear Alexnya screaming inside. The last dose of medicine must be wearing off.

But why were the grains still showing her all these memories from Haoquin? They’d never done that before. In fact, the grains had taken care to lock away most of Haoquin’s

memories for fear that they'd influence Frere-Jones in the wrong ways. So why were the grains now sharing them?

Frere-Jones shrugged off the question and opened the door to her house. She had to focus on saving the day-fellow girl.

Remember that, she thought. Remember what's important.

* * *

After the next dose of medicine, Alexnya slept in fits for the day, waking every few hours to drink more. But when Frere-Jones stepped into the bedroom with a new dose the following evening, she found Alexnya sitting up in bed reading an old-fashioned paper book with her mother. Alexnya looked far better, no longer shaking or in pain. Frere-Jones tasted only the barest touch of the grains still inside the girl's body.

"Hello Fre," Alexnya said.

Frere-Jones nearly dropped the mug of medicine. The only one who'd ever called her Fre had been Haoquin.

"Alexnya, be polite," Jun snapped. "Call her Master-Anchor Frere-Jones."

"But she likes being called Fre..."

Frere-Jones sat on the bed beside Alexnya. "It's not her fault. The grains communicate using snippets of memories

from previous anchors. ‘Fre’ is what my lifemate used to call me.”

Jun paled but didn’t say anything. Alexnya frowned. “I’m sorry, Fre... Master-Anchor Frere-Jones,” the girl said. “I just want you to love me again. You used to love me.”

Frere-Jones ignored the girl’s obvious confusion at having her memories mix with the memories stored within the grains’ matrix. She handed Alexnya the mug of medicine. “Drink this,” she said.

The girl swallowed half the medicine. “The grains are angry,” Alexnya whispered as she wiped the red glow from her lips. “The grains don’t like you removing them from my body. They don’t like my family overstaying our welcome.”

“They won’t hurt your family without my approval.”

Alexnya didn’t appear convinced. “They’re also angry at you,” she said as she yawned. “Why are they angry at you?”

“Let me worry about my land’s grains. You need to sleep.”

Alexnya nodded and closed her eyes. Jun and Frere-Jones shut the door and walked over to the dinner table, where Jun stared at the remaining dregs of medicine in the mug.

“She’s taken enough medicine,” Frere-Jones said. “By tomorrow her connection to the land will be weak enough to leave. She’ll have to continue taking the medicine for another

few days to remove the remaining grains, but you can give it to her on the road.”

Jun glanced with relief at the den, where Takeshi lay sleeping on a sofa with Miya and Tuft.

“What memories are the grains showing Alexnya?” she asked.

“Does it matter?” Frere-Jones asked with a growl. “Any memories she’s experienced are hers now.”

As Frere-Jones said this she shook with anger at the thought of Alexnya experiencing even a taste of Haoquin’s life. She didn’t care about the stored memories of her parents and ancestors, but Haoquin... those memories were special. Damn the grains. Damn these day-fellows for intruding on the most intimate parts of her life.

Frere-Jones’s right hand spasmed as claws grew from her fingertips. She dug into the wooden table, imagining the need to go into her son’s bedroom and rip Alexnya to pieces.

“Master-Anchor Frere-Jones!” Jun shouted in a loud voice. Frere-Jones snapped back to herself and looked up to see Jun aiming the laser pistol at her head. She took a deep breath and forced her body to reabsorb the claws.

The grains were pushing her, like they had as a young anchor when she’d attacked that day-fellow caravan.

“I will sleep outside tonight,” Frere-Jones said as she stood. “Bar the door. And windows. Don’t let me in.” She grinned at Jun, who kept the pistol aimed at her. “If I do break in, make sure you end me before I do anything we’d all regret.”

Jun chuckled once but kept the pistol aimed at Frere-Jones until she walked outside and the door slammed shut.

* * *

Frere-Jones didn’t sleep that night, instead patrolling the land to ensure no one came near her house. This also kept her further away from the day-fellows. Despite the distance the grains inside her shrieked at her land being defiled by the day-fellow presence. And Alexnya was right—the grains were also furious at Frere-Jones. They knew what she’d done to her son. The grains knew she hated them and that she would destroy every trace of their existence if it was within her power.

But despite this anger the grains also continue to share Haoquin’s memories with her. She saw the birth of their son through Haoquin’s eyes. Saw Haoquin and Colton playing chase in the fields. Saw the three of them going for picnics in the deep woods.

All memories from Haoquin’s life.

“What the hell are you telling me?” Frere-Jones yelled. But the grains didn’t respond.

When Jun unbolted the sod-house's door in the morning, Frere-Jones was meditating under the oak tree in the front yard. Her body was coated in red smears from the countless fairies she'd killed during the night as she ripped apart every one of the red-glowing, grain-infused monstrosities she encountered.

Several chickens pecked at the fairies' remaining grains in the dirt around her.

Jun stepped toward Frere-Jones with the laser pistol in her right hand.

"You okay?" Jun asked.

"Must be. You're still alive."

Jun shivered. Frere-Jones licked her lips before biting her tongue to silence the grains. They were easier to control during the daytime, but the longer the day-fellows stayed on the land the more demanding they would become.

"Are you safe to be around?"

"I can maintain control until you leave," Frere-Jones said. "We'll give Alexnya another dose of medicine after breakfast. That should be enough to enable your family to leave. You can travel well beyond this land before night falls."

"Tak is cooking breakfast," Jun said, gesturing to the sod-house. "Will you join us?"

Frere-Jones snorted at being invited into her own house but nodded and followed Jun in. She was pleased to see Alexnya looking even better than yesterday and sitting at the dinner table eating oatmeal.

“I missed you, Fre,” Alexnya said. Frere-Jones suppressed her irritation at the nickname and sat down in the chair next to her family altar.

The stone altar bubbled and snapped, the red sands swarming angrily over the statues of her family. Miya and Tufte stared at the flowing sands as if mesmerized until Takeshi tapped the table beside them so they returned to eating their oatmeal.

“We have to keep an eye on them constantly so they don’t touch the altar,” Takeshi said. “Did your son try to play with it all the time?”

“Yes,” Frere-Jones snapped. “But he was the child of an anchor—touching the altar wouldn’t bring death on his family.”

Jun and Takeshi stared in shock at Frere-Jones, and Jun’s hand edged toward the laser pistol before Frere-Jones sighed. “I apologize. The grains are pushing me even now. It’s... hard, being around you with them screaming in my mind.”

“That’s the price of protecting our sacred land,” Alexnya said.

Frere-Jones tapped the vials of glowing medicine on the table before her. She knew Alexnya wasn't trying to deliberately provoke her. She remembered how confused she'd felt when she'd come of age and the grains had activated within her, and how a similar confusion almost overwhelmed Haoquin when he'd married into her anchordom. The sooner Alexnya and her family returned to the road the better.

"It must have been difficult when your son became a day-fellow," Jun said, trying to change the subject. "You're fortunate one of our caravans was nearby to take him in before..." Jun paused.

"You can say it," Frere-Jones muttered. "The grains would have forced me to kill my son if he'd stayed more than a few days after becoming a day-fellow. But luck had nothing to do with it. I timed Colton's change so a caravan was here for him."

Jun and Takeshi stared at Frere-Jones, who shrugged. She knew she shouldn't tell such truths to people outside her family, but she no longer cared. The grains pounded inside her at the admitted heresy. She wanted to slam her head into the table to silence them.

"Haoquin died when Colton was only twelve," Frere-Jones whispered. "My lifemate had grown up on another land. When he married into my anchordom and accepted my grains, the grains from that other land deactivated. But my grains

eventually tired of the... unsettling thoughts Haoquin expressed. His ideas for changing the world. So they reactivated his original grains, causing him to need to live on two separate lands to stay healthy. His body almost tore itself apart. There was nothing I could do.”

Frere-Jones reached out and rubbed Haoquin’s statue on the altar. The grains felt her hate and slid away from her touch. “Haoquin dreamed of a world without grains. He knew that was merely a pipe dream—we both knew it—but the grains decided even a dream without their existence was too much to tolerate.”

Frere-Jones flicked at the red grains in the altar’s basin, wishing she could throw them all away where they’d never harm another person.

“The grains calculated they didn’t need Haoquin anymore since we’d already created a son,” Frere-Jones continued. “But I refused to let them have Colton too. I waited until a caravan was on my land then gave Colton a massive overdose of the medicine, almost more than his body could handle. He turned day-fellow and had to leave.

“The anchor system is evil. To decide that a select few can live in one place while everyone else is forced to continually move from land to land... death for any unlinked human who stays too long on a land or pollutes or harms that land... to

force *me* to enact the grains' arbitrary needs and desires... that's nothing but evil."

"But the grains saved the planet," Alexnya said. "I can see some of the old anchors' memories. How the land was nearly destroyed and overrun with people. I can taste the chemicals and hormones and technology. Trees cut down. People dying of blight. There were so many people. Too many for the land to support. Destroying everything they touched..."

Alexnya gasped and pushed away from the table, her chair falling backward as she tumbled across the ceramic tiles. She jumped up and ran for the bathroom, where she slammed the door shut.

Frere-Jones sighed as she stared into the shocked faces of the girl's family. "She'll be better once you're on the road," Frere-Jones said. "Keep giving her the medicine twice a day and the grains will soon be completely gone."

"But the memories..." Jun began.

"So she'll know why anchors protect their lands. Why those without grains are forced to continually move around."

Takeshi hugged Miya and Tufte, who had jumped into his lap because of the tension in the room. "It's different to be on the receiving end," Takeshi said. "Do you know why our last caravan was destroyed? We were leaving a land a hundred leagues from here when the caravan master's wagon broke an

axle. Normally not a problem—most caravans leave early in case of issues like this. But it turned out our caravan master also was smuggling forbidden chemicals and hormones. When the axle broke it stabbed into one of his smuggling tanks and contaminated the land for ten yards on either side of the road.

“We tried cleaning the land. Our caravan master even took responsibility and offered his death for everyone else’s lives. But the grains didn’t care. You could feel their anger. The ground was almost shaking, the trees and plants whipping madly as if blown by an unknown wind. Then the anchors came—dozens of them, from lands all across the region. They attacked us all night before the grains finally allowed them to calm down. Our wagon was the only one they didn’t break into and massacre everyone.”

Frere-Jones nodded. If her land became even a slightly bit contaminated the grains would force her to do the same. She picked up the remaining vials of medicine. She held the vials over the altar to encode them with her grain’s programming before handing them to Takashi.

“Have her drink another dose then take the remaining vials with you,” she told him. “Jun and I will prepare your wagon. You’ll leave by noon.”

* * *

Frere-Jones had spent decades watching day-fellow caravans, but she'd never prepared one of their wagons for travel. Harnessing the horses and securing the wagon's cargo stirred memories of both her own life and those of the anchors who preceded her. How all of them had watched passing day-fellow caravans across thousands of years.

As a child she'd desperately wished she could travel like a day-fellow. See other lands beyond her own.

"Take the northern road through the forest," Frere-Jones told Jun when the wagon and horses were ready. "That's the safest route to avoid irritating the anchors on neighboring lands. Go north and you'll be several lands away before dark."

Jun nodded a silent thanks.

They were still waiting a half-hour later, with Frere-Jones growing increasingly irritated from the grains' demands. "Come on Takashi," she yelled.

"I'll go get him," Jun said, hurrying to the house.

When the family didn't emerge a few minutes later, Frere-Jones cursed and smashed a powered hand into the side of the barn, breaking the inch-thick boards. She stomped into her own house—her house, on her land!—to discover glowing red medicine flowing among broken glass vials on her tile floor. Jun and Takashi stood beside the dinner table pleading with Alexnya but wouldn't go near their daughter.

“Land’s shit!” Frere-Jones bellowed. Alexnya stood beside the stone altar, her hands immersed in the flowing red grains.

“She won’t let go of the altar,” Takashi said. “Should we yank her away?”

“No! Don’t touch the grains!” Frere-Jones accessed the grains inside her body, connecting through them with the grains in the altar and across her land. She prayed that Alexnya touching the altar hadn’t alerted any nearby anchors. She tasted the forests and plants and animals on her land, felt the nearby anchors going about their duties and work.

But no alarm. There had been no alarm raised. Which was impossible. That could only mean...

Frere-Jones screamed as she jumped forward and grabbed Alexnya. She threw the girl across the room, only at the last moment aiming for the sofa so she wouldn’t be hurt. Alexnya smashed into the cushions as Jun and Takashi grabbed their youngest kids and ran for the door, Jun again aimed the pistol at Frere-Jones.

Frere-Jones raised her hands as she bent over, panting and trying to stay in control. “Don’t shoot,” she yelled. “Kill me and your daughter will be stuck here.”

“What do you mean?” Jun asked.

“Your daughter should have set off the grains’ alarms, especially after taking that much medicine. But she didn’t. Why didn’t you, Alexnya?”

Alexnya stood up from the sofa, her eyes sparking red light, a growl escaping her snarling lips. For a moment Frere-Jones remembered herself at that age when the grains had first activated in her body. “The grains don’t like you,” Alexnya whispered. “They changed the altar’s coding so the medicine wouldn’t remove all of the grains from my body. They promised that if I didn’t tell you they’d let my family stay.”

“You can’t trust the grains,” Frere-Jones said. “No day-fellow is ever allowed to stay on a land for more than a few days. That won’t change no matter what the grains promise.”

Frere-Jones started to say more, but fell silent as she tasted an unsettling tinge in the grains. She felt Alexnya’s frustration at travelling from place to place, never settling down long enough to have a home. Frere-Jones also saw the attack which destroyed Alexnya’s last caravan. As the anchors shrieked and smashed on the outside of her family’s wagon, Alexnya swore she’d never go through this again. That one day she’d find a place to call home.

The grains, Frere-Jones realized, had found a willing partner in this young girl.

“I’m sorry,” Alexnya whispered, looking at her parents. “I want to live somewhere. I want a home. The grains said we could all stay.”

“The other anchors won’t let you be one of us,” Frere-Jones stated. “And even if they did, the grains will never let your family stay.”

“They promised.”

“They lied. The grains only want a new anchor to take my place. They’re incapable of caring for your family. They are programmed to protect this land, not to protect unlinked day-fellows without a grain in their bodies.”

Frere-Jones glanced again at the altar. She was missing something. If the grains hadn’t told her they’d changed the altar’s programming to negate the effects of Alexnya’s medicine, what else weren’t they telling her?

She heard a slight rapping on the kitchen window. Dozens of fairies buzzed outside the glass, their tiny hands tap tapping against the panes like angry snowflakes blowing on the wind.

Framed in the glass, surrounded by the fairies, was a red-tinted face.

Malachi, Chakatie’s oldest son.

Frere-Jones ran for the front door, but by the time she opened it Malachi was already running away, nearly gone from sight. She reached out to the grains, trying to power up her

body so she could catch the boy, but the grains resisted her, not giving her anywhere near enough to catch him.

Instead, the grains rebutted her in flicks of angry memories. They had a new anchor. They didn't have to obey her any more.

* * *

A few weeks after their son had been born, Frere-Jones had woken to find Haoquin standing by the altar, rocking Colton back and forth in his arms in the grains' red-haze light.

"You okay?" she asked sleepily.

"I was thinking about all the previous anchors who raised their kids in this house," Haoquin said. "I bet many of them stood in this very spot and let the grains' glow soothe their babies to sleep."

Frere smiled. "You could ask the grains to share those memories. Sometimes they'll do that, if you ask nicely."

Haoquin snorted. "When I first became an anchor, that's what scared me the most—that the grains spoke to us using memories. I mean, after I'm dead is that what they'll do with my memory of this moment? Use everything I'm experiencing now—love, exhaustion, tenderness, caring—to tell some future anchor that this is how you calm a crying baby? Is that all my memories are good for?"

Frere-Jones hugged her lifemate. “Your memories mean more to me than that. Perhaps they’ll mean more to any future anchor who experiences them.”

“Maybe,” Haoquin said as he and Frere-Jones stared down at their son. “Maybe.”

But neither one of them had sounded convinced.

* * *

The anchors came for Frere-Jones and the day-fellow family at midnight.

Frere-Jones had finally been able to power up her body after Alexnya ordered the grains to do so. The girl had still been torn, wanting to believe the grains would protect her family, but in the end her parents convinced her the grains would never protect day-fellows. “Have the grains shown you a memory,” Jun had said, “any memory across the land’s thousands of years where they protected a single day-fellow? If they do that, you can believe them. If not...”

When the grains hadn’t been able show such a memory, Alexnya broke down and cried. She ordered the grains to obey Frere-Jones.

Yet Frere-Jones knew, even with her body completely powered up she couldn’t fight so many other anchors. She messaged them, saying the day-fellows would leave. The only

response was laughter. She said she'd allow another anchor to be selected, if only the day-fellows were allowed to leave safely.

Again, more laughter.

Now, at midnight, the anchors were coming. They ran through the river mists. They ran across her new-plowed sunflower fields, their massive bodies and claws destroying the furrows and scattering soil and seed to the winds. They came from the road, giant feet pounding on the dirt packed by centuries of wagons. They came from the forests, knocking down trees and scattering deer and coyotes before them.

Frere-Jones sat on the sod roof of her home, the laser pistol in her hands. The grains showed her Haoquin's memory of building the illegal weapon with parts acquired from day-fellow smugglers. How proud he'd been. His mother had said the grains wouldn't like the pistol, but Haoquin merely laughed and said if he ever was forced to use the laser the displeasure of the grains would be the least of their worries.

As usual, Haoquin had been correct. Maybe that was why the grains had killed him.

"Here they come," Frere-Jones yelled down the air vent into the house. Jun and Takeshi and Alexnya were inside, Jun holding the knives Frere-Jones had gifted them, in case a final defense was needed.

Frere-Jones looked around her. She knew she should give the anchors a warning. She'd known these people all her life. They'd worked together. Had bonds stretching back a hundred generations.

Her land's red fairies buzzed around her, the faces of her ancestors silently pleading with her not to do this. As long as she remained anchor the grains couldn't warn the other anchors. But the grains were outraged at what she planned. A fairy with Haoquin's face flew in front of her eyes, the tiny red body shaking side to side in a silent scream of "No!"

But she knew what the real Haoquin would want. On his last day, as he lay in their bed while the competing grains destroyed each other and his body, he'd told her not to be angry. "Life here was worth it," he'd whispered in her ear as she leaned over him. "Too short, yes. But knowing you made it worthwhile."

Why had the grains waited so long to share his memories with her? If they'd done so years before, maybe she wouldn't have been so angry. Maybe she wouldn't have forced her son into exile from the only land and family he'd known.

Frere-Jones tapped the cord connecting the pistol to her farm's power grid. She aimed at the anchors running toward her. She hated the grains. Hated every memory they spoke.

Burn them all.

The laser lit the land green, the light dazzling through the river mists. The first row of anchors in the sunflower fields flashed and burned, bodies screaming and stenching like spoiled meat over bad flames. Howls of outrage rose from the remaining anchors, who split up to make less obvious targets, but they all still burned bright in Frere-Jones's enhanced vision. She shot two next to the barn, where she heard the day-fellows' horses whinnying in fright. She shot three others on the dirt road. She split one massive anchor in two right before the oak tree in front of her house, the laser also severing the tree's trunk.

She shot every anchor who came near her home. And when the remaining anchors broke ranks and fled, she detached the laser from her power grid and chased after them, using the remaining charge to sear every one of them into char for the coyotes and wolves to feast on.

"Share this memory with the land's future anchors," she told the red fairies as they stared at her in shock. "Share this memory with the whole damn world."

* * *

"The laser is potential," Haoquin had told Frere-Jones the night they were married. They lay in bed after making love awkwardly, then excitedly. Afterward, Frere-Jones couldn't help looking at the pistol on the bedside table.

“Potential for what?” she asked.

“To upset the grains. To force them to experience something they’ve never before considered.”

“So you’d burn the land?”

“That would merely set off the grains’ anger. No, I’d burn any anchor who tried to harm you or me.”

“Then you’d have even more anchors attacking.” Frere-Jones had heard stories of day-fellows who’d tried defending themselves with lasers. Eventually the anchors overwhelmed them through sheer numbers.

“Yes, we can’t defeat the anchors. There are too many of them, tied to millions of lands around the world. But what if we could use the threat of killing so many anchors to make the grains change?”

“We can’t change the grains’ programming,” Frere-Jones whispered. “That’s beyond us.”

“But what if we could change the memories they spoke with?”

“What good would that do?”

“If this land only spoke through certain memories—say yours and mine—the grains would be forced to say very different things than if they spoke through the memories of anchors who’d supported their damn work. Over time, it might change everything.”

Frere-Jones smiled at that possibility. “So you’d really kill, or threaten to kill, hundreds of anchors merely to force the grains to delete the memories they’ve stored over the centuries?”

Haoquin sighed. “You’re right. I couldn’t do that. I guess it’s a bad idea.”

Frere-Jones had kissed Haoquin, glad he wasn’t someone who would do such evil in a silly, misguided attempt to change the world.

* * *

An hour before morning’s song of light and warmth, Chakatie arrived. Frere-Jones sat on the sod roof of her home, the laser pistol in her lap, the smoldering corpses of the other anchors glowing in her land’s fields and forests.

She scented Chakatie ten minutes before her mother-in-law walked up to the house. Chakatie had deliberately come from upwind so Frere-Jones would catch the scent. She wasn’t surprised by Chakatie’s arrival. After killing the anchors Frere-Jones realized she hadn’t seen or scented any member of Chakatie’s family during the attack.

Chakatie looked nothing like the powerful being she’d been the other night in the forest. She was powered down and tiny, and wore a neatly pressed three-piece suit and bowler hat.

Instead of claws her hands were manicured and folded over themselves at her waist, as if to show she meant no harm.

Frere-Jones snorted and patted the grass on the roof. “You’re welcome to join me, but that suit doesn’t look like it’s made for sitting on a sod roof.”

“It’s not.” Chakatie jumped up to the other side of the roof. She grinned nervously as Frere-Jones shifted the pistol slightly so it pointed at Chakatie’s chest. “My children made me wear this. Said it’d show you I meant no harm since no one in their right mind would fight while wearing such fancy clothes.” Chakatie laughed softly. “I think they’re worried about you killing me.”

Frere-Jones wanted to laugh, which was likely Chakatie’s other intent in wearing the suit. Perhaps to catch her off-guard. “And did Malachi also suggest you wear it? Perhaps after he spied on me?”

Chakatie spat. “Malachi did that on his own. I sincerely apologize. To spy on another anchor... any punishment you wish against him will be given.”

Frere-Jones didn’t believe her mother-in-law but accepted the lie as Chakatie’s round-about means of apology. “And my punishment for killing dozens of anchors?”

“Ah, that is the question, isn’t it?”

Chakatie sat down on the roof, running her fingers through the grass. “Is the girl in the house?” she asked. “The day-fellow anchor?”

“Yes. The grains lied to her. Said her family would be able to stay if she became the new anchor.”

“That’s why it’s difficult for someone who grew up without the grains to become an anchor. You and I, we know the grains’ memories don’t always tell us the truth. We sort the memories the grains show us. Sift the wheat from the chaff. Your day-fellow girl doesn’t know this.”

“She will after today. I doubt she’ll ever again trust the grains after witnessing this massacre.”

“Then she might end up making a good anchor.”

Chakatie stretched out on the sod roof, laying on her back as she looked across the sunflower fields. “No anchor with any sense loves the grains. But most anchors also have the sense not to challenge them directly.”

“Too late for that. Now what?”

“The grains demand vengeance. You’ve upset their programmed order.”

“How about I simply burn you first?” Frere-Jones said.

“Your choice. My family would, of course, attack. And can you sense the other anchors on their way here from distant lands? The more you kill the more who will come.”

Frere-Jones sighed and pointed the laser pistol at the grass. “Funny how your family didn’t join in the attack.”

“Nothing funny about it. I raised my son, after all. He told me all about his little plans when he was younger. I knew he’d never carry out such evil. That’s why I let him build the laser pistol—it satisfied him, and I knew he’d never use it. But you... I suppose I should have seen this coming.”

Frere-Jones shrugged.

“You know, the grains wanted me to kill Haoquin when he was young, because of his dangerous ideas,” Chakatie said. “But I refused to do it. Despite what you may believe, we anchors can still ignore some of the grains’ programmed demands.”

Frere-Jones knew Chakatie was playing her. Her mother-in-law had probably known exactly what she was doing when she gave Frere-Jones the medicine for Alexnya. With so many anchors killed, Chakatie’s children would be able to go to those lands and become master-anchors in their own right.

“I can still kill a lot more anchors, including you, before I’m taken down,” Frere-Jones said. “What do you propose to avoid that?”

“Right now you have leverage with the grains,” Chakatie said. “They don’t want you to kill hundreds of new anchors when they arrive here. So offer them a bargain. Let the day-

fellow girl become this land's new anchor. The remaining anchors in the area—meaning my family—won't oppose her."

Frere-Jones looked at her hands. The pistol could easily cut Chakatie in two, but she really didn't want to kill her mother-in-law. "What do I get out of that?"

"Haoquin had some interesting ideas about the grains' use of memories. This might be your only chance to see if what he said could come true."

* * *

The day Haoquin died, Frere-Jones and Colton had stood side by side in the cemetery as Chakatie and the other anchors shoveled dirt onto her lifemate's body.

Frere-Jones could still feel the grains in Haoquin's body. Worse, she could feel them already working to isolate many of Haoquin's memories. The grains didn't want his heretical beliefs contaminating the land, so they were locking those memories away. They would never share those memories with anyone, most of all her.

Frere-Jones hugged her son tight. She knew the grains would do the same to her memories when she died. But if she had her way, they'd not be able to use her son. She'd free him one way or another.

And then, maybe, she'd see if Haoquin's plan could work. The plan he'd been too kindly to actually put into action.

* * *

They stood in the cemetery where Haoquin and the other anchors of this land were buried. Alexnya and her family stood on one side of the graves while Chakatie stood on the other. The rest of Chakatie's family patrolled the boundaries of Frere-Jones's land, keeping away the other anchors until this ceremony was completed.

Frere-Jones reached out to her land's grains, the laser pistol still in her right hand. The grains shivered and shook, resonating in shock at both what Frere-Jones had done and the dead anchors she'd killed.

Frere-Jones, detaching herself from the grains, walked over to Alexnya and her family. "Good luck to you," she told Alexnya. "You can trust Chakatie's advice. I suggest you listen to her."

Alexnya looked overwhelmed, as if just realizing the life she'd stumbled into. Her family could stay only a few more days before they'd have to travel on. But aside from suggesting Alexnya trust Chakatie, there was no other advice Frere-Jones could give. Alexnya would have to sort through the lands' memories on her own and determine which, if any, could be trusted.

Frere-Jones laughed to herself, knowing whose memories Alexnya would soon be experiencing.

“How can you say our daughter should trust that... woman?” Jun asked, outrage almost pouring out of her lips as she glared at Chakatie. “From what you’ve told me, she caused all this.”

“Chakatie didn’t trap your daughter,” Frere-Jones said. “If anyone did, it was me, by being so stubborn that the grains sought out a new anchor.”

“But she took advantage of all this. She played everyone. She...”

“Must I really listen to this right before I die?” Frere-Jones asked.

Jun fell silent. She bowed slightly in a mix of respect and mocking.

After speaking with Chakatie, and asking her mother-in-law to pass a final message to Colton, Frere-Jones reached out to hold Alexnya’s hand. Together they accessed the grains.

“Do as we’ve agreed,” Frere-Jones told the grains. “Chakatie will ensure I hold up my end.”

“Do it,” Alexnya ordered, added her voice as the land’s new anchor.

The grains screamed but, unable to see any other option, they complied. Across the land they deleted the memories of every anchor who’d lived before Frere-Jones. The memories

flared and shrieked, as if begging Frere-Jones and Alexnya to save them. But then they were gone.

Except for Haoquin's. Frere-Jones dropped the laser pistol and fell to her knees as Haoquin's memories flooded into her. All the memories the grains had copied from his life. All of him.

So many memories. Memories of everything Haoquin had felt and seen and thought and experienced worked their way into Frere-Jones's being. Her mind could barely contain all of him.

As Frere-Jones shook and spasmed on the cold ground, she looked across the new-spring grass. She could taste the grass. Could feel it growing and reaching for the sun.

Haoquin was within her. They now shared one life.

"I missed you Fre," Haoquin whispered. Or maybe Frere-Jones said it to herself. Either way, she smiled.

"Life here was worth it," they whispered to each other. "Too short, yes. But knowing you made it worthwhile."

Frere-Jones and Haoquin saw Chakatie walk up to their body and pick up the laser pistol. Chakatie wiped at her eyes as she nodded, then she shot them in the head.

* * *

Alexnya stands silently over Frere-Jones's burned body. The grains are still convulsing, still in chaos, but Frere-Jones's death has calmed them.

Chakatie holds the laser pistol in both hands. Alexnya feels Chakatie's grains powering up her body. A moment later powerful claws rip apart the pistol.

Chakatie throws the broken technology to the ground in disgust. "Your mother is right, you know," she says. "I did manipulate all this. I knew Frere-Jones and my son would cause sparks. But I didn't know all this would happen. I swear on the grains I didn't know."

Alexnya isn't sure if she can trust Chakatie. Frere-Jones said to trust the anchor, but how can she truly know?

Yet Alexnya also understands that once her parents are forced to resume their travels, Chakatie and her family will be the only one for hundreds of leagues around who might support her.

Alexnya wants to scream at this situation. To curse at not knowing what to do. But before she does, she feels a gentle caress in her mind. She tastes memories—memories from Frere-Jones and Haoquin. She sees all the good things Chakatie has done. How Chakatie once cried over a family like hers.

"I think I'll trust you," Alexnya finally says. "Did you really... cry over a day-fellow family once?"

Chakatie nods, then waves for Alexnya's parents to follow her to the sod-house to prepare an evening meal for everyone.

Alexnya stays behind and digs the grave for Frere-Jones's body, the grains powering up her body so the shovel digs faster and deeper than she ever could have done before. She places Frere-Jones in the hole and covers her with fresh soil.

As Alexnya stands over the grave, she feels the grains churning in Frere-Jones body. Feels the grains already beginning to spread the memories of Frere-Jones and Haoquin across the land.

“Thank you, Fre,” Alexnya says, bowing to the grave. She then runs to the sod-house to spend time with her family before they're forced to flee.

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Jason Sanford is an award-winning author of short stories, essays, and articles and an active member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. Jason has published more than a dozen of his short stories in the British SF magazine Interzone, which once devoted a special issue to his fiction. His fiction has also been published in Asimov's, Analog, InterGalactic Medicine Show, Year's Best SF, Bless

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COVER ART

“Research Lab,” by Sung Choi



Sung Choi is a concept artist who specializes in world design and illustration for the entertainment industry. Born and raised in South Korea, he later moved to Los Angeles and attended Otis College of Art and Design where he majored in digital media. He studied environment design and has been broadening his visual library by going outside and studying nature. Throughout his challenges, Sung has focused on simplifying the subject and creating readable and compelling designs. View more of his work at www.sung-choi.com.

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