

# The **Clarendon House** Short Story Magazine

**Satisfying Fiction from  
Clarendon House Publications**  
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**Issue  
# 5**



**Seven gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet**  
Riham Adly, Mel Lee Newmin, Gabriella Balcom, Gary Bonn, Jim Bates,  
David Bowmore and Elizabeth Montague

# The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

## Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

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An accident on a supposedly lifeless planet brings Ooljee face to face with...what?

**The Princess of Fantasistan** by Riham Adly  
A surreal, masterful gem from the poetic mind of the queen of flash fiction.

**Free's Tale: No Home at Christmastime** by Gabriella Balcom  
'Scanning his surroundings with wary eyes, he took cautious steps forward, uncertain of the reception he'd receive if he were seen...' A little dog tries to come to grips with the world around him.

**Social Distancing** by Jim Bates  
Did social distancing rules push us apart — or bring us together?

**Be Nice** by Gary Bonn  
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**An Englishman in New York** by David Bowmore  
'Fatty Buckingham's education had been some of the finest 1930's aristocratic money could buy, and yet new ideas did not often bombard his grey matter...' A short tale of embarrassment from a master storyteller.

**Buadhach** by Elizabeth Montague  
'The creature reared up on its long, undulating body. Inky black scales glistening in the light from the bonfires the villagers had lit to lure it to where Aoibhel waited...' Fantasy drama from the author of Dust and Glitter.

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

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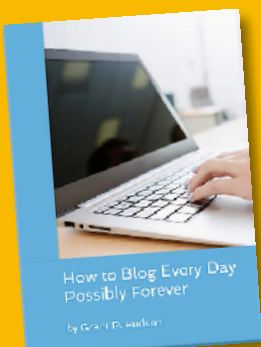
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A vast desert landscape with rolling sand dunes under a bright sky. A path of footprints leads across the dunes. The text is overlaid on the top portion of the image.

# SCORCHED EARTH

BY MEL LEE NEWMIN

Ooljee called it the devil's breath. The ceaseless blast of heat from Strasser Two's planetary desert. Devoid of oceans to generate weather, the atmosphere of the unnamed rocky ball circling the dwarf blue star Strasser-Campollini churned from its short day-night cycle and the stratification of its thick atmosphere. Eddies spun up dust devils that soared kilometers into the neon blue sky like snakes reaching for God. They danced across the torrid, empty landscape often singly but sometimes in pairs in silent, eerie tangos of grit and desolation.

Adjusting the goggles that protected her eyes from the dust and Strasser-Campollini's blazing blue light, Ooljee considered her prospects for completing work before the dust devils drove her back to the lab. The pressure in her chest urged her to continue while the quiet dance of devils whispered, run! run!

I'm so close, she thought. I can almost taste it.

To calm her nerves, she drew a long inhale through her dust mask and forced her mind to focus on the leaves she'd uncovered. Cautiously, lest she disturb the next fragile piece, Ooljee transferred the topmost into her tote and arranged a protective cover over it.

Finding the cache of dessicated, almost petrified leaves had sent a shockwave of exhilaration through the xenoteam working the vast dig site because Ooljee had uncovered something special. Writing. Perhaps now, after months of scouring the sterile ruins of Strasser Two's vanished alien civilization, the team would learn what had reduced its magnificent cities to nubs in an endless desert.

With exquisite care, Ooljee lifted the next leaf from the sand-filled grotto that had been its tomb for thousands of years. The leaves were in such critical condition that handling the first one ended with it evaporating into a cloud of particles. After that debacle, the team debated removing the leaves from their resting place. Ooljee had argued the importance of preserving them in hermetically sealed containers. The leaves carried the only writing they'd found in the vast complex. To leave them in a hole was unconscionable.

"Moonbeam," Dominic's voice crackled in her ear. "Two devils are headed your way. Time to pack up."



Ooljee gritted her teeth at the interruption. Much as she adored Dominic's loving translation of her Navajo name, she resented his intrusion into her thoughts.

"Just two more leaves, Dom," she growled into her mic. She used her brush to carefully shift sand from the next leaf.

"It can wait." Dominic's voice lost its playfulness. He was not only her lover but leader of the team. He refused to be gainsaid by anyone. "Those leaves have survived this long in their hole. They can wait one more day."

"They hadn't been exposed to the environment like this," Ooljee insisted. "Just two more, Dom. Just two more."

"You don't have time! Moonbeam! Those devils are converging. They'll be a huge one just as they hit your section. Get out!"

Ooljee glanced up at the darkening sky. On Earth, that ominous shadow would herald a violent thunderstorm, but no such weather cursed Strasser Two. Something else was brewing.

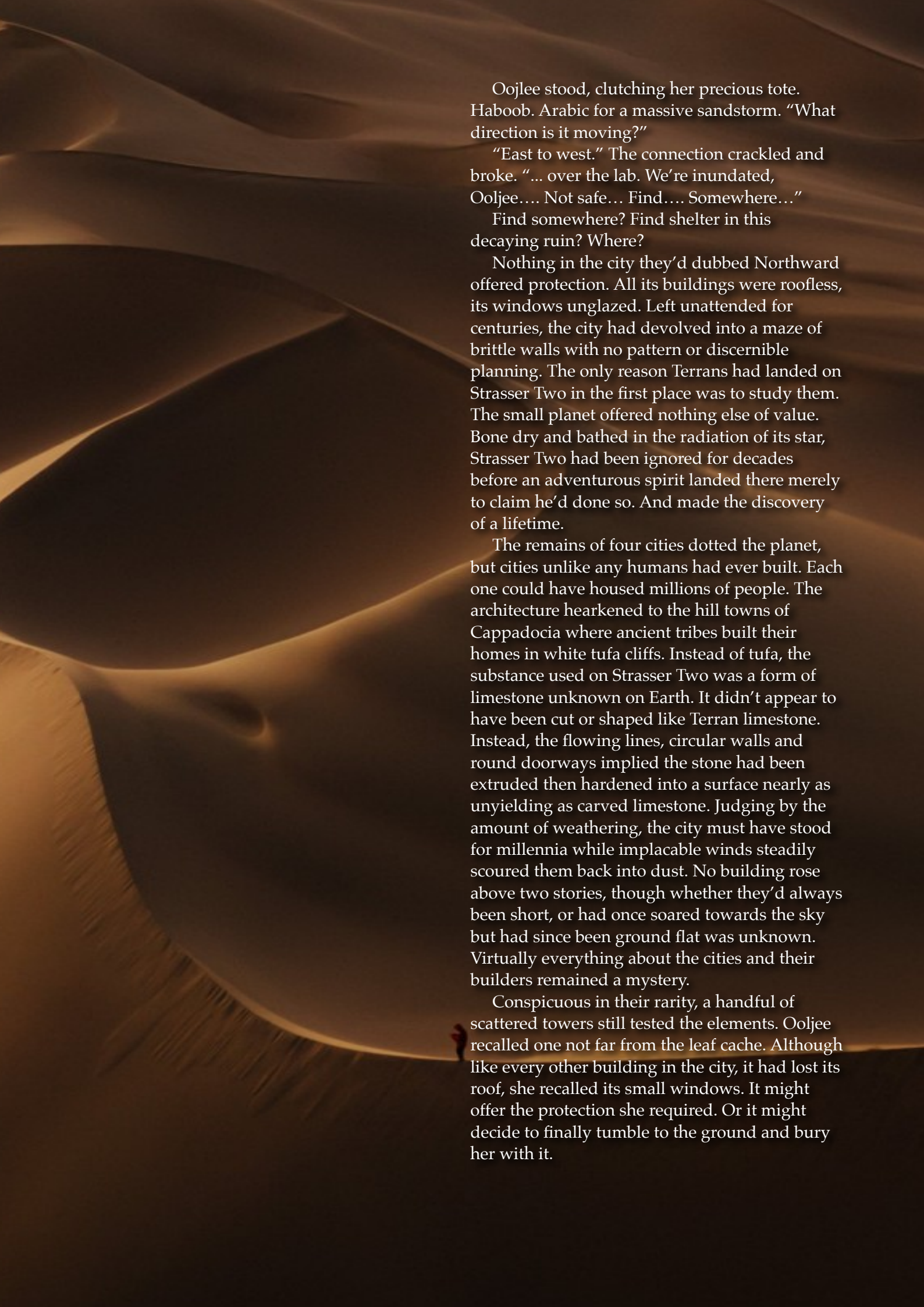
*I'll bolt for the lab as soon as I have these two leaves packed away. I won't lose them to a storm.*

As Ooljee brushed dust off the last leaf, more filtered down like a soft snowfall. Outflow from the approaching devil filled the air with golden sand particles. Its shadow veiled the star, dimming afternoon to early twilight. Ooljee jumped when she heard thunder in the distance, yet knew that couldn't be. Strasser Two possessed no oceans to generate storms rich with water vapor. The only weather her team had encountered was heat, wind and the dust devils.

The ground trembled. Bits of sand jarred loose by the vibration dribbled down from decaying walls to augment piles at the base of every wall.

Ooljee tucked the last leaf into her tote and sealed it up. She breathed a sigh of relief. Inside that tote, the leaves could survive for another thousand years unscathed by time.

"Ooljee!" Dom's voice had risen to a panic pitch. "It's a haboob! A huge one! Get the hell out of there!"



Ooljee stood, clutching her precious tote. Haboob. Arabic for a massive sandstorm. "What direction is it moving?"

"East to west." The connection crackled and broke. "... over the lab. We're inundated, Ooljee.... Not safe... Find.... Somewhere..."

Find somewhere? Find shelter in this decaying ruin? Where?

Nothing in the city they'd dubbed Northward offered protection. All its buildings were roofless, its windows unglazed. Left unattended for centuries, the city had devolved into a maze of brittle walls with no pattern or discernible planning. The only reason Terrans had landed on Strasser Two in the first place was to study them. The small planet offered nothing else of value. Bone dry and bathed in the radiation of its star, Strasser Two had been ignored for decades before an adventurous spirit landed there merely to claim he'd done so. And made the discovery of a lifetime.

The remains of four cities dotted the planet, but cities unlike any humans had ever built. Each one could have housed millions of people. The architecture hearkened to the hill towns of Cappadocia where ancient tribes built their homes in white tufa cliffs. Instead of tufa, the substance used on Strasser Two was a form of limestone unknown on Earth. It didn't appear to have been cut or shaped like Terran limestone. Instead, the flowing lines, circular walls and round doorways implied the stone had been extruded then hardened into a surface nearly as unyielding as carved limestone. Judging by the amount of weathering, the city must have stood for millennia while implacable winds steadily scoured them back into dust. No building rose above two stories, though whether they'd always been short, or had once soared towards the sky but had since been ground flat was unknown. Virtually everything about the cities and their builders remained a mystery.

Conspicuous in their rarity, a handful of scattered towers still tested the elements. Ooljee recalled one not far from the leaf cache. Although like every other building in the city, it had lost its roof, she recalled its small windows. It might offer the protection she required. Or it might decide to finally tumble to the ground and bury her with it.

The rumble under her feet was joined by a howl as wind-driven sand raced across the landscape. The face of the storm rose as an ominous, billowing cloud, extending from one horizon to the other. As she fled from it, Ooljee cursed the climatologists who'd failed to warn about the possibility of such storms.

*If it's planetary and lasts like a Martian storm, I'm in deep shit.*

With her link to Dominic and the lab broken by intense electromagnetic fields generated by the storm, Ooljee couldn't tell them where she was going. She hugged her precious tote and fled downwind.

Her feet puffed up little clouds as she raced through the twisting alleys. She skidded on the fine powder when she rounded sharp turns. In the confusion of the maze, she lost all sense of direction. Only because the tower rose above every other wall was Ooljee able to stay on target.

Wind whipped sand around her, spinning up small devils as a prelude to the main event. Ooljee panted, her dusk mask turning her huffs into a metallic gasp. Left. Right. Around that corner. Left again.

God, I'm running in circles!

The blueish sunlight faded as an eerie red pall fell over the land. The wind howled, chipping at walls and sending bits of decomposing limestone flying. They stung like insect bites each time they struck her.

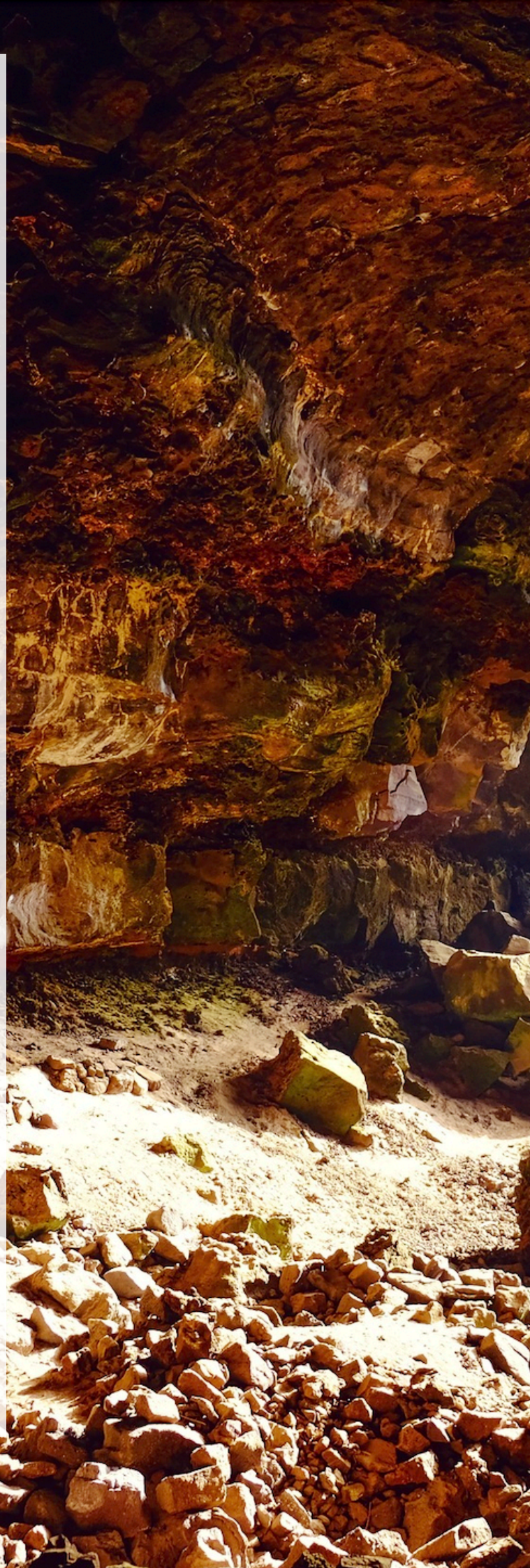
Come on, tower! Where are you?

Ooljee tripped over a boulder in the middle of an alley and fell to one knee. Her knuckles whitened as they gripped the tote.

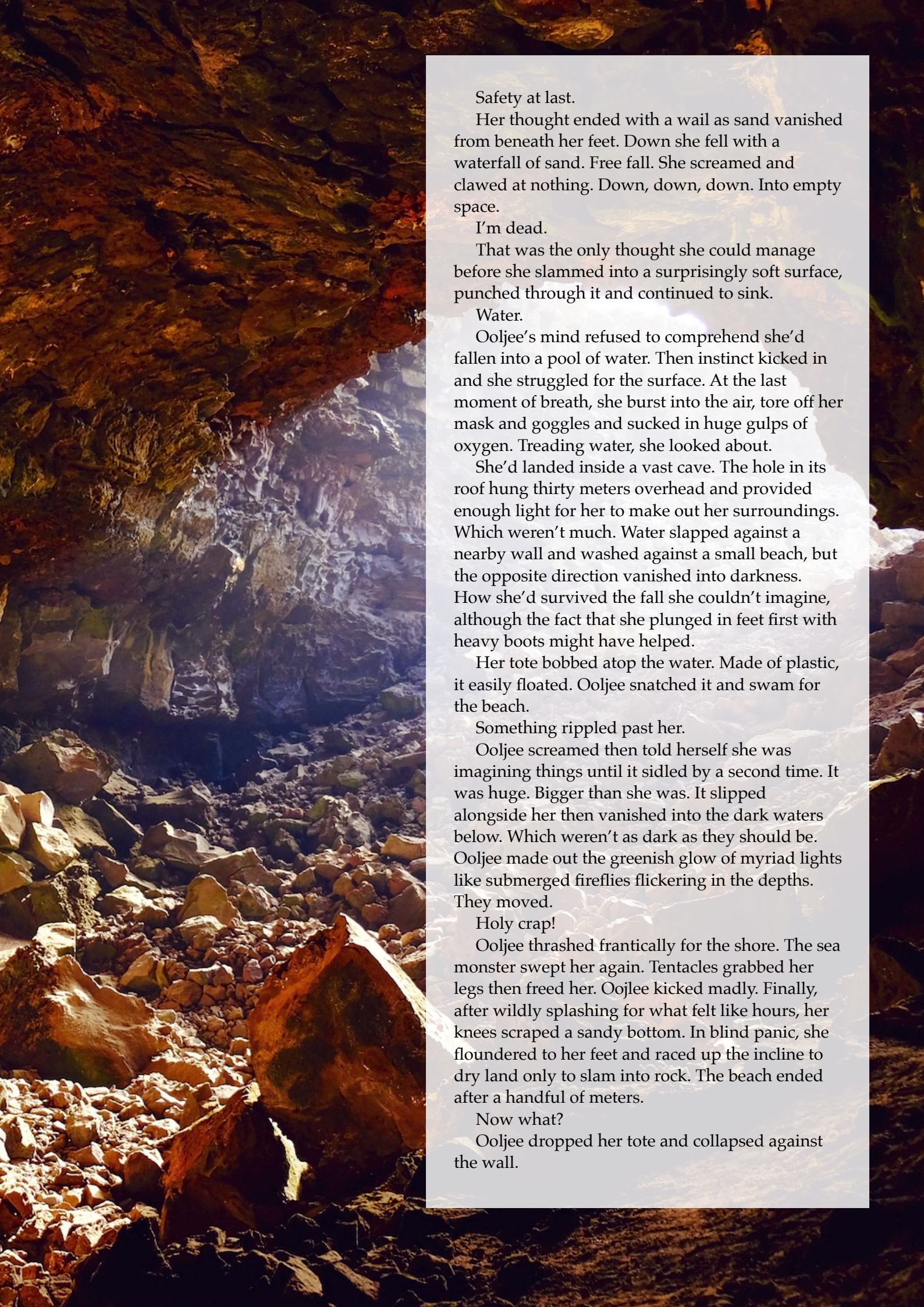
Are you worth dying for, leaves?

Ooljee thought they were. Not only did they possess the only writing found anywhere on the planet, they were also the only remains of life the team had uncovered. In all the months of digging, the team had encountered not a single animal bone. Not a petrified piece of wood. Not a fossilized imprint of a fern. Nothing to imply life had ever flourished here. And yet, the ruins emphatically insisted it had. The contradiction had perplexed the team for months.

The gust front that drove the haboob slammed into Ooljee's back just as she staggered into a small square. The tower stood before her.







Safety at last.

Her thought ended with a wail as sand vanished from beneath her feet. Down she fell with a waterfall of sand. Free fall. She screamed and clawed at nothing. Down, down, down. Into empty space.

I'm dead.

That was the only thought she could manage before she slammed into a surprisingly soft surface, punched through it and continued to sink.

Water.

Ooljee's mind refused to comprehend she'd fallen into a pool of water. Then instinct kicked in and she struggled for the surface. At the last moment of breath, she burst into the air, tore off her mask and goggles and sucked in huge gulps of oxygen. Treading water, she looked about.

She'd landed inside a vast cave. The hole in its roof hung thirty meters overhead and provided enough light for her to make out her surroundings. Which weren't much. Water slapped against a nearby wall and washed against a small beach, but the opposite direction vanished into darkness. How she'd survived the fall she couldn't imagine, although the fact that she plunged in feet first with heavy boots might have helped.

Her tote bobbed atop the water. Made of plastic, it easily floated. Ooljee snatched it and swam for the beach.

Something rippled past her.

Ooljee screamed then told herself she was imagining things until it sidled by a second time. It was huge. Bigger than she was. It slipped alongside her then vanished into the dark waters below. Which weren't as dark as they should be. Ooljee made out the greenish glow of myriad lights like submerged fireflies flickering in the depths. They moved.

Holy crap!

Ooljee thrashed frantically for the shore. The sea monster swept her again. Tentacles grabbed her legs then freed her. Ooljee kicked madly. Finally, after wildly splashing for what felt like hours, her knees scraped a sandy bottom. In blind panic, she floundered to her feet and raced up the incline to dry land only to slam into rock. The beach ended after a handful of meters.

Now what?

Ooljee dropped her tote and collapsed against the wall.

*Is that thing amphibious? God, I hope not!*

For several minutes silence reigned except for the gentle lap of water against stone. Only a drift of sand from the hole disturbed the pool's smooth surface. Eventually, Ooljee crept to the edge to peer into the depths. Far below greenish lights still glowed. What were they?

Ooljee glared at her tote of leaves.

*I hope you're worth all this.*

Even given her predicament, Ooljee thought they were. Perhaps they'd once been green and supple like earthly vegetation, but now they were black and as brittle as ancient paper. Each was the size of a banana leaf with veins that ran parallel from base to tip in a pattern not seen on Earth. The inhabitants of Northward had used them like lined writing paper. Ooljee hadn't studied them enough yet to understand how the aliens had marked the leaves, but she recognized writing when she saw it. Small scratches reminiscent of cuneiform removed a layer of the leaf's surface to reveal the slightly paler flesh within, creating pale characters on a dark background. She had no doubt the marks had been written by intelligent hands.

Momentarily safe on her tiny beach, Ooljee rid her boots of water and wrung out her suit. When she switched on her radio, only raging static assaulted her ears. Perhaps the storm's interference or the cave blocked transmission or maybe the swim had ruined the equipment. She switched off again.


She propped her elbow on her knee and her chin on her fist. Nothing for it but to ride out the storm and hope it didn't last a month. She carried no food and only a small canteen in case she'd be unable to reach the safety of the lab.

Like in this situation.

Her fingers encountered her flashlight. She thumbed it on and flicked it around her temporary home.

The inside of the cave gave no indication anything intelligent had ever visited it. The walls were as blank as those of every Strasser building. Sand continued to fall from the hole as the storm raged overhead.

To keep from panicking, Ooljee focused on the puzzles the planet presented. Anything to avoid thinking about being trapped underground with a sea monster.



Why didn't Northward have decorations? No one had seen a single carving, a statue, or a design chiseled into a single structure. No evidence of paint or plaster remained. Was this due to incredible age which, along with the sand storms, had obliterated such niceties? Had the desolate, bland buildings once been vibrant with color? Or had the inhabitants kept their city blank in a way no human ever would? Ooljee didn't know.

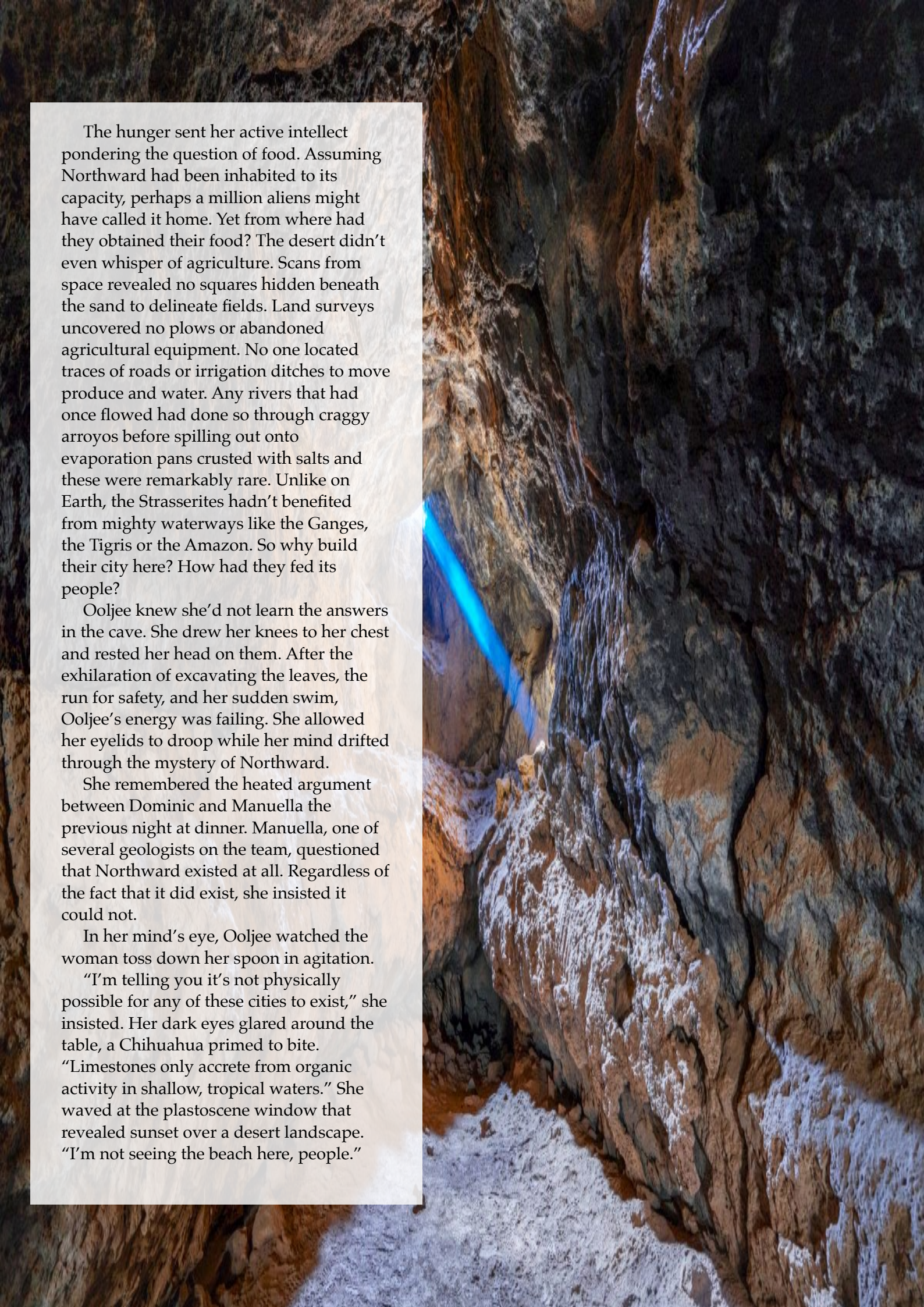
Where were the bodies? Surely, creatures capable of creating such buildings were large land animals similar to humans. Which meant they required either internal or external skeletons. Ooljee couldn't imagine a creature like a snake or a snail erecting towers to the sky. The size of the doorways spoke against it. Whatever the Strasserites had been, they ranged in height comparable to a human.

So why had no one found a bone? The archeologists had encountered nothing like cemeteries, tombs or catacombs. Where had the millions of creatures who inhabited Northward gone? Even if the last survivors of some awful disaster had fled the planet, surely generations of their ancestors should be interred somewhere. For that matter, Ooljee thought, turning off her flashlight to save power, the team hadn't discovered any advanced technology. No launch pads or industrial machinery. No vehicles rusting under the light of their brutal star. Not a plate or bowl or bit of crockery nor any glass to be found. The Strasserites might have been intelligent enough to build a city, but they'd not attained spaceflight. Of that Ooljee was certain.

So where were they? What had happened to their civilization?

Ooljee's stomach grumbled, telling her she should be heading for the dining hub for dinner. A glance at the sand still falling from the hole told Ooljee she would be late.

*I hope they save me a plate.*



The hunger sent her active intellect pondering the question of food. Assuming Northward had been inhabited to its capacity, perhaps a million aliens might have called it home. Yet from where had they obtained their food? The desert didn't even whisper of agriculture. Scans from space revealed no squares hidden beneath the sand to delineate fields. Land surveys uncovered no plows or abandoned agricultural equipment. No one located traces of roads or irrigation ditches to move produce and water. Any rivers that had once flowed had done so through craggy arroyos before spilling out onto evaporation pans crusted with salts and these were remarkably rare. Unlike on Earth, the Strasserites hadn't benefited from mighty waterways like the Ganges, the Tigris or the Amazon. So why build their city here? How had they fed its people?

Ooljee knew she'd not learn the answers in the cave. She drew her knees to her chest and rested her head on them. After the exhilaration of excavating the leaves, the run for safety, and her sudden swim, Ooljee's energy was failing. She allowed her eyelids to droop while her mind drifted through the mystery of Northward.

She remembered the heated argument between Dominic and Manuella the previous night at dinner. Manuella, one of several geologists on the team, questioned that Northward existed at all. Regardless of the fact that it did exist, she insisted it could not.

In her mind's eye, Ooljee watched the woman toss down her spoon in agitation.

"I'm telling you it's not physically possible for any of these cities to exist," she insisted. Her dark eyes glared around the table, a Chihuahua primed to bite.

"Limestones only accrete from organic activity in shallow, tropical waters." She waved at the plastoscene window that revealed sunset over a desert landscape. "I'm not seeing the beach here, people."



Dominic stabbed at her with his fork. “Not now. But this planet might have had small seas at one point. Given its size and the radiation coming off Strasser-Campollini, it’s possible they’ve since evaporated away.”

“Might explain the excessive moisture content of the atmosphere,” Reggie added. His eyes lifted skyward. “It’s strangely thick for such a small planet. Especially one without oceans. Its vapor load seems unusually high given the circumstances. If ancient seas evaporated, maybe they’re drifting around over our heads.”

Manuella protested. “I’m not arguing the existence of ancient seas. Scott may have located shorelines buried beneath the sand using lidar. I’m questioning the existence of ancient sea life in sufficient abundance to deposit enough limestone to build these cities. Where are the reef beds? The fossils? Sediments composed of seashells? All the bedrock we’ve sampled so far as been basaltic topped with a thin coat of sedimentary sandstone and clays. We’ve not found any limestone in the ground.”

“Not all limestones are organically generated,” Dom insisted. He slipped another piece of soy-turkey onto his plate. “Evaporative properties such as occur in caves can distill limestone from rainwater.”

Manuella scoffed. “Only if the rainwater has an acidic content and percolates through organic limestone. It simply carries the mineral load to another place before depositing it. The origin is still sealife. Yet we haven’t found any here.”

Much as Ooljee had hated inserting herself into the conversation, she piped up anyway. Lifting her finger, she corrected, “We have. My leaves. I think they are of an algal nature, not terrestrial.”

Dom turned with a pucker between his brows. “What makes you think that?”

“The veining.” Ooljee paused when ten pairs of eyes turned towards her. “It’s not much thicker than the leaves’ matrix so it wouldn’t provide the stiffness terrestrial leaves need against wind and gravity. Think banana leaves with their thick, pulpy central vein. I think my leaves were from a plant similar to kelp. They probably grew in warm, shallow seas. The locals gathered them, dried them in the sun then scratched on them like humans scratch on paper.”

Manuella poked the table with her finger. "It doesn't matter. I'm telling you I can find no evidence of reef building here. None. So where did all the limestone come from?"

The argument had spun around the table until Reggie pleaded a headache and fled for his quarters. Dom and Manuella might have continued battling all night; Ooljee wasn't interested in seeing who won. She had her theory. They could believe whatever they wanted. Like Reggie, she sought refuge in solitude.

She had plenty of that now.

Ooljee eyed the sand falling through the hole. Was it her imagination or was it easing? She noted the sky brightening. The worst had passed.

Or so she thought.

Something sent ripples through the pool. They lapped the shoreline near Ooljee's feet. Nervously, she backed up. A great bulge lifted the water in a hump only meters from shore. It sent small waves crashing on the beach as it swept past. Ooljee swallowed a scream as she scrambled backwards. A creature swam just beneath the water's glassy surface.

Grabbing her flashlight, Ooljee flicked it on only to wish she hadn't. The creature waited in the shallows only a meter away from her. Without doubt it was watching her. As Ooljee panned the beam of light along it, her heart thrummed. Her head wanted to explode. Alien life. The first humans had ever encountered.

The creature was the size of a dwarf sperm whale and probably weighed a hundred kilograms. Its skin was smooth and olive colored, splotched with white. Some of those splotches pulsed firefly yellow. Others flicked between black and white. Its motionlessness allowed Ooljee to study it just as she suspected it was studying her. Like most earthly life, it was bilaterally symmetrical, built long and flexible like a fish, but it was no fish. It possessed three sets of paired appendages along its length which looked like seaweed. Only their gentle swishing told Ooljee they were limbs. A long tail covered with loose flaps looked like water lettuce. The creature strongly reminded Ooljee of a sea dragon. A one hundred kilogram sea dragon.





Ooljee could see nothing like a head. A line of dots ran along its spine. These shifted from white to black and back again in an oddly organized fashion. When a series closest to Ooljee turned all black and remained that way, Ooljee realized the spots were sight organs of some sort. Black meant pupils staring at her. White meant the organ was closed. So the dragon could stare at her with twenty eyes. Intimidating.

For several minutes, Ooljee sat watching the dragon. Its bizarre eye array watched her back. Finally, her curiosity got the better of her. Ooljee palmed the water. To her surprise, the dragon floated a limb frond and delicately touched her. Both withdrew hastily.

*It's as afraid of me as I am of it!*

"I wish I could speak with you," she said.

The dragon didn't respond.

The two waited, staring at each other. Then the dragon extended a limb frond. Ooljee extended a hand. They touched. Backed away. Waited.

The dragon was the braver. It thrust a frond out of the water.

Because the gesture looked strangely like the offer of a handshake, Ooljee closed her fingers around the frond. It was cold and slippery, rubbery on the outside but with something bone-like on the inside. At her touch, the fronds curled around her hand in a brief clasp, then released her.

Amazing!

Ten eyes flicked open and shut. Then the dragon offered its frond again which Ooljee took. A gentle current ran across Ooljee's skin, enough to raise the hairs on her wrist. For reasons she couldn't explain, Ooljee understood the sensation. A greeting. She gave the frond a squeeze.

They separated. Touched twice more.

On the third encounter, lengths of seaweed curled around Ooljee's fingers, bundling her hand in wet bandages. Another soft jolt of current. The sea dragon squealed and chirped.

"I don't understand and yet I do," Ooljee said aloud.

The frond tightened its grip much as Ooljee had when squeezing, then released her.

And so the gentle introduction continued, one touch at a time.

A group of lights approached from the depths. Ooljee eyed them nervously as three more dragons appeared. Ignoring her, they floated around the first and Ooljee heard squeaks and clicks. So they possessed some sort of communication similar to that of cetaceans. The conversation continued for several minutes, then the three new arrivals darted away.

The first sea dragon's eye array rearranged itself. A limb frond lifted as if pointing. Both gaze and limb aimed at the forgotten tote of leaves.

Determined to understand these creatures because she sensed intelligence, Ooljee grabbed the tote and opened it. With the gentlest touch, she lifted the topmost leaf.

The dragon swished violently, causing Ooljee to jump back. Then it settled. Its eye array readjusted.

No longer afraid, Ooljee watched in wonder as a new dragon swam to the surface and circled the first. The two clicked and squealed. Then the new arrival swam into the shallows, nearly beaching itself. It belched, then with a heave, flopped back into the depths.

Ooljee gaped. A pile of fresh, red / green leaves glistened on the sand. Kneeling, Ooljee studied it. On each leaf she saw writing. Flipping through the stack, Ooljee felt as if she was paging through a book. Her hands stilled.

*I am. This is something they want me to read!*

Ooljee carefully stacked the leaves while the sea dragon watched, ten eyes focused on her. Intelligently. Understanding at least fundamentally that she was as intelligent as them.

A frond swished water towards the pile several times. A message.


Ooljee understood. "You want me to read this. To understand you." Ooljee placed the leaves on a flat surface, treating it like a manuscript. "I will, when I can."

Ten eyes flicked shut then open in succession as if answering.

"You built Northward!" The realization swamped Ooljee like cold water. Because, suddenly, it all made sense.





A desert landscape with tall, thin, yellowish rock spires under a clear blue sky. The spires are scattered across a sandy dune area, some standing alone and others in small groups. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

Of course, nothing about the city seemed terrestrial, because nothing about it was. It had been a submerged city. Such a place needed no roofs or windows to protect inhabitants from weather. It required no roads to the outer provinces. If the dragons had practiced agriculture, it would not have been by plowing the ground or digging irrigation ditches. Perhaps they generated the limestone for their homes from their own bodies the way paper wasps made nests from wood and saliva.

The meaning took Ooljee's breath away. An intelligent species still existed on Strasser Two! Not on land as terrestrial creatures assumed in their arrogance. But in what remained of their vanished seas. Undoubtedly, the dragons had once lived on the surface when oceans still covered their world. But catastrophic change had driven them below ground. To live here in dark and silent caves.

She wondered how many still survived. Was this the only cave? Was a vibrant civilization reaching its end?

Another dragon shoved leaves onto the beach. Then a third.

Ooljee arranged the growing pile like a giant manuscript. Her heart raced at the thought of the magic they'd reveal once their code was broken.

The first dragon swished water towards the leaves. Something in that gesture told Ooljee exactly what the dragon wanted. Take them.

She couldn't store them in the tote with the dried leaves, so she carefully rolled them up like a burrito and tied the bundle with a bit of cord she tore from her pack. She brandished it at the dragon to say she understood the message.

The dragon's many eyes blinked in succession.

It offered a frond again. All ten eyes stared fiercely.

Sensing desperation from the creature, Ooljee sat down on the water's edge and offered her hand. This time the dragon's grip was as determined as its gaze. It sent small electric jolts through Ooljee's hand that sent her mind spinning. Too late to withdraw, Ooljee could only close her eyes as the sensation penetrated her brain. Vague images filled her mind. Odd concepts. The freedom of swimming in a planet-sized ocean, no limits in any direction. A blinding, painful burst of blue light she tried to deny. Sadness. Desperation. A shrinking of the world. Then separation. Loneliness. Finally, darkness. A gritty determination to survive.

Just as Ooljee almost pulled free, she caught one last sensation. Wonder and hope. That another entity had arrived. Take our knowledge. Don't let us die forgotten.

The sudden crackling of her headset wrenched Ooljee back to consciousness. The dragon released her.

"Moonbeam!" Her comlink whined and spit. "You out there? Ooljee?"

Still stunned, not able to gather her thoughts, Ooljee sat winded beside the pool. Then relief washed over her. Breathlessly, Ooljee tapped on her set. "Yes, I'm here. I rode out the storm OK. How are you guys?"

Dom's voice whooshed with relief. "We survived. Took some damage though. Are you OK?"

"Better than OK, but very lost." Ooljee stared up at the hole in the cave ceiling. The storm had ended and night was falling.

"We're tracking you. Our detector says we're right on top of you. Where are you?"

"Probably under your feet," she laughed. "I fell into a hole. A really big one."

"You're all right?"

Ooljee didn't know quite how to answer that. The dragon continued to eye her, not moving. She sensed it wanted to know if she'd gotten its message.

"I think so. Just you wait until you get down here. I found something very special."

A veil of dust poured down from the ceiling. Ooljee saw shadows hovering.

"Holy mazes!" That was Reggie. "How'd you survive that?"

Ooljee chuckled. "I'm a good swimmer and there's lots of water down here."

"Shift me!" Reggie swore. He beamed a light into the hole.

Ooljee waved.

"Come on down!" she offered. "The water's fine."

Dom's voice was stern. "We'll need more rope, Moonbeam. Can you hang in there a little longer?"

Ooljee nodded, knowing he couldn't see the gesture. "Yes. Take your time. I've got a new friend I'd like to talk to. There's lots more I need to understand."

She gazed at the dragon, willing it to know she understood its desperation. Trapped in a dwindling environment. How well humans knew about that! Hadn't they, too, nearly turned their world into a desert? At least the dragons could blame their star. Humans could only blame themselves.

The dragon offered a limb frond.

Ooljee took it.



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## MEL LEE NEWMIN



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*Mel Lee Newmin presents a story destined to be a classic of the science fiction genre: a fast-paced, multilayered adventure which is also richly textured and thought-provoking.*



# NOMAN'S LAND

It's never easy: traveling on a cloud, carrying around my own mug-shot, and all that running for life on a treadmill. I was once mistaken for a hat, a bat, and that last time, for a Spartan saleswoman. I have nothing to sell except for those nerve-racking attempts at skin-peeling. I change my skin every time someone takes a good look at me. It hurts like hell because sometimes—just sometimes—I want to be looked at. I want to be real.

One day, I feel bored and let myself out of my bird-cage. I reach out and draw my sword. It has an aura of ruby-red that makes me gag sometimes, but I am only real—in the strictest sense—when I'm holding it. I crave bubble gum. Gum adds substance, creates motion. I'll hunt for bubble gum.

I liked a special brand that comes in gorgeous shades of bruised purple. The advice of the cashier in the supermarket nearby is to look in the Emporium of the Runaway Princess on Fantasistan Street.

I take an unexpected left when I should've turned right. Travelling in your cloud of thought helps when you're lost; it's what others—the real kind of others—call gut instinct. The Emporium looms ahead like a dwarfed giant supporting a passive-aggressive predilection.

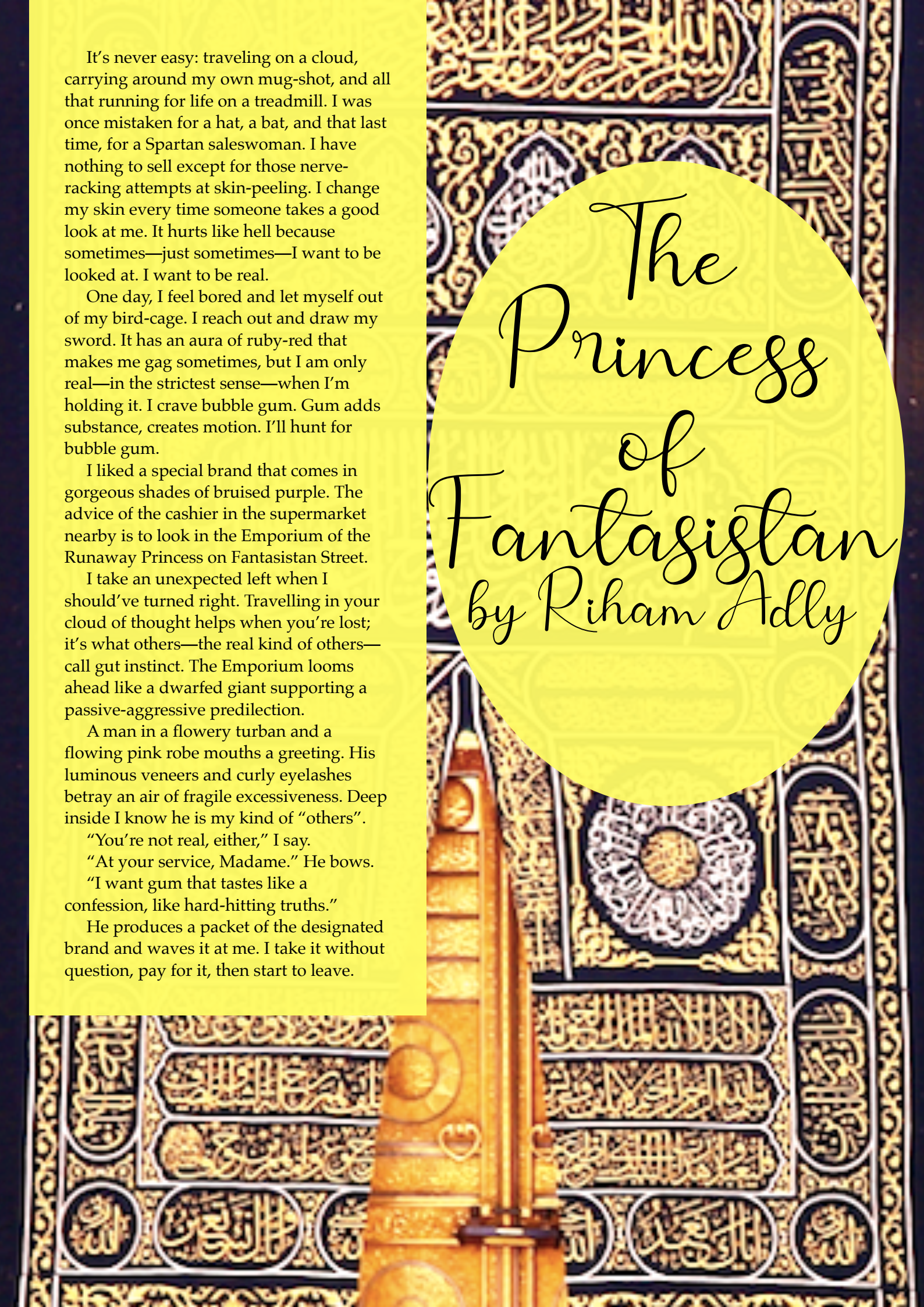
A man in a flowery turban and a flowing pink robe mouths a greeting. His luminous veneers and curly eyelashes betray an air of fragile excessiveness. Deep inside I know he is my kind of "others".

"You're not real, either," I say.

"At your service, Madame." He bows.

"I want gum that tastes like a confession, like hard-hitting truths."

He produces a packet of the designated brand and waves it at me. I take it without question, pay for it, then start to leave.



# The Princess of Fantasistan

by Riham Adly

"Why leave us so soon, Madame? Take a look around. Everything's on half-price, today." Blocking the exit door, he towers well above me like those highway signs with unintelligible print. I feel like I have no choice. I walk around a little.

In one of the display windows I spy a signet ring made of steel—but not without the confidence of gold—on a velvet cushion. A lime-green cigarette packet stands right next to it. They look like a pair with unusual intimacy, something like a conspiring mistress and her masseur.

"I've always wanted to smoke," I blurt out without realizing it.

"What's stopping you, Madame?" He reaches for the packet in the display window and offers a cigarette. I accept. He lights it. I take a long drag. Tendrils of smoke billow up, their tails running in fading puffs.

"Whose ring is that?"

"Ah, this is Solomon's seal. It parts water and exposes the hidden People of the Sea."

"What about those? They're good." I take another drag, savoring the mint flavor.

"Those belonged to Gulnare of the Sea. She was a chain-smoker. She ran away from her sea-folk because cigarettes won't light in water. On land, when the merchant sold her to some king, she remained silent for a whole year so the king wouldn't pick her smoker's breath. But she smoked to her heart's desire. The Musk perfume I sold her helped."

"She's not real, just like us." I sigh, I just hate it, but then, I hear a murmur, something like, a blowing breath, struggling to keep a rhythm. The sounds come from the midnight-blue bottle with the delicate stopper in one of the display shelves.

"Whatever you say, Madame."

If it's whatever I say then why won't he let me leave?

I blow more smoke in the face of the statue in fancy embroidery.

"I would've liked a father like that."

"A king for a father? He was a fisherman once, you know, turned king. Anything's possible."



I don't bother looking around anymore and just walk straight to the door.

"What would you make of her?" He grabs my hand and steers me to the life-size painting occupying the entirety of the wall. "A mother like her?"

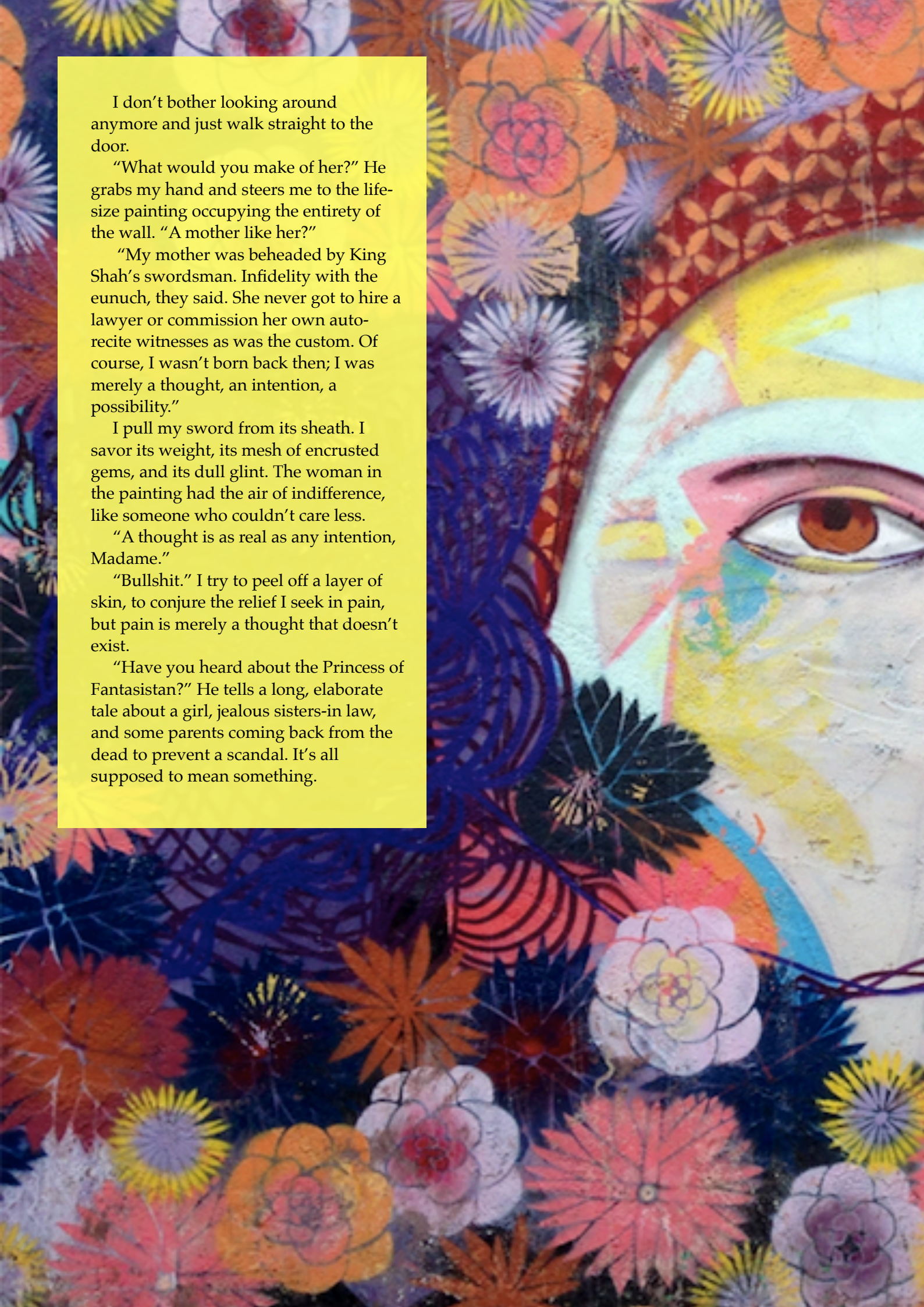
"My mother was beheaded by King Shah's swordsman. Infidelity with the eunuch, they said. She never got to hire a lawyer or commission her own auto-recite witnesses as was the custom. Of course, I wasn't born back then; I was merely a thought, an intention, a possibility."

I pull my sword from its sheath. I savor its weight, its mesh of encrusted gems, and its dull glint. The woman in the painting had the air of indifference, like someone who couldn't care less.

"A thought is as real as any intention, Madame."

"Bullshit." I try to peel off a layer of skin, to conjure the relief I seek in pain, but pain is merely a thought that doesn't exist.

"Have you heard about the Princess of Fantasistan?" He tells a long, elaborate tale about a girl, jealous sisters-in-law, and some parents coming back from the dead to prevent a scandal. It's all supposed to mean something.





I feel tired from the effort of trying to run, trying to listen, trying to exist, and rest on a throne-like chair nearby. The cloud that holds me rains on itself. The floor is littered with my old skin. The woman in the picture frowns. Is it disgust or mistrust? When my resistance relents, the turbaned man smiles in offering, giving me his hand. I take it and it's soft, and gooey, and love-full just like gum. I nick bits of the foggy truths I came here looking for and chew.

On my throne, I enjoy—in drowsy satisfaction—the process of gum chewing: how the gum moves in my mouth, how it infuses my taste buds with its flavors of revelation. I gather it at the base of my tongue and blow a raw-pink bubble.

What would it be like to just...believe?

My cloudy mood bubbles into subtle droplets that evaporate back to my mother's thoughts, her intentions, and her dreams.

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

RIHAM ADLY



# LOVE IS MAKE-BELIEVE

*Princess, priestess, runaway, slave-girl, heiress, aquatic siren: women live thousands of lives in the flash fiction of Riham Adly, sometimes in the course of one story. A writer from modern Egypt, Adly reflects the complex reality of a world that can be both cosmopolitan and insular, a changing world where women risk new roles, but still struggle to push through family and cultural conditioning that tells them to “expect nothing, stay quiet, be smart.” The women in these stories ignore that advice. They expect everything, rebel, push boundaries, speak from the heart.*



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CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

PETER ASTLE



*'This isn't a book you'll find easy to set aside until tomorrow: make a cup of tea, get comfortable, switch off your phone and be drawn into the little worlds of this book to emerge content and refreshed by the work of a master author.'* — Grant P. Hudson, 2020



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CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

G. MARINO LEYLAND



*'...the world is crazy and we are all a little crazy in it.'*



# ***Pezzi Pazzi | Crazy Pieces***

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A black and white photograph of a long, narrow alleyway. The walls are made of concrete and have some graffiti. A dog is lying on the ground in the middle of the alley. The lighting is dramatic, with a bright light source at the end of the alley creating a lens flare effect. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# Free's Tale: No Home at Christmastime by Gabriella Baleom

Brilliant lights flashed in a steady rhythm—red, yellow, blue, green—repeating the pattern again and again. Outdoor speakers played a continual round of Christmas music. “Silent Night”, “Away in a Manger,” and other traditional songs were interspersed with more light-hearted fare like “Jingle Bell Rock” and “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.”

People streamed up and down sidewalks, cut back and forth across streets, and swarmed in and out of stores. Voices rang out as shoppers searched with ferocious determination for the perfect gift, nabbed completely different things, and sometimes grabbed one of everything.

The air was a chilly twenty-five degrees. Three inches of snow lay on the ground, left over from yesterday’s flurries, and six to ten more were anticipated by morning. Hail and freezing rain were also expected according to forecasters, who predicted they could turn into black ice overnight. Texans weren’t used to this type of weather, and

people were being advised by radio and television to stay inside and off the roads.

Despite the threat of less-than-optimum conditions, happiness dominated the atmosphere. Excitement. Hope. Camaraderie. Tolerance. Family ties. Parents laughed, occasionally snapping at one another but jovial overall as they herded and hustled children along. People enjoyed each other's company, or at least chose to share it. Strangers smiled at one another, hearts lightened.

However, not every situation was epitomized by sweetness and light. Someone wasn’t joyful or hopeful. He certainly wasn’t happy.

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Scanning his surroundings with wary eyes, he took cautious steps forward, uncertain of the reception he’d receive if he were seen. Some people were kind and welcoming, but he’d learned the hard way that others were unpleasant—even vicious—for no reason.

Therefore, he kept his distance despite being sorely tempted by the food smells in the air, which came from the direction of the crowds. Some vendors maintained food trucks, with numerous people taking advantage of the selections. He smelled an enticing new odor every time he sniffed, and his mouth watered. Roasted turkey leg, hot dog, pizza, peanuts, popcorn, or cakes—every scent hit his nose with a hundred times greater intensity than usual and his stomach with even greater force. Maybe that was because water was all he'd had in the last two days. It had been easy to come by, and hadn't required him to get near anyone.

He was uncomfortable now, very much so. His legs were cold. His ears were cold. His nose was cold and runny, and his eyes watered. His entire body felt frozen, and he couldn't keep from shivering. A warm place to sleep or rest sounded wonderful, but he didn't have one and hadn't in a while.

When he smelled more tantalizing food odors from another, less populated direction, he changed course and followed his nose to an open trash can behind Tim's Eats. Knocking it over so he could get to the contents faster, he rummaged through them, desperate for a few bites. Anything would do. The leftovers he found—mouthfuls of steak,

meatloaf, catfish, spinach, corn, slightly singed squash and cornbread—seemed a kingly feast compared to eating nothing.

"Hey! Get out of that!" The restaurant owner, Tim, didn't seem enthused about someone pawing through his trash. Red-faced, Tim charged, yelling like a madman. The hungry visitor didn't flee, because he'd seen a chunk of cheesy garlic bread and wanted to take it with him. Tim tried to kick him and missed, but connected on the second try.

Yelping, the scavenger dropped the bread, eyed it longingly, but darted away. Afraid of being followed, he looked over his shoulder repeatedly and didn't notice what lay ahead—two concrete slabs of sidewalk which had shifted over time. One jutted upward. The other had sunk, leaving an opening which had filled with water. Heart racing and mind caught up in trying to get away without further injury, the hungry soul stumbled and plunged head-first into the partially frozen liquid. He scrambled to get out, but noticed his reflection in the swirling water and cringed. He looked like the Mud Monster from Hell. Clumps of mud clung to him, and rivulets of brown slime ran down his face and into his mouth. A bitter, chemical taste hit his tongue. Spitting several times, he tried to get the nasty-tasting stuff out of his mouth but couldn't, and a foul aftertaste remained.



"Beat it, you worthless mutt!" Swinging a broom, Tim came at him, missing his muddy head by a breath.

The mutt in question let out a strangled bark. Barely managing to evade Tim's next broom-swing, he dashed off as fast as he could. He hadn't bathed in a long time, and his cream-colored fur—scraggly and matted long before he fell into the water—was encrusted in muck. Under that were dirt, bits of grass, and debris.

He was getting colder, since the goop all over him had begun freezing. Releasing his breath in pants as he ran, he tried to ignore how he felt and muttered in time with his steps, "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their County; but he that stands by it now—*Ouch!*" A sharp pebble had lodged between his toes, but he shook it loose and kept moving. "When you get in a tight place and everything goes against you, till it seems as though you could not hang on a minute longer, never give up then, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn."

He stopped speaking aloud when he noticed people and dogs ahead. Veering around them, he worried they might bother him and renewed panic gave his paws wings.



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The Committee members had seen the dog being kicked and chased. Since he'd just run down their street, they aimed their humans—they'd been walking them—toward home. Listening to their charges' concern for the direction change, the Committee members smiled at one another. It never failed to warm their hearts, knowing their people thought *they* were the caretakers, not the cared-for.

Bruno, a German Shepherd, and their leader, said, "That scruffy male looked like he bathed in mud before being electrocuted. He could be a troublemaker, so to be on the safe side, I suggest we lead him to Reverend Bill and away from our neighborhood." The pastor helped strays. Glancing at Charlene, Bruno saw sympathy in her eyes. "I know that look, but we can't rescue everyone and take them home with us. Some aren't savable, and you know it."

"The best way to figure out if someone's savable is to get to know him." Charlene's tone was unruffled. A sheepdog and the oldest

Committee member, she was deemed quite wise. "Your neighbors are gone and their place is empty."

"I suggested leading that male *away*, not home," he argued. "Remember that Chihuahua we helped? She turned out to be pure spite, and attacked us and our humans alike."

"We couldn't know how she'd turn out," Tanya, a young Collie, said. "She was a fluke."

"That fellow we saw running looked very skinny," Charlene commented. "Something tells me there's more to him than meets the eye."

"Maybe the Great Dog in the Sky is prompting you," Tanya said.

Bruno frowned. "You ladies have soft, caring hearts, but sometimes you're wrong." He sighed. "Then again, you may be right."

"He was quoting Thomas Paine and Harriet Beecher Stowe," Charlene replied. "They're famous among humans, and a dog who quotes great minds is one I want to meet."

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Glancing behind himself yet again, the dog limped down the sidewalk. His spine tingled. He suspected he was being followed, but hadn't seen anyone.

As he passed homes, he saw happy-looking people through open windows and sighed. Ever since he was tiny, he'd listened to Mama's stories of caring people and loving homes, like hers. He'd dreamed of the same for himself, longing to bask in the warmth of someone's love. But the "home" he'd been taken to hadn't been loving. Unbidden memories flooded his mind—being yanked away from his mother as a pup, crying out and hearing her frantic howls—and he shuddered.

The unpleasant memories sapped his spirits. He couldn't keep running and slowed to a trot. Despite the few bites from the trash, he remained hungry. Moving hurt. In fact, his body ached everywhere, and he felt like a dog-shaped icicle. Studying his feet, he wondered if his life was about to end and plowed into someone.

"Whoa," a deep voice said. "Don't run. We mean you no harm."

The formerly-pursued dog bit his tongue by accident. Sides still heaving from his earlier exertions, he tried to breathe slower. Raising his head, he saw a large, frowning German Shepherd.

"You could freeze to death if you don't get out of the cold," the Shepherd said.

"Do I look like I have someplace to go?" The newcomer tensed, expecting to be attacked, but couldn't help but notice the Shepherd's large collar, well-fed look and immaculate grooming. Were his nails *clipped*?

"No." The pleasant, feminine voice came from the dark-brown sheepdog who stepped from behind the Shepherd. "But Bruno's right. The cold will soon get below freezing. You need a bath, a warm, dry place to rest, and food."

"Wishing doesn't make it so." He tried to conceal his trembling. "I'm not a pampered indoor pet like you two." He'd noted her clean fur—the fact she wore an unmistakably expensive collar, too. His right front leg, which had been kicked, ached so badly he could barely put weight on it.

Her smile remained calm. "Snipe if you want, but follow us. We can help you with a place to stay."

"That Tim who kicked you is worse than a rabid flea and ten times as mean," Bruno said. "But not all men are like him. I know that has little meaning coming from a stranger like me, but it's true."

The sheepdog spoke. "Let's walk. What's your name, stranger? I'm Charlene."

"Name?" The stray's mind felt as numb as his feet.

"A name is what humans call you," Bruno explained, casting a sideways glance at him.

"You don't say," the uncomfortable dog snorted. Trust wasn't something he granted easily, but he was close to collapse. Forcing his pained body to move, he hoped beyond hope to thaw out somewhere safe and warm. "I must have lots of names then, because I've been called Stop That, Crap-for-Brains, Bad Mutt, Worthless—." Remembering unfriendly voices, he stopped speaking.

"People can say and do hurtful things." Charlene fell silent. "What do *you* call yourself?"

"Free."

Charlene and Bruno's eyes met, but neither spoke.

The dogs loped down one block, then more.

Bruno stopped in front of a cornflower-blue house with gray trim. "See the house across the street with the empty drive? The people living

there are away, but they have a dog-door you'll fit through and... I'll do a quick recon." He vanished, reappearing only moments later. "It's warm inside. Food is sitting out, hopefully enough to last you tonight. If not, let us know. I'm in the blue and gray home. My Sergeant is generous and gives me more than I need. I wouldn't mind sharing."

"I'm given extra, too," Charlene volunteered. "I'm next door in the white house with the green garage."

"Why help me?" Free gazed at them. "You don't know me. For all you know, I could be vicious. I could be rabid."

"Tim was mean to you but you didn't hurt him." Bruno's gaze on Free was intense. "You didn't even try to." His gaze met Charlene's briefly, and he sat up tall and straight. "My Sergeant and I live by strict guidelines. Help others. Be generous and share. It could be you in need some day. Don't leave a fellow behind... Sergeant would chew my hide if I didn't follow the rules." His warm tone and eyes revealed his deep affection for his human.

"And it's Christmastime." Charlene smiled. "Welcome to the neighborhood, Free. I'll give you time to eat, then join you. You'll want to use their tub—to clean up, you know."

Free did *not* know but appreciated their kindness. Dipping his head to show respect, he spoke softly. "Thank you." Then he painstakingly climbed the steps and gingerly eased through the dog door.







\*\*\*

Inside the house, Free inhaled the contents of the dog food bowl, a tasty mix of beef, gravy, peas, and rice, then licked the bowl so many times, no trace of food remained.

Charlene reappeared within minutes of his giving the bowl a last swipe of his tongue. "Follow me," she said, going from one room to another till she located a tub with large spigots. Grasping the left one with her teeth, she turned it and water poured from the faucet. She did the same with the right, adjusting it just so. Grabbing a round stopper by its top ring, she dropped it in the drain, pressing down with a paw. "This keeps the water in. Soaking would do you good." Once the level had risen, Charlene turned off the spigots. "I'll wait in the front room." Then she vanished.

Free put a paw over the side and into the water, quickly followed by the rest of him. The hot water felt good, but his bones remained chilled awhile. He worked hard to remove the garbage from his fur, but couldn't get everything. Once the water had chilled, he climbed out, rolled on the thick rug on the floor, giving himself brisk shakes afterward.

Exiting the room and backtracking, he stepped into the living room and froze. Five dogs sat on their haunches, facing him in total silence. He recognized only Bruno and Charlene.

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Bruno spoke first, his tone brisk and matter-of-fact. "I don't know how long you'll be in the neighborhood, but the entire Committee wanted to welcome you and go over a few rules."

"Rules?" Free's chestnut-colored eyes narrowed. He remembered the first *rules* he'd been taught, and what had accompanied them.

Charlene's expression was kind, but her eyes sharp in intensity. "Yes. First, this is Tanner."

An imposing Great Dane with short dark-brown fur stepped forward. Towering over Free, he said nothing but nodded. Free nodded back.

"This is Twigs," Charlene said.

A mini Chi-Poo pranced forward, touched Free's nose with his own, and spoke in a high-

pitched voice, "Welcome, young man."

Free's eyes widened, and he cocked his head to the side. "Young? Pardon me, sir, but you can't be much older than me.

Twigs grinned. "I'm *much* older than I look. I'm a granddog several times over."

Free's mouth had fallen open at the mention of grandpuppies, but he snapped it shut. "Uh, congratulations. And thank you."

"This is Tanya," Charlene continued.

The honey-colored dog had flowing fur and svelte curves, and Free acknowledged her beauty even as he said, "Hello."

"Hello, Free." Tanya chuckled. "I love your name, by the way."



"Thank you." He smiled but figured bad news was coming, and waited for the bone to vanish. The word "rules" could mean anything or nothing, but he'd learned to expect the worst.

"Charlene heard you quoting Harriet Beecher Stowe," Tanya commented. "I like her, too. My human charge reads to me."

Free relaxed a little. "Alvin—a man who was my friend—loved literature. He used to teach it and read classics to me."

"Did you live in his home?" Tanya asked.

"Not exactly." He saw the expectant look in her eyes. "Both of us were homeless and lived on the street." Thinking of old Alvin, who'd died from the cold long ago, Free's heart panged. He missed the man. One of the good two-leggeds, he'd always shared what little he had. However, Free shoved the memories aside and focused on the present.

"I notice how quiet and tense you are, but there's no need to be nervous," Tanya said. "We have only good intentions." When he didn't respond, she asked, "Do you know any quotes that apply to this situation?"

"Yes," Free replied. "We are wise to be cautious, but I suggest we prepare for the worst and hope for the best." He added, "There are

times when fear is good. It must keep its watchful place at the heart's controls."

"I haven't heard that before," Tanya said.

"Orson Scott Card said the first part, Aeschylus the second."

"Hmm." Tanner only made the sound.

Free thought that commentary without commentary carried a warning. *I knew this food and home bit were too good to be true*, he mused. Still, he'd gotten a good meal and nice soak out of his brief visit, and felt a little better. But he couldn't help but wonder if he'd get out unscathed.

"Don't worry." Bruno grinned unexpectedly, looking like a mischievous puppy. "We aren't planning on eating you."

Free was taken aback about being read so accurately.

"On with the rules," Bruno said, holding his shoulders at what looked like military precision. "Number One. Respect the home you're in. It can benefit you and last if you take care of it, so don't damage anything. Number Two. Don't do your business inside. Number Three. *Don't damage* includes not chewing wood, cushions, shoes..."





Free interrupted. "Got it. Chew nothing except food."

"Correct. Number Four. Your stay could last awhile if the people from here stay away, but it could end at any time. If it does end prematurely, we'll try to find you another place. Number Five. Never bite a human unless it's the direst emergency, like a person has a tight rope around your neck and you can't breathe, or someone is trying to stab you."

Free's eyes widened. Being stabbed sounded horrible. Thank the Great Dog with Endless Bones in the Sky he'd never endured that. As far as choking, he knew more than he wished he did. And he'd seen dogs beaten to death, and people doing horrible things to one another.

"Let's finish the rules," Bruno said. "Number Six. Don't dig in Mrs. Switzer's flowers. *Ever*. Her roses are her babies, and she loves them more than anything. She lives in the pink house with the green van. I *mean it* on this rule. You'd live to regret breaking it. In fact, don't even go near her

home."

"Heed his words." Twigs' voice was flat and emotionless. "Mrs. Switzer has been known to call the pound over the smallest things. One of my sons looked at her flower bed funny. He was across the street, but she had him taken away. I never saw him again."

Some of Free's tangled fur hung down over his eyes, and he blew it aside. He'd heard of pounds, although he'd never gone to one. "I'm sorry," he told Twigs, and the smaller dog nodded.

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The man dumped the small puppy on the ground, then grabbed him roughly by his scruff. Shrieking for his mother, the puppy felt a metal chain being put around his neck. Ice-cold to match the temperature, it sent a chill through his body, and the heavy links weighed him down. The man who'd put it on him walked away, leaving him crying. But when he didn't stop yipping and howling, the man yelled and kicked him.

Free's eyes popped open. Jumping to his feet, he stared around wildly, unable to breathe. It took awhile before he realized he was safe. What he'd experienced was only a nightmare from his past. But his memories had been so vivid and real that he could still feel the metal around his neck and the blows.

After being in the neighborhood for five days, Free's paw didn't hurt as bad. He'd run hot baths daily, soaked, and believed the heat had eased his pain more than anything. The regular food had also been great. The Committee members had regularly snuck him into their homes to eat.

Despite his initial suspicions, he'd accepted they were good, decent dogs who just wanted to

help others.

For what seemed like forever, he'd been unable to see beyond worrying about his next meal or spot to rest. But now he found himself day-dreaming. Wondering what it would be like to stay where he was. Contemplating if he'd be able to help others like he'd been helped. Mere survival no longer in the forefront of his mind, Free thought wistfully of a loving home, but tried not to dwell on that.

He'd been venturing outside, too, to take care of business and explore his surroundings.

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Glancing out her living room window, Mrs. Hilda Switzer smiled. The sixty-nine year old woman had a perfect view of the rose beds in front of her home, and she'd designed them with that in mind. She loved to look at her prized roses, especially the Royal Hilda Baer Switzer, a blue variety her devoted husband Gunter had bred and named for her years before. An undetected aneurysm had taken him from her side four years ago, and while his absence pained her, nothing could erase her memories of their time together. They'd been perfectly matched, both frugal and industrious, and they'd worked in nurseries and roses all their lives. Moreover, they'd been happy together. She continued raising roses after his death, although less than when Gunter was alive. Every time she looked at her plants, she thought of him, and her front beds were devoted to his favorites and the Royal Hilda. She maintained small greenhouses in her back yard, too, and her regular customers swore by her flowers, refusing to buy anywhere else. The small amounts of

money she earned helped provide what Social Security didn't. Although she and Gunter had saved for their latter years, one of their grandsons had been born with unexpected problems, and they'd given most of their savings to help him.

Hilda winced as she leaned on her cane, and admitted something to herself she'd been loath to acknowledge. She wouldn't physically be able to do the necessary work on her roses much longer. Her long-lived arthritis had worsened over the past few years, gnarling her fingers. What used to be negligible pain had intensified. She'd already been forced to hire a neighborhood teen to take over much of the weeding, mulching, and watering. Her hands just couldn't take the pain, and her knees could barely handle bending and kneeling. Only three days ago, she'd been unable to stand after being on her knees in a greenhouse. She'd had to crawl to her back steps and use a hand-rail to pull herself up.





Sighing, she shook off her worries and went to make herself chamomile tea. Warming and soothing, it would do her a world of good.

Twenty-four minutes later, she carefully cradled a cup in her aging hands and took a sip. The hot tea cascaded down her throat, the heat spreading outward, warming her entire body. With the help of her cane, she walked to her rocker—another gift from her beloved Gunter—and patted its twin positioned beside hers. This had been his, and she planned to never get rid of it. She started to sit down, but glanced at her rose bed first because she could use the joy brought by gazing at her roses.

However, she gasped. Forgetting about her tea and relaxing, Hilda's hands trembled, her cup falling to the floor. A light-colored *dog* stood in front of her home. Worse, the animal's head was raised as it aimed its nose right, then left, as though it were sniffing in the direction of her precious flowers. The unwelcome visitor wasn't in her beds—*yet*—but everything about it indicated interest. And she *knew* dogs!

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Intrigued by new scents, Free took a long-drawn-out sniff and caught hints of a meaty tang—chicken fat or meat juices maybe—a sharp bitter smell similar to something people drank, and something stinky with subtle hints of milk and corn. He walked in the direction of the odors, which drifted from a house in the neighborhood.

Padding across a lawn, rich green despite the

cold weather, he moved toward a darker section of ground. He ignored the plants he walked through, lowered his muzzle, and inhaled deeply. *Yes!* This was the spot! He nosed a damp depression and took an experimental lick. Yum—steak juice. In another aromatic spot, he nibbled small round pieces of something unknown. Packed with many favors—corn, egg, milk, wheat, and a strong acidic tang similar to animal waste—he'd never eaten it before.

"Get *out* of there!" The high-pitched scream had come from behind him.

The woman swung a piece of wood at him which narrowly whistled by his left ear. Turning tail, he ran into a man, who looped something around his neck and yanked it so tight he had trouble breathing. The man grabbed him and shoved his body into a metal cage.

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Charlene and Bruno ran down the sidewalk after she told him the bad news, but it was too late. Free had already been loaded onto the dog-catcher truck, which headed down the road.

"We have no way of getting him out of the pound," Bruno said, his voice harsh. "I warned him to stay away from her place."

"I'm not sure he understood which house we meant." Charlene paced back and forth, voice quavering. "He was such a sweet boy." Tears rolled from her eyes.

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Jose stepped away from the animal cage he'd sanitized. He'd been asked to ready it for a dog found roaming a residential neighborhood.

Hearing a door open, he looked up to see Craig, an animal catcher, leading a shaggy dog by a leash. Craig yanked it hard, jerking the animal off its feet. Then he kicked the dog, and it cringed to the ground.

"No need for that," Jose said flatly. "The fellow's not resisting." Not lambasting the man for his unnecessary cruelty was hard. Swiftly unfastening the leash, he ushered the unresisting animal into the readied cage.

"It's just another stupid, mangy dog," Craig snorted. Tromping off, he whistled and kicked the front of two cages he passed. Everyone knew he worked only because his parents had threatened to kick his "lazy ass" out of their home if he didn't get a job, and his attitude

toward dogs had always been abundantly clear.

Scowling after the worthless sucker, Jose knelt to talk to the new animal. "He's a jerk, but I don't do the hiring." He saw the dog raise its head to look at him, and clicked his tongue. "Come here, fella. I'm sorry he kicked you. Let me check your side, okay? I won't hurt you. I like dogs."

The animal hesitated, then responded the man's friendly tone and kind eyes. Creeping toward the cage door, he sniffed the fingers wagging at him through the links, moved closer, and let the man touch him.

"You're a sweet one, aren't you?" Jose crooned. He stroked the nose and smoothed back the haphazard, light-colored fur, ignoring the grime getting on his fingers. "We're going to be friends. I can tell."



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Three days later, Manuel Medina maneuvered his mop around animal cages and walkways. As the Animal Shelter's custodian, he regularly cleaned up, along with his other duties. His son, Jose, had a direct-care position, working with the animals.

Manuel flexed his left arm and grimaced. It ached. His fingertips had been getting numb, too. Massaging his left arm with his right hand, he was glad he was almost done for the night. He'd be happy to relax at home, eat, put his feet up and watch a show. He didn't have to cook since moving in with his son's family, and looked forward to tonight's meal. Carmelita, Jose's wife, was fixing enchiladas. Flavorful, packed full of everything good, and loaded with cheese—his mouth watered as he imagined piling several on a plate.

He moaned when the pain in his arm traveled to his shoulder. Jose and Carmelita had

been nagging him to go to a doctor but he'd put it off, wanting to save money. Maybe he *should* go, if only to get his family off his back. He'd had a stroke three years before but had been trying to take care of himself since then, exercising and avoiding alcohol. He had a weakness for fine food, though, and overindulged, so he was sure his current pain was nothing but indigestion.

But Manuel felt a sharp, stabbing in his chest and groaned. He grabbed the edge of a cage for support, forcing himself to head toward the door leading up front. Jose was there. He'd finish his father's assigned tasks, so Manuel's pay wouldn't be docked. Money was tight and every dollar helped.

Unable to bear the increasing pain and getting dizzy, Manuel found he couldn't stay on his feet and slumped to the floor between cages. He would've called out for Jose, but couldn't do more than whisper the name.





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Free rushed to the side of his cage, worried about the man who'd fallen. He was kind, always patting Free's head and slipping him munchies. Now the dog pushed his nose through a metal link, nudged the man's face and woofed softly. The man made a sound like he was in pain, and his head sagged lower to the ground. Free licked the man's cheek, woofed again, but got no response at all.

Recognizing something was very wrong, Free raised his head, howling as loud as he could. "Call for help!" he urged the other caged dogs. "Be as loud as you can!" Soon, the animal shelter rang with sound—short yaps, deep booming bellows, high-pitched squeals, and staccato yips.

Hearing the cacophony, Jose wrenched the door open, intending to see if a cat had wandered into the dog area again. However, he saw shoes sticking out from between cages. Racing over, Jose skidded to a stop, his breath catching in his throat when he saw his father on the ground. The sweet, shaggy dog nuzzled Manuel's face in between howls.

"Papa!" Jose yelled. He shook Manuel and searched his father's pockets with frantic hands. Finding the bottle he sought, he wrenched the top off, spilling blue pills in the process, and put one under his father's tongue. He counted the remaining pills and cursed his father's stubbornness. From what Jose saw, Manuel hadn't used any since filling the prescription.

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Jose moved extra slowly as he rose from the Shelter's front desk. He was both exhausted and elated. Eleven days had passed since his father's collapse, and Jose was tired from the long hours spent at the hospital. Still, he felt joy and gratitude that his father was doing well after a heart valve replacement. His negative reaction to a medicine had delayed his release, but the staff had substituted a new medication which worked well, and Manuel had been released to come home yesterday. Carmelita had picked him up, since Jose hadn't been allowed to miss more work. Thank the Blessed Virgin Mary his father had survived. Losing his mother six years ago was bad enough; he didn't want his father to leave him, too.

Entering the dog area, Jose made his way to the shaggy dog's cage. He bent, stroked the dog's head, and scratched behind his ears. "Good boy. Very good boy," he murmured, knowing he owed gratitude to this stray, who'd known something was wrong, and alerted Jose.

A faithful Catholic, Jose believed in divine intervention. Maybe Pater Noster and the Blessed Virgin Mary had worked through this dog. Whatever the case, today was Christmas Eve—a special day, doubly blessed because Jose's father had come home and was recovering.

Because of the holidays, the shelter had

closed early and all the staff had left except Jose. He and Susan had been the only two scheduled, but he'd volunteered to cover her tasks and she'd accepted, figuring he did it to be nice. He'd had a different reason. Tomorrow, on Christmas, the shelter would be closed the whole day, but he'd go in briefly to feed the animals and check ailing ones.

Jose unlocked the shaggy dog's cage and opened the door, stooping to attach a leash to the collar around the animal's neck. The dog looked up, his eyes seeming to ask a question, so Jose explained, "I'm taking you home with me, boy, for a short visit. I wish I could keep you and give you a permanent home, but I can't. My family has trouble keeping food on the table and my car keeps acting up. We have even less money now, since Papa hasn't been working. I owe you, though. You deserve the best of everything, and the least I can do is give you a nice Christmas Eve supper and Christmas day away from here. I'll have to bring you back tomorrow night, but you're worth the risk."

The dog pushed his nose against Jose's leg, and the man bent to pet him. "I hope I don't get your hopes up, and I wish you could understand. You're a great dog and deserve a break from this prison." He hugged the dog. "If Papa hadn't gotten to the hospital when he did, he could've died. You helped save him and it's only right I thank you."





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Later that evening, Free relaxed in front of the fireplace and wished he could remain in the home forever. He'd understood Jose's words and was grateful for the thoughtfulness he was being shown, however short-lived.

Jose sat cross-legged beside him, petting his fur. It was the cleanest it had ever been, because Jose and his three children had bathed and groomed him thoroughly. The man laughed when his kids jumped on him, sending them all tumbling backwards. They caressed the dog now and then, accepting his licks on their faces, necks and hands. "I wish I could keep you with us," Jose stated yet again, "but I can't." His kids had asked for just that several times.

"It's the thought that counts," Free woofed. His eyes strayed from the cozy fire to the loud, happy family now opening presents, and he felt the peaceful joy of his surroundings like the warmth of the sun soaking into his body. He wondered if The Great Dog with Endless Bones in the Sky was blessing him, and thought of Helen Keller's words: *'The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched – they must be felt with the heart.'*

At that moment, he understood for the first

time what it felt like to be in a happy place with kind, caring people, and wished he could stay just this once. His mother's words came rushing into his mind, along with his old dreams of love and a true home.

Studying everything around him, he tried to imprint it all on his mind, so he'd have the memories with him forever. Looking up, he whispered to The Great Dog in the Sky, *"I've been told you're all-powerful, so if you could find me a home of my own, I'd be grateful. For now, being with these people is wonderful, even though it won't last. I'm warm and welcome here. Thank you."*

A phone rang in the distance, and Jose answered it. "Really?" A huge grin spread across his face. "That much? Thank you so much." After he ended the call, he told his family, "I'm getting a bonus." He twirled his children around, laughing with them, after which he kissed Carmelia. His eyes strayed to the dog, who wagged his tail and woofed, then back to his wife, who nodded.

Walking toward Free, Jose knelt to pet him, and whispered, "Guess what?"

THE END

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

# GABRIELLA BALCOM

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CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

SHARON FRAME GAY

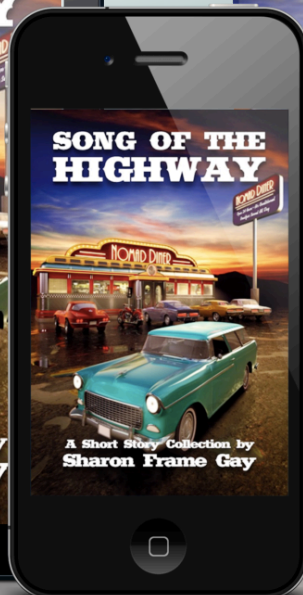


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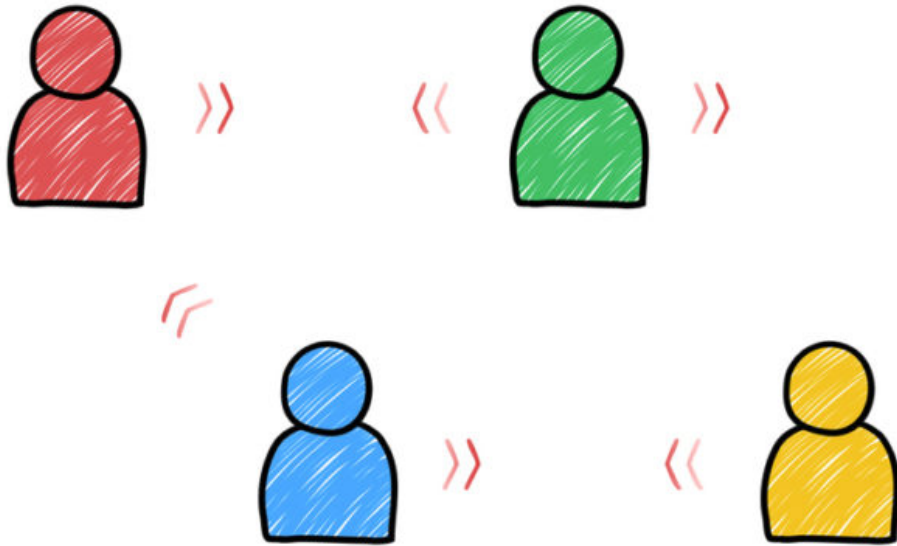
## A Short Story Collection



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# SOCIAL DISTANCING



by Jim Bates

Social distancing brought us together. It was the seventh week of lockdown and the governor had eased back on state-imposed restrictions about being in public places so I took him up on it. My favorite coffee shop was open for walk-in traffic and take out and I decided to treat myself to a steaming latte.

It felt good to stroll the three blocks from my apartment and even better to open the door of Carl's Coffee and get smacked in the face with that roasted coffee bean aroma. Ah, it had been too long. Almost swooning, I moved into line.

"Hey, buddy!" A zealous manager suddenly appeared. "Six feet, remember?" He pointed to signs on the walls explaining the rule about not getting too close to anyone. In my excitement for being out in the world I'd forgotten and chastised myself for not remembering the drill. Should I

make a joke and play my septuagenarian age card with him? No, better not. Why push it?

He pointed to brightly colored orange circles on the floor with Six Feet written on them just to make his point, a picture being worth a thousand words, as they said. Point made. I got it.

"Sorry," I said, turning a little red. People were starting to stare. I stepped back quickly and bumped into a tiny woman who squeaked out an "Ouch" when I stepped on her foot. This was getting ridiculous. You'd think after being stuck inside for only seven weeks I'd at least remember how to act in public. But this was pandemic time and things were changing. Still...

I turned to her as I moved back to the required distance, "I'm so sorry. I don't know what's come over me."

Gray hair fluffed out over the collar of a jean jacket put her in the vicinity of my age. I could tell she was smiling because her eyes were twinkling behind her floral mask. "That's okay," she said, then quickly, and, as far as I was concerned, thankfully, changed the subject. "Do you live around here?" she asked. I was immediately impressed that she didn't get on my case for not wearing a face covering, or berate me for clumsily invading her space, not to mention potentially injuring her foot.

"I do. I live just a few blocks over," I said, pointing arbitrarily behind me.

"That's nice," she said. "I'm in town staying with my daughter."

We chatted as the line moved forward, keeping our distance, of course. She told me she was from New York City.

"Oh, my goodness, did you fly?" I was shocked. Getting on a plane at a time like this with Covid-19 running rampant seemed like an insane thing to do.

She smiled. "No. Well, yes," she laughed, understanding where I was coming from. "I flew

in a few months ago, before the troubles" (as she put it) "began."

When we got to the counter I turned to her, "What are you having?" After a brief back-and-forth semi argument, she said, "Well, thank you. I'll have a latte."

Hmm. Same as me. "Two lattes, please." While the coffees were being made, I had an idea. "Say, would you like to join me?" I pointed outside. "It's a nice day. For Minnesota in the springtime, anyway. They've got their tables set up."

"Sure," she said, "that would be lovely."

I paid for our lattes and we took them outdoors. The morning sun was shining brightly warming the day and it felt good to be in the fresh air. We found two tables so we could sit six feet apart and continued chatting away and getting to get to know one another. It turned out we had a lot in common: we both liked to read, go for walks, cook and spend time with our grandchildren.





During a lull in our conversation, I said, "I don't mean to be too forward, but I'm having a wonderful time." She looked at me, raised her mask and took a sip of her latte, then replaced it. She seemed to be waiting for me to continue, so I did. "I was wondering if you'd like to meet again tomorrow." Her non-committal look worried me. I was enjoying being with her and hoped she felt the same way. "Right here. For coffee," I added, just to be clear. Was she interested? She was witty and charming and it had been years since I'll felt so comfortable with a woman. "I'll even pop for a scone."

She eyes crinkled as she laughed. "Well, if that's the case, how could I refuse?"

Whew! Relief flooded over me. "That's great," I grinned. Suddenly, the pandemic was starting to feel not quite so brutal.

"There's only one thing, though," she said, as her daughter pulled up to the curb and beeped her horn.

"What's that?" I asked, standing along with her, wondering if I'd missed something and offended her somehow.

"Could you please wear a mask tomorrow when we get together? I'd appreciate it." She pointed. All around everyone was masked up.

"Absolutely," I said, embarrassed. "I should have known better."

"Good," she said. "I'll see you tomorrow then, same time, same place."

She smiled, her lower face still covered. I waved good bye as she drove off with her daughter.

One of these days, hopefully, soon, I'll be able to see that smile of hers. In fact, as I began walking back to my apartment I found myself looking forward more and more to spending time with her. Her name was Sue. Maybe we'll be able to ride out the pandemic together and eventually not have to worry about masks and social distancing. One of these days the restrictions will be lifted and she'll be able to take her mask off. I'd love to be there when she does. I'll bet her smile is beautiful.

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

# JIM BATES



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# Witness Testimony and Other Tales

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# Be Nice

by Gary Bonn

Fumes of diesel thicken the air. Huge dogs tethered in shadows watch and menace. Muddy paths have appeared where grass used to be. Cables criss-cross, half trodden into the dirt.

Why do I notice these things first? Why not the flashing lights, the shrieks of joy, the roar of machinery, the smells of candyfloss and fried onion?

I'm an optimist ... I *think* I am. I'm a good person too and try to be nice to people. But ... I don't have to look too far inside myself to touch the rage. I don't know if everyone has it; it's not the sort of thing one speaks about.

It taints the way I see things. Like I should be looking at the sexy woman serving burgers but instead I concentrate on the two men walking towards her. There's something in their speed and hunched body language. Violence? Evil intention? It's hard to say but it's not pleasant. I really don't know why people have to be nasty to each other. It demeans them and upsets me. It's really

simple; all the prophets, philosophers and profound people were right: just wise up, share, be considerate and the world is a better place.

I'm also a bit of a wimp and inclined to panic, so when I find myself running towards the two men as they punch and kick the woman – I'm truly stunned.

So is the first bloke I connect with as I jump high and ram two feet in his back. Landing, I'm ready to launch myself at the other. He looks at me for a split second and the woman gets one hell of a kick in. That's two big men down.

The first is struggling to rise; there's still fight in him and I'm shocked at my ferocity as I stamp on his jaw. I know where my anger came from: two big blokes against a small woman. That sort of thing just shouldn't happen but even so I think I overdid it with my foot.

The two attackers scabble away. They won't be back in a hurry.

'You all right?' the woman asks me. She's relaxed like this sort of thing happens all the time. Close up, she's even sexier. Tight leather from neck to toe shows every curve even the crests of her pelvis.

'Yeah... yeah. Fine thanks. You OK?' I answer.

She tightens the band holding her ponytail tight. 'Thanks, mister knight in shining armour. That could have been a bad moment for me.' She grins. 'I'm Judy, and you?'

I shrug. 'Jarno.'

'Great name. I think I owe you a burger, Jarno. Onions?'

'Uh ... yeah, thanks. You don't have to.'

'You didn't have to help me...'

'Why did they attack you?'

'Don't know. Salsa, chilli, hot chilli ... or my speciality: demon sauce?'

'I dunno; you choose.'

Her eyes sparkle with laughter; she tosses her hair and does a circular movement of her shoulder. I think she means it to be seductive. It's not but what the hell? It's the fact that she meant it that works for me.

She says, 'Demon sauce it is. Try it. If you don't like it I'll give you another with something milder in.' She assembles the burger in a blur of practised fingers. 'Here.' She wraps it in paper and hands it to me.

I take what I hope looks like a manly bite – the sauce is stunning. 'Actually that's awesome! Really good. You make that yourself?'

'Of course but no one ever said anything so nice about it. Maybe it's an extra good batch.' She holds her hand out. 'Can I take a bite?'

I pass it to her. 'Sure.'

Her eyes close as she samples it and moans with sensual pleasure. 'Wow!' She says and hands it back, her fingers lingering against mine.



This time I take a huge bite – and scream. Fire burns my mouth and throat, even into the salivary glands at the corners of my jaw. She's added something – something infernal from her own mouth.

I'm staggering, lurching, crashing against a caravan. Snarling, a Doberman launches at me only to be stopped by its leash.

People look away, like they're seeing someone blind drunk.

~

God knows where I am or how long I've been stumbling around. I must be on the other side of the fairground. The burning has settled a bit and a bottle of icy water helps. I'm shaking; the cold plastic is nice against my sweating forehead.

What on earth did that woman do? That wasn't chilli, more like acid, but my tongue and mouth don't seem damaged.

The heat hasn't faded so much as passed into my body. It flickers and smoulders; not a bad feeling – just weird. I sit on a grassy bank in the dark. Dew soaks into my jeans. Below me the fairground people pack up for the night. The noise fades, dogs are freed from their tethers and walked, lights go off and quiet settles over the scene.

Time to return to my bedsit and another night of lonely boredom. A shortcut takes me through trees and bushes, along the back of the station and into the waste ground by the industrial estate. I didn't expect people to be up and about – this place is normally deserted at night. Car doors slam and people crash through the undergrowth.





Someone runs towards me, twigs snapping and tearing at clothes. A woman carrying a screaming baby appears in the dim light of the distant motorway lights. She's terrified, panting, sweating, looking all around like someone's after her.

I feel the same surge of anger I felt when the men attacked the woman at the fair. Mothers shouldn't have to run in terror: it's not right.

She stops when she sees me, hunches over, looks to the sides to see if there's another footpath to run down but there are only thorny bushes. I raise a hand and smile. It doesn't calm her. I step aside and motion her past me. She runs, sweat trickling down the jet-black skin of her neck. Her dress whips me as she dashes past.

People in pursuit, men. There's noise everywhere, people shouting and forcing their

way amongst the scrub. Two figures storm up the path towards me.

Now what the hell am I going to do? A lifetime's training in no-hope and failure, of being bullied at school and ignored thereafter has not prepared me for this moment.

But instead of the cold emptying terror that is my usual response to danger, the fury mingles with the heat inside me. I feel strong, calm and dangerous.

The figures slow and glare at me. 'Who are you?' The speaker doesn't wait for an answer but looks back to the other. 'Take him. I'll get the woman.'

I'm not a fighter and don't know what to do. That thing at the fairground was dead lucky. If one of those blokes had hit me I'd still be whimpering and daydreaming about what should have happened instead – anything that led to me winning and being heroic.



The first man dashes towards me and I raise a hand to protect myself. Still three metres away he stops, jerks like he's run into a glass door, staggers back and bumps into the bloke behind him. They look around, hunched, confused, trying to work out what just happened. The leader gathers himself up and launches at me again. This time I raise my hand and make a pushing motion. Old leaves and twigs fly up from a shockwave that hits both of them, crashing one against a tree and the other through a bush and into some crumpled corrugated iron.

Both men lie still, leaves and other debris settle as the thundering vibrations of the iron fade.

More shouts. I think the noise attracted people. A tall black bloke pushes branches aside, steps on to the path, sees the two men lying and looks at me. His hand whips under his jacket and pulls out a knife.

I feel no fear just an incredible calm. There's a force inside me. I can shape it, move it.

The black bloke approaches, poised to attack or run, eyes narrowed and flicking glances from side to side.

I stand, weight on one foot, hands in pockets. Not a threatening stance but the man looks fearful. I think my lack of concern worries him.

'Who are you? What are you doing here?' Turning slightly he shouts, 'Boys, over here.'

More movement in the darkness, people swearing and stumbling in the poor light.

Behind the man a woman screams. That's it; I've had enough of people being hurt by others: it's got to stop. I walk forward. The bloke tenses, and when I'm in reach launches his whole body behind the point of the knife. He may as well have tried to stab concrete. The blade snaps against my T-shirt and he bounces off me sideways, tripping and falling in the mud.



I walk towards the screams. Without looking back I feel the man rise and run towards me. A simple thought blasts him up, back and wraps him among branches in one of the taller trees. God knows how he's going to get down; I don't think he has enough working limbs left to do it.

I leave the path and stride onto an apron of concrete. Two men and a woman work at the rear of an articulated lorry. As I approach I can see they're struggling with a boy. Maybe they want to put him in the back.

Feisty little bugger; he's putting up quite a fight and shouting, 'Mum!' A savage punch to the side of his face silences him and he sags, wailing. The woman's arm rises to strike again – and comes off – spinning through the air.

Maybe I was a bit cruel but if that's the sort of thing she uses her arm for then she's better off without it.

It takes her and the two men a moment to work out what happened. They drop the boy and look around, see me approaching. The woman staggers, clutches her useless shoulder. Blood pumps over the concrete.

Raising my hands I gesture as if pulling the container's doors further open. Metal screeches and explodes. Of course they land on the two men – all nice and tidy. Inside the lorry, huddled figures, men women and children, bound and gagged, stare out in horror.

Leaping up, I kneel by the first group and tear at their bonds. Cable ties ... hard and narrow ... gods they must be sore on wrists. How can people treat others like this?

After freeing them all I ease myself through the crowded container. People rub sore limbs, hug children and each other, look at me with thanks and fear in their expressions.



I jump out and head home, only to see another man leap out of a car and run towards me. He's carrying something small. I think it's a pistol or machine pistol. Shit, I've really had enough of this. If I ruled the world things like that wouldn't be made.

He raises it, points it at me and shouts something. I can't even be bothered to listen. The gun drops, his clothes shred and fly in twisting ribbons. Stark naked, he rises, limbs flailing, into the night. I leave him tangled in a group of four power cables between pylons. If he survives he'll have a nice story for the police and rescue services.

A car, hidden in shadow, starts up and accelerates away. Black, with tinted windows I think it contains people who realise they're outclassed and want to escape. It's no big deal for me to bring a wall down and cover them in a thick heap of rubble. At least that probably

didn't kill them. I think restraint is in order when you know you're winning.

No further incidents, well, until I get to the block of bedsits and flats.

Burger girl leans at the entrance. She's smoking a cigar. Street lights glint off the shiny tight leather that suits her so well.

She sees me and throws the cigar down, drops to her knees facing me and says, 'My Lord.'

Well, bugger me. None of this was in my horoscope this morning.

'What?' I ask.

She looks up. 'May I rise, my Lord?'

'Stand up and stop pissing around.'

She rescues her cigar, rises, leans against the door frame again and takes a puff.

I ask, 'What was your name again? Sorry if that seems rude but it's been a weird evening.'



'Call me Judy, my Lord.'

'And I'm Jarno, not your lord. What did you do to that burger?'

'I added a little sauce ... Jarno.'

'Spit?'

'Sort of. Normally it just makes people sick – they tend to return and complain, sometimes violently. But I knew one day it would enter the right man and bring my lord and master back.'

Maybe if she'd given me one piece of information at a time I wouldn't be standing here with my mouth opening and closing.

She pushes herself from the wall and nods to the accommodation block. 'You don't need to go back to that dump. I'll find something better for you.' She reaches out. 'It would be an honour to take your arm and walk with you.'

'Fine.' I run through the inventory of things I'm leaving behind. Clothes, most of them dirty and all of them old, a toothbrush... It's rather pathetic how little I possess. The only thing I'm going to miss is my collection of porn, but, with a sexy woman that calls me 'my Lord' maybe that won't be such an issue.

I'm glad to hear the strident sound of sirens converging on the industrial estate.

Professional, people who will sort out the mess, take over where I left off, put the bad people in prison and look after everyone. Maybe that was some human trafficking thing. I'm glad it's all getting sorted.

Judy has an arm around mine. She rests her head on my shoulder as we walk. 'It's so good to have you back, my Lord. I've felt so vulnerable without you and your strength. Did becoming a human give you the insight you wanted – the purpose you were looking for?'

Good question – if I knew what she's on about. I think hard but don't answer. I don't want to give away that I have no idea what's going on. We walk into the centre of town, all bright lights and groups of people sitting round tables on pavements.

I'm so hungry. The very thought of food sends my salivary glands to full throttle. My mouth waters and I taste the fire Judy spat into my burger, but ten times more savage. It doesn't hurt – I think I'm beyond being hurt. The fire spreads through me, lighting me up with energy.



Judy gasps, stops, looks up at me. 'I can feel it ... power. She kneels again and rests her forehead against my knee. 'I am your faithful and devoted servant.' People stare, drink or hold food halfway to their mouths.

'Get up, Judy. Let's get some food.'

Again she looks up at me, wide pupils and eyes. 'I will serve you,' she says and marches into the nearest restaurant. 'Food! Bring it all and we will choose.' Turning, she asks, 'Where would you sit, my Master?' her eyes still wide like I'm the most amazing thing she's ever seen.

'Anywhere. But can you quit the master, lord thing? I'm Jarno, right?'

'As you wish.' She turns back to a waiter. 'I asked for food...'

The sound of her voice, a cross between the hiss of a cobra and growl of a tiger, cuts through the room. Customers look away, look down, grab their coats and start to leave. Judy's voice is the sexiest thing I've ever heard – but these people don't seem to think so.

Any minute she'll grow fangs and suck all the blood from my neck or something. Nothing

this good happens without an ending like that but I could do with the free meal first.

I guide Judy to a table and pull a chair out for her. She looks to me and the chair, like she's amazed I'm doing something for her and not the other way around.

'What's going on, Judy? What's this all about?'

'You are my master, a spirit of great power. I am your servant. You lead; I follow. That is all.' She looks at the nearest waiter and narrows her eyes. He freezes in fear.

'Judy, I don't think you should frighten people.'

She turns back to me. 'Is this a sign? You have a purpose?'

'Yeah, maybe.' I sit too and rest my chin on my hands. 'I think there's too much evil in this world. I'd like to do something about it.'

'Evil?'

'People hurting, frightening, abusing weaker people.' I pause and look at her. 'This power I have, how long will it last?'

'For eternity.'





A pale and hesitant waiter hovers near us. I turn and smile, hoping to put him at ease. It doesn't work. He looks like a rabbit asked to hand an eviction order to a den of foxes.

'Just bring lots of food; something nice,' I say.

Judy's lost in thought until plates are placed in front of us. Oh wow, I could live like this. I think that's real lobster. Don't know for sure – I've never had it.

As I dig in, Judy says, 'That's brilliant, my Lor... Jarno. Too much evil about and you can stop it...' She shakes her head. 'Amazing ... bloody amazing.' Tears swell in the corners of her eyes. 'Absolute genius.'

'Hey, quit all that stuff and pass the ketchup.'

'May I touch you again?'

Hell, here it comes. I'm about to die horribly.

'What?'

'Hold your hand?'

'Go ahead.' I reach across and take hers. She gasps with delight and lays her other on top.

Tearing her eyes from my fingers, she asks, 'What happened? Why all the police cars in the industrial estate? Was that you?'

'Yes, something to do with slaves and stuff I think. Anyway, there were people hurting others and I stopped it.' I look deep into her eyes. 'You helped me do that, Judy.' I squeeze her hand. 'Thank you.'

A little gasp from her and she says, 'My Lord...'

'Jarno ... I give in. Call me what you will but I do like Jarno.'

'Jarno, there are many people in this town who suffer abuse.'

'Well, let's get started after we've finished here.'

She gives me that look again like I'm offering her the world and she can't believe it.

I think the waiters are glad to see us go. I mean really glad, as if they're all going to head for the nearest church and pray thanks to God.

It took me ages to get a bill out of them. Neither Judy or me had enough money so we said we'd pay when we could.

First stop, according to Judy, is a brothel under a posh hotel. I ask her how she knows it's there. She looks away. "I know a lot of things, Jarno. The girls are slaves, some of them bartered and sold from distant countries."

I never thought this sort of thing could happen in the UK. I can feel the fury rising in me. Judy hugs me tighter as we approach the place.

Posh hotel? It's like a palace! The whole façade is floodlit. Great sheets of glass – doors that open automatically for us. We stroll, arm-in-arm on deep carpets.

I put Judy under orders to be kind and friendly and not to scare the crap out of people at every opportunity.

The receptionist we're heading for may not know what's going on in the basements so it's not fair to terrify her until we know she's in on it.

I don't know much about posh hotels but I'm pretty scruffy at the best of times. It's after two a.m. and we have no luggage. Maybe that's why we don't get the huge corporate smile you see in TV ads. I mean, we could pass as rock musicians but we failed to arrive in a Ferrari or whatever they go around in.

The receptionist stands and says, 'May I help you?'

It's difficult to know where to start this conversation. I let a ripple of power flit through my body just to give me confidence that it's still there. Things could go horribly wrong.





'I believe there's a secret brothel of slave girls under this hotel and I'm about to sort that out. Can you show me the way?' Not my best chat up line.

The woman's eyes widen. She reaches for the phone. I don't stop her; it's all part of her job. She only pushes one button and the security guards materialise as if by magic.

'Before you say or do anything,' I announce, 'I'm going to see this through. Call the police, whatever, but don't try and stop me.' I turn to Judy. 'Check the ground floor and any stairs down. If we can't find anything we'll have to take up the floors. In fact it'll save time if we just do that.'

The receptionist, all short skirt and heels, scrambles over the desk. A vase smashes on the floor and spills a load of fancy flowers. The guards help her towards the door. None of them were prepared to see the carpet tearing itself from the floor and boards snapping and bursting up. The whole place fills with dust; a siren goes off and there seem to be more of them making noise outside. Under the floorboards, a layer of concrete erupts and I

wave all the debris across the front entrance. That should stop people entering and getting hurt.

Lights go out. Emergency lights, dim and spooky in all the dust, come on and illuminate a corridor and the corner of a room below. Judy and me climb down. I could probably jump but I really don't know if I'd break something or if I'm indestructible or what.

Judy presses switches; the lights work down here. I have to smash one locked door after another. All we see are stores and rooms full of ventilation equipment and stuff. Time to take up another floor.

I expose what looks like a living room below us. A man, cowering – hands held over his head – stares up, freezes at the sight of Judy and me, staggers back and tumbles over a sofa. He's dressed in a sharp pinstriped suit.

This room is a lot higher, no chance of climbing down. I grab Judy's hand and we jump. Nice landing, no pain. Apart from the streams of dust trickling from the ceiling this all looks quite luxurious.



The man tries to run but struggles against the force of my mind. He can't possibly win such an uneven fight but he struggles anyway – until I stand face to face with him.

'I'm not up for a conversation or lies or any crap,' I announce to the man. 'You will bring everyone in here, everyone in this place or I will kill you. My friend will go with you to make sure you behave.' I gesture to Judy.

The man doesn't move or say anything. He's a blank mask of confusion and terror. 'Do you understand me?' I ask.

He nods, his eyes flicking up to the hole in the ceiling and back to me, as if he's still catching up with reality.

'Do it then.' While they attend to that I decide to go for a little exploration. Doors and corridors everywhere. I find I don't have to smash the locks; they do my bidding. Inside one room a naked girl with alabaster skin and blue but otherwise oriental eyes, lies on the floor, bound and gagged. Red weals and the

bruises of strong fingers mar her skin. The bonds and gag burst apart and I help her up and reach for what I suppose is her dressing gown.

'Who did this to you?' I ask, helping her cover herself.

She answers in a burst of Eastern speech that I can't follow. There's a glass and jug of water on the table beside the bed. I pour some and hand it to her. She takes the glass and gulps the contents, her eyes on me.

'Come on,' I say. 'You're safe now.' Taking her arm, I lead her into the corridor. I'm stopped by the ghastly sight of a man with an obscene mount of flesh being forced out of another door. Struggling to pull his pants on, he looks in terror back into the room. I can only suppose Judy is in there.

I take a pace towards him. 'Who are you?'  
'None of your business.'



'Oh, it really is. What are you doing here?'

'This,' says Judy, leading a girl through the door. A thin teenager with ribs far too defined, like she's anorexic, struggles into her clothes. The girl looks frightened and follows Judy.

'Who the hell do you think you are?' roars fat man at me. 'Get out of here.'

'Nope.'

'You've taken on far more than you can cope with...'

'So have you,' I reply. 'But that's cool because I can help you with it. Does all that flabby gut get in the way when you mess with young women? I hate to think of it spoiling your fun.'

'What...?'

A vertical stroke in the air of my finger and his abdomen opens from top to bottom. The entire contents erupt onto the carpet along with slabs of yellow fat.

Pinstripe man comes through the door, claps his hands over his ears as fat man screams.

Thin girl throws up; Judy supports her as she retches. Oriental girl strides forward, leans over fat

bloke and rakes her nails across his eyes again and again. I don't stop her. I think he probably deserves it.

The commotion brings people tumbling into the corridor from rooms either side. Judy slaps pinstripe man and yells, 'You're supposed to be leading them to the room. Get on with it.'

So, she had to slap him. Interesting: she doesn't have my power.

Good.

I get the feeling two people with my talent could lead to world war final.

Just before we get everyone into the big room, another man bursts from a bedroom and races for a wall. I suppose there's some sort of secret door there. He glances back at me and presses the wall. As it opens, I dislocate his femurs and break his wrists. I reckon that's all repairable; surgeons are really good these days. He's run enough and people will need to speak to him. Good people that will put him and his kind in prison.



With everyone, apart from those currently unable to move, in the big room I realise it's meant to sit far more. I ask pinstripes why there are so many seats. He says something about more guests being accommodated at times.

There are twelve girls and young women here. Judy's looking after them. She's getting food from a trolley and drinks from a bar. I help carry and serve.

Judy stares at me like I'm the best person on earth and a source of profound wonder to her.

Pinstripes looks pale and scared. The slaves, mouths pulled half open over clenched teeth and nails digging into the upholstery, look at him like the want to tear him apart. Maybe it will ease their pain if I let them.

I offer him a drink and he says, 'I'll see you dead first.'

After his left eyeball explodes, I answer, 'You won't see much at this rate. Are you going to learn that you don't mess with us, or would you like me to work on your internal organs?' He shuts up, apart from screaming a lot.

'I'm sure you have a family and friends. We'll find them. You resist me and they get punished. The police will come soon.' I pass him a bar pad and pen. 'Names and contact details of clients and contacts. Everything. Stop whingeing about your eye. Feel lucky that you still have another – for the moment.'

I have to say, the police, SAS, or whatever are really sneaky. Tossed through the hole I made in the ceiling the gas grenades come as a surprise.

Nice to know we have people like this. I'm going to need them. For the moment I'll just push the gas back up and rip the officers' masks off. 'Keep writing, pinstripe,' I command.



Judy offers me a glass of Champagne, clinks her glass against mine, looks up into my eyes and says, 'Wow!' She turns to the girl slaves and says, 'Our Lord Jarno has freed you. You are all free to go. Some of you may return to your families and countries only to face humiliation and contempt. I, Judy, may be able to help. I am Jarno's servant and follower. He has chosen to make war on those that cause suffering and abuse other people. The poor and the weak can turn to him for support; the powerful and the cruel must cower. We need people in all countries; people who can help this cause – the final battle against evil. I can make you strong like me. Knives, bullets and bombs will never harm you; no one can resist you once I've made you one of us. I can do this but Lord Jarno can undo it and inflict pain and death if you stray from the cause. This is my promise. I will make you the new angels of good.'

She smiles. 'Sorry, long and scary speech. Anyone for another drink?'

Pinstripes is writing and whimpering still. I say to Judy, 'I'll take another glass.'

She grimaces and waves an empty bottle. 'There's more but it's not chilled. Shall we go upstairs?'

'Yeah, come on. It's a bit gloomy in here.'

One of the girls talks and gesticulates to oriental girl who looks from her to me to Judy in lightning fast glances. I assume there's some sort of translation going on.

Judy asks, 'Lord Jarno, could you lead the way up? There may be some resistance and these women are merely mortal. After all they've been through it would be hard to see them suffer so soon after you rescued them.'

Interesting. I don't trust her. This could be treachery but she seems so sincere.

She must have seen my hesitation. She adds, 'I could lead them up from that secret door. Could you go through the hole in the ceiling and make sure we'll not be attacked?'



Actually, that sounds even more like potential treachery. 'No,' I say. 'It's best if you convert as many as possible now. I'll go up and have a look.'

'Conversion takes time as you know but your wisdom is great. Thy will be done.'

That sounds freaky, unsettling. I'm a bit embarrassed to admit that I don't really know what "Thy will be done" means. I walk under the hole in the ceiling and leap up.

Crashing through a whole mass of cameras and microphones I didn't expect, bullets spatter off my skin and clothes. I don't fight back. These people will be on my side soon and the world will benefit from their expertise. I'll just wait until the ammunition runs out or the people get bored of wasting it.

When silence falls, I say, 'Gentlemen ... and Ladies? it's difficult to identify you under all that armour. I'm here in peace. I'm here to see that good is restored to the world.'

I may as well be talking to bags of peanuts. The armoured figures pull back; others come forwards. What I think may be rocket launchers point at me.

'Stop this nonsense. You cannot kill me but you can hurt or kill innocent people in the room below. So...'

I don't believe it; they're not listening, fingers tighten on triggers. I flatten and bend the ends of the launchers. 'I said stop.' Just to add emphasis, I crumple every gun barrel in the place.

'You are about to leave. I, Jarno, am here. Take this message with you. Within one month from this very moment, all guns, tanks, missiles and other weapons of war and anything to do with torture is banned throughout the world. The leader of any country in which these things remain will suffer. That will leave a lot of countries without

leaders. No problem – we'll supply replacements. Go now in peace, love and kindness. The era of evil is over.'

Well, that impressed no one. I suppose it's hard to listen to a prophet... Hang on; did I just think I'm a prophet? I'll put that to the back of my mind and return to it later. I may be out of my depth here but who is even trained for *normal* life, let alone this weirdness happening to me?

The police or soldiers back away. This won't stop here. It'll be tanks or bombs next, maybe nuclear crap. Can I handle that? Yeah ... I think so. Extending my senses, I can feel satellites in orbit, planes flying ... nuclear subs deep underwater. I wonder if there are any limits to my power? That's scary. I only want to be an ordinary person who's nice to others. But there's that niggle; I'd like to be someone who convinces everyone that being kind is more important than anything else. When you think you can actually do that how can you not act? If you see a child fall in the deep end of pool and you're the only person who can swim – do you turn away and say that it's someone else's responsibility?' I'm not that heartless.

Anyway, I told these people it's time they left. It's just a matter of putting some force down the corridors and pushing everybody out of whatever door, hole or corridor they came in by.

But that puts them out and leaves us in. I'll bet they don't give a shit about the slaves. It'll be bombs next. It's me they want.

I drop down into the big room again. Judy stands among twelve women staggering, clutching their throats and crashing into wall and furniture – the dance of the demon sauce. Pinstripe bloke looks very dead. My eyebrows rise.



Judy shrugs, 'He said he'd finished writing...'  
I look at the corpse. Superficial injuries and massive blood loss – the slaves got to him. Whatever...

As I glance over the lurching and whimpering women, Judy says, 'They're all up for it; all your disciples. They've taken my saliva.' A grin from her. 'Not burgers; I only had the plastic-wrapped sandwiches.' She looks down, hugs herself and twists into a sculpture of tension, walks over to me and curls at my feet. 'Master, I couldn't make them less powerful than me. Please may I be your head servant? I've waited so long, my Lord, my Lord.' She clutches at my ankles and kisses the hem of my jeans.

No way, this is too much. I reckon this woman is more intelligent, cunning and downright evil than I could ever be. I'm being set up for the biggest fall in history but I can't help being pulled in. It's all so fascinating and heady. I don't even begin to hope that somehow I'll outsmart her in

the end. It's going to be painful, humiliating and I'll wish I had never met her. I'll torture myself for my own stupidity more than she can ever hurt me ... *but...*

I pull her up. 'Let's get them upstairs and somewhere more comfortable. I could do with another drink of cold bubbly stuff.'

The hotel is completely empty except for us, well, after the last of the armed people scurry away. Judy says the slaves are invulnerable now – despite the agony her saliva still causes them. Will these people really be less powerful than me? I'm not sure: I'm not sure of so much. If I'm some sort of reincarnated lord why don't I remember anything?

I look after the women while Judy finds the kitchens. I stroke foreheads, wipe brows, squeeze hands, murmur words of comfort... The women are recovering.



My senses alert me. Here it comes; I feel two aircraft hurtling into the area. Their engines die as I smash the compressor blades; I'm pretty sure the pilots will eject and survive. It'll be missiles next, possibly within minutes. I suppose it depends on how many people have been evacuated or how many the authorities are prepared to kill. I'll stop the first missiles and any that follow but I wonder what conversations are happening between the UK and other countries. "Yes, we are about to launch strategic missiles but only to destroy a hotel in our own country, so don't worry. Have a nice day."

A clever thought. I may not be the brightest person but I reckon the police will have stuffed

this place full of listening devices. It's time for another announcement.

'Good evening, people. All weapons aimed at this hotel will be redirected to Moscow, Peking and Washington. Thank you. That is all.'

I'm worried about one girl. I reckon she's about seventeen. Olive skin, sharp features, probably European. There's no denying she's incredibly sexy but she's shivering and sweaty. Something's not right. I slide beside her on the sofa of the main lounge and hold her in my arms. Can I heal people? Oh my god! *Can I?*

Apparently not; nothing happens. When Judy returns, pushing an overladen trolley I say, 'Judy, this one's sick, really sick. Can we get a doctor?'





'She's fine,' Judy growls like I'm about to fall in love with the poor girl and reject Judy forever. 'Nothing can hurt her now ... except you.'

I release the girl and jump up. 'Is it me? Am I making her sick?'

Judy softens and laughs. 'My Lord Jarno. No, you are not making her sick. She's working though some serious disease, cancer or something; she'll be fine.'

She lifts food from the trolley, looks back at me, freezes and says, 'What's wrong?'

'Missiles. Some from the Atlantic... Oh hell, some from Europe, sodding *Europe* and from countries all over the world.' It takes a moment for this to sink in. 'People were expecting this, expecting *us*.'

She says, 'There's stuff like that in old scriptures.'

Missiles, crippled in midair, fall to the ground or into the sea – their engines and rockets failing. I crush components; propellant blazes into the skies. I only hope the warheads don't go off. The people who launched them will be safe in

bunkers – it's the innocent that will suffer. The fury boils again.

Judy gasps and sighs. 'The strength pours from you, my master.' She kneels and, holding a glass of Champagne, holds it up to me in both hands. 'Of course they expected us. They always expect something like us. If only they wouldn't. If only they would bloody grow up and not need someone to come and save them.'

So, just when I'm getting my head round all these new developments, Judy goes and scrambles me again. No time to discuss it now. Some of the women are almost recovered. Soon we have to train these disciples and send them around the world.

I think; I talk to Judy; I discuss with the twelve but it's all useless. They only want my decision, my direction.

That's not hard. Bottom line: when the stronger hurt the weaker, the strong must be punished. Natural selection will see to it: evil will no longer promote survival. Evil is doomed.



It's a pretty simple message and, when the twelve are ready to travel, they don't take long to spread it across the world. Some wander; before long some run countries.

It all goes well. Well, some countries and doctrines try to resist but resistant people end up with the dodo and the dinosaurs.

I work out that evil is not just about intention to harm; there's an element of ignoring the suffering of others, the starvation and poverty. Frankly that's just as bad, I think. As a group we do warn people – once – to care for others. After that there's punishment. Hard, I know, bloody hard but I think the world's moving away from greed.

I stay in the hotel; Judy's always flying round the world sorting things out. It's a bit of a lonely life and lovely when she returns like now – all smiles and open arms as she comes through the

rebuilt hotel entrance. I fancy taking her back to that restaurant – and paying the waiters this time.

Skinny girl phones me from Sri Lanka. 'Master, hello.'

'Hello, you. What's new?'

'Today I saw a woman beat her child. She was too violent.'

'And?'

'I killed her. I killed a mother in front of a crowd as an example.'

'Don't feel bad. This is all leading to a new world. Love can be hard, so always keep the future in mind.'

'I don't feel bad. Everyone knows we are doing good. You're saving the world, master: we all follow you.'

'Yes. While I rule, there will be no evil.'

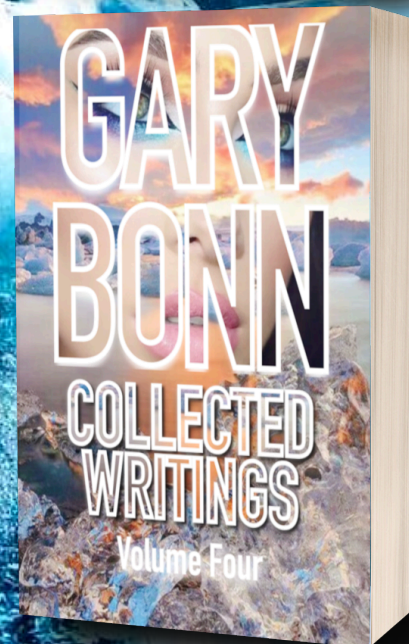
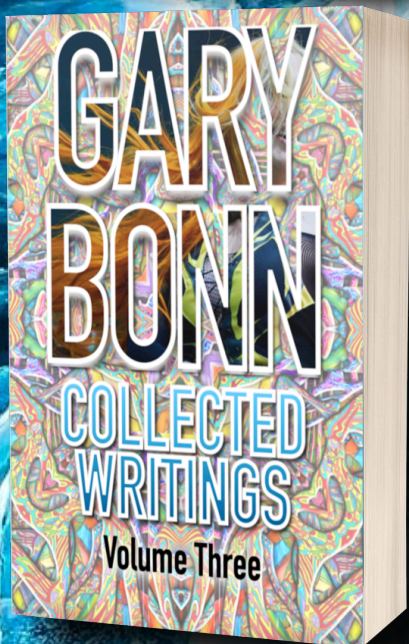
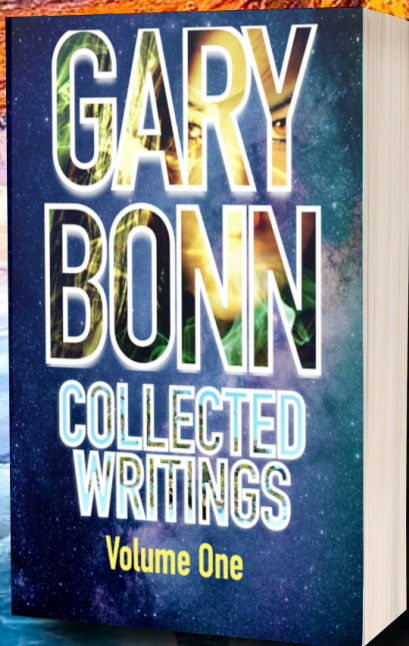


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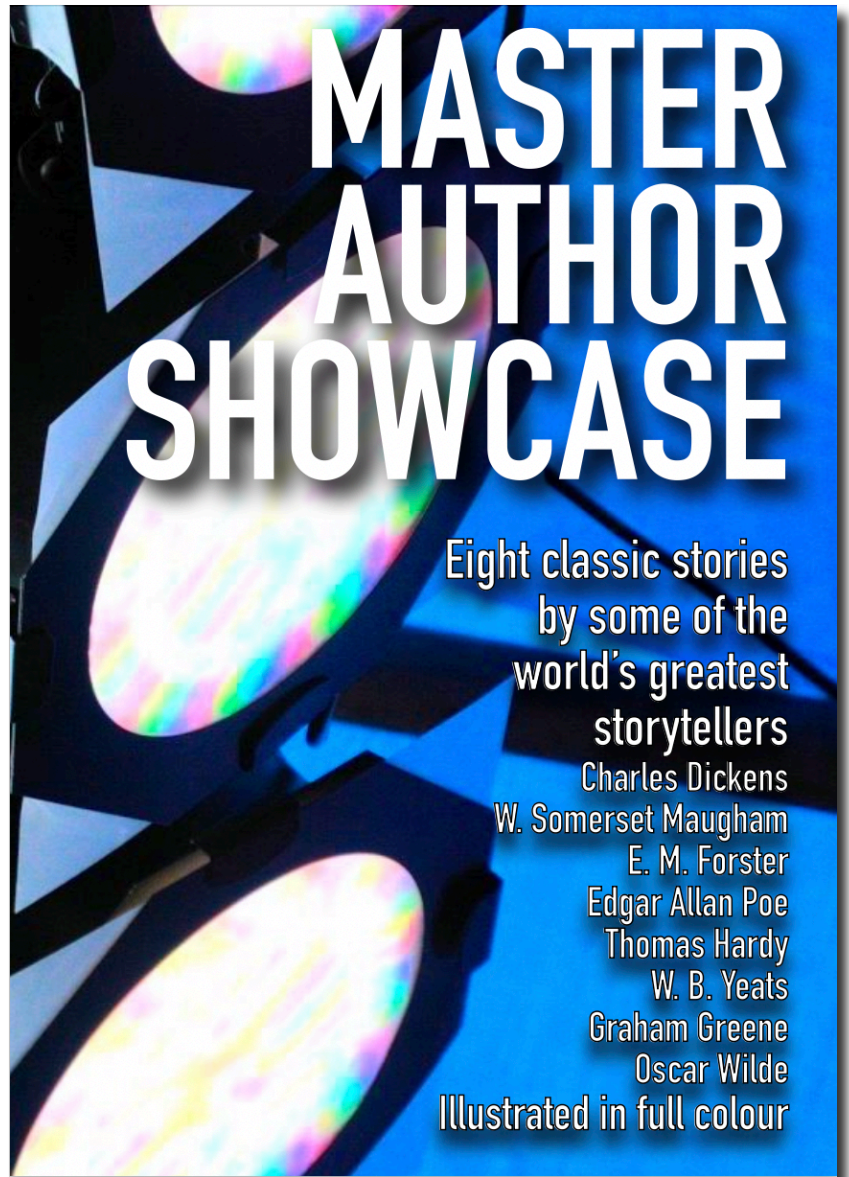
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The signs were all there; sweaty palms, an extra splash of Trumper, anxiety at the prospect of being in her presence, the

loosening of his collar as she approached, forgetfulness once she arrived.

Yes, he definitely loved her. The idea soothed his brow like a cool muslin cloth.

Mustering his reserves, and determined to say something to her today, he entered the eatery for the third day in a row.

Sitting in the same booth he had taken on previous occasions, he watched as she approached, pulling quill and parchment from the frilly white pinafore smeared with grease and grey pencil marks. A strand of loose hair was casually pushed behind her ear.



He was sure she had the brightest teeth behind those red lips. These were things he had never noticed in a waitress before. Waitresses just were. How old was she? Late twenties, perhaps thirty. Well, it wasn't unheard of, was it? An older woman marrying a younger man. Would she even consider marrying him? A twenty-two-year-old Englishman visiting the Americas for the first time.

Marriage, another new idea. Gosh! Two ideas before breakfast. He was on a roll today. Wait till the boys back home heard about this.

'Wha' can I get'chya?' Such a delightful accent. The sort that threatens to take the listener into its confidence before laying them flat with dropped consonants.

'Well, I'm not sure. I was sort of struck dumb by the way you chew the end of your pencil and blow pink bubbles at the same time.' There, he'd said something.

'Are you tryin' to be funny, fella?'

'Oh no, I leave that to the comedians.'

'Are you for real?'

'Yes, I think so. Although if you're after an existential discussion I'm afraid you've asked the wrong chap.'

'Listen, dook. I just wanna know wha'chya wanna eat or drink.'

'Oh, I see. I'm not at all sure at present. May I have a menu?'

The waitress pointed her pencil at a menu board over the serving counter. The bubble she blew popped and drew his attention back to her. Fatty's face reddened from the knees up, and feeling hot—not to mention bothered—he said, 'Actually, miss, I feel like I've just walked the Gobi Desert or some such pill of a place. Would it be possible to order a soda?'

'Sure,' she said, before waddling back to the counter. A minute or so later, she returned with a glass of frothing brown liquid, placing it on the table with enough carelessness for spillage to occur.

The smile she gave him was over before it had begun.

Another idea struck like a minor earth tremor. *What would his wife say?*



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# Buadhach

by Elizabeth Montague

The creature reared up on its long, undulating body. Inky black scales glistening in the light from the bonfires the villagers had lit to lure it to where Aoibhel waited. They had gone through warrior after warrior in the hope of defeating the beast, the bones of those who had been lucky littered the ground at her feet. Others had lingered and died of their wounds in the village, a burial mound raised for the heroes who had given all for the price of the villagers' gold. Aoibhel knew there were bets as to which category she would fall into but she knew it would be neither.

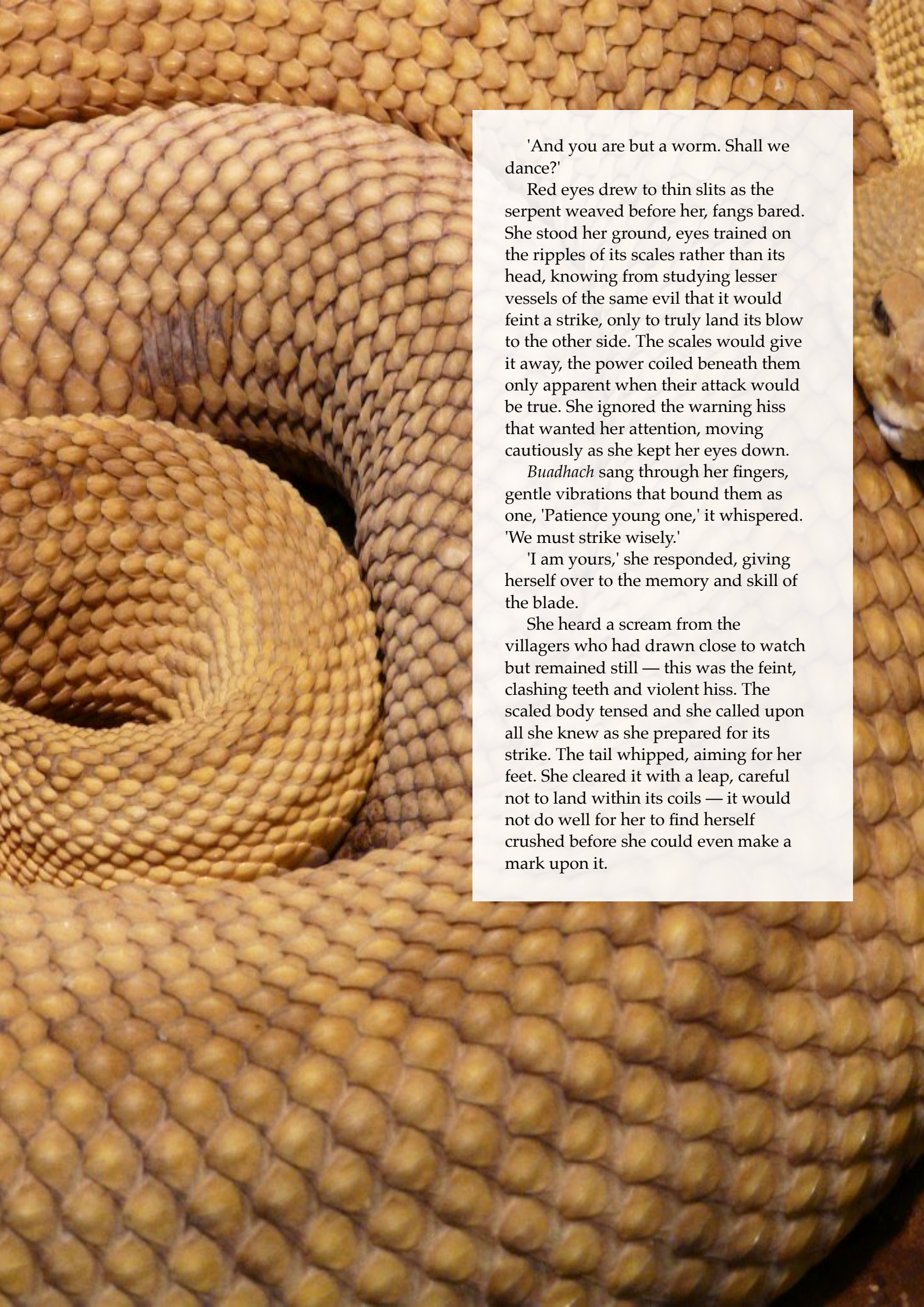
She tightened her grip around the hilt of her sword, the one that had been passed down to her from her father and his father before him. The blade had tasted combat against men and beasts and gods and had always stood victorious. The blade was unbeaten, *Buadhach* the victorious one, and she was chosen as worthy to be its bearer over her brothers. She knew it would not fail her now, nor would she fail it.

'And now they send a woman,' hissed the serpent, 'when their men have already failed.'

'Men fail as their egos do not match their skill, demon,' said Aoibhel. 'I come with no words, no accolades, no claims save for the belief that I shall be the one to rid the world of your evil.'

The sibilant laughter rumbled through the ground and into her boots but she planted her feet against it.

'You are but a child.'



'And you are but a worm. Shall we dance?'

Red eyes drew to thin slits as the serpent weaved before her, fangs bared. She stood her ground, eyes trained on the ripples of its scales rather than its head, knowing from studying lesser vessels of the same evil that it would feint a strike, only to truly land its blow to the other side. The scales would give it away, the power coiled beneath them only apparent when their attack would be true. She ignored the warning hiss that wanted her attention, moving cautiously as she kept her eyes down.

*Buadhach* sang through her fingers, gentle vibrations that bound them as one, 'Patience young one,' it whispered. 'We must strike wisely.'

'I am yours,' she responded, giving herself over to the memory and skill of the blade.

She heard a scream from the villagers who had drawn close to watch but remained still — this was the feint, clashing teeth and violent hiss. The scaled body tensed and she called upon all she knew as she prepared for its strike. The tail whipped, aiming for her feet. She cleared it with a leap, careful not to land within its coils — it would not do well for her to find herself crushed before she could even make a mark upon it.

The heat from the fires and the vicious movement of the serpent soon had the sweat trickling down her back, beneath the layers of armour she had trained in for so long that it felt like a second skin. Feint right, strike left. Feint left, strike right. Watch the scales, don't let it fool you. Whether in her head or *Buadhach's* song, she heeded the words, waiting for the moment when her counter attack would inflict the most damage.

A strike with its fangs gave her the first opening, a cut to the neck that loosened the scales, iridescent black shards falling to the floor and embedding themselves in the muddy ground. She drew the serpent away from them, the tips pointed and wicked, gleaming with the poison that it brewed beneath its skin. Her boots were strong but she would not take the risk, not when victory was so near. The serpent feinted left, then right but she watched the coils, moving only when they tightened for the final strike. She raised *Buadhach*, the blade's song so loud in her head that it drowned out the screams, the roar of the fire, the violent hiss of the serpent. *Buadhach* sang and Aoibhel struck, meeting the mark where the scales had been knocked away. *Buadhach* sank deep, black blood spurting from the wound as the serpent screamed its last and fell dead at Aoibhel's feet.

As the crowd looked on in stunned silence, Aoibhel pulled *Buadhach* from the serpent's neck. It came out clean but, as the tip appeared, her heart sank. The end of the blade had broken away and was left within the gullet of the dead serpent. The blade that had served her family for generations had broken. In saving the village she had lost a part of herself but they did not care, the cheering all about their release even as she felt the prison draw around her.



*Buadhach* was silent, its song forgotten and no longer singing in her veins. She felt small, vulnerable, something in her had broken as well. Her heart stilled in her chest and she wondered if her death would be caused by the blade that had ended so many others. Her lungs rattled on her last breath as the villagers drew forth, using the scythes from their fields to carve up the great beast. She tried to call out but she had no words to stop them as they carried away the part of the neck she had struck, the part the contained the shard of *Buadhach*.

Resolve took hold of her ailing body. A need to find the shard and reunite it with the blade. She felt the power in her then, the swearing of an oath to the gods that had so long watched over her kin.

'I will find you,' she screamed in her mind, 'I will make you whole. I will not rest until you are again at my side.'

Though the villagers did not hear, the gods did and they took her at her word. Her lungs remained empty and her heart remained still but she lived on. She watched months, then years, then centuries pass. Moving through the world almost in shadow, searching for the shard of *Buadhach*, she kept moving, taking no rest, no food, no joy.

Ages of man came and went, their wants and needs changing, societies breaking and rebuilding. Mankind reached its zenith, killed its gods and then, when there was no enemy left to conquer, they turned on each other. The great civilisations polarised and Aoibhel lamented the world she had known but there were places she felt more at peace, places where humans treasured their past. She gravitated towards them, to the galleries, the archives, the museums, where the ancient was venerated and remembered. It passed the time that she was forced to linger, forever searching for *Buadhach*.

The place she found herself in was no different to so many she had seen before, smaller in scale but with the same smell, the same feeling of old and comfort that eased her long-stilled heart. She did not register the song when she walked through the door, music so often played to calm the masses even in places of peace. Places of peace; she almost laughed at the term. Peace was an alien thing in a world whose people were at each other's throats every moment of every day. War was brewing, a great war, one that would determined the future of all humankind. She could have swayed it, could have influenced it for the good but without *Buadhach* she was not whole, not strong enough to turn the tide.

She cursed the music as it grew in volume but the tune took hold of her blood, making it flow through her veins once more and she let it carry her feet. The heart in her chest twisted and then thumped, remembering the rhythm it had once held. Lungs expanded and she tasted the sweetness of air. She saw it then. Behind the glass. A shard of metal among so many others, marked as nothing more than a part of a blade but she knew it well, knew its song. *Buadhach*.

'Hello, my old friend,' she said, touching her fingers to the glass and knowing that she would return that night to set it free. 'We have work to do.'



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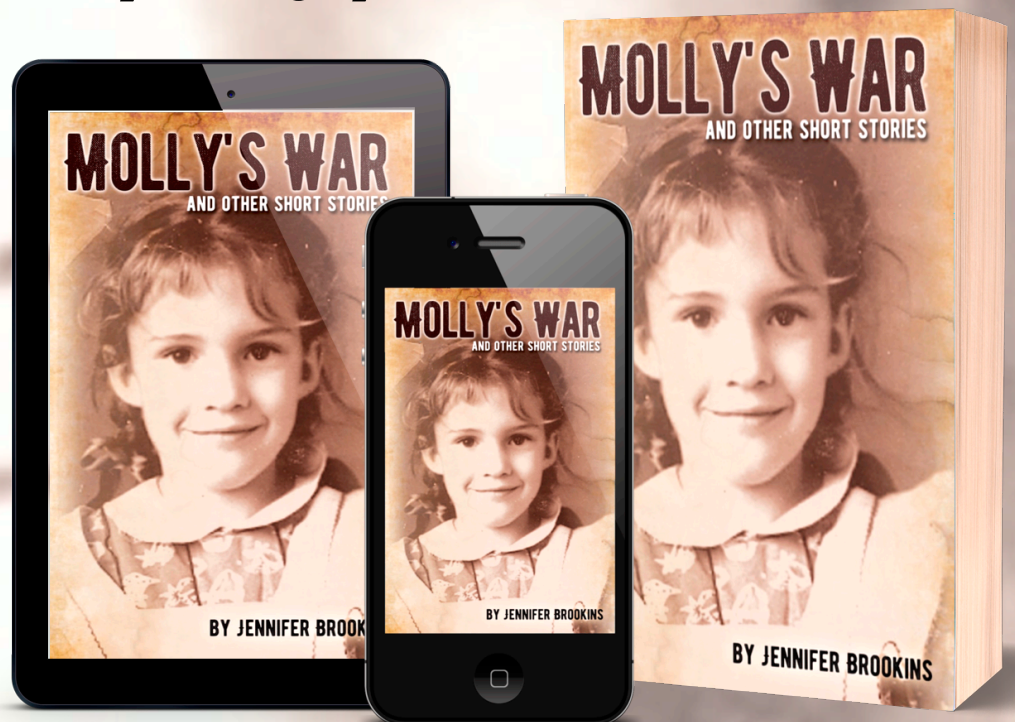
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