

# **The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine**

**Satisfying Fiction from  
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**Issue  
# 8**



**Five gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet**  
**Riham Adly, Gabriella Balcom, Jim Bates, Alexander Marshall and E.J. Nickson**

# The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

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An old man is touched by the spirit of the season, from the author of the collection **Dreamers**.

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## **Where Could She Be?** by Gabriella Balcom

A cat goes missing at Christmas — another sweet tale from the author of the collection **On the Wings of Ideas**.

## **The Dragon In Winter** by Alexander Marshall

Young warrior Kolte risks his life to meet his idol — but the result of that meeting is wildly different for both of them.

## **The Brief Chronicled History of *The Girl* as told by the Realist but yet Optimistic African Fortuneteller** by Riham Adly

Flash fiction expert Riham Adly brings us a hard-hitting tale in 400 words.

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

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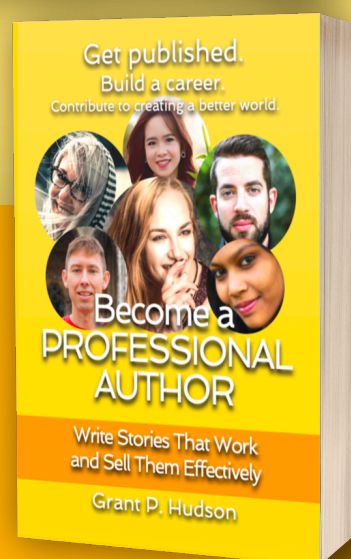
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# CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

## G. MARINO LEYLAND



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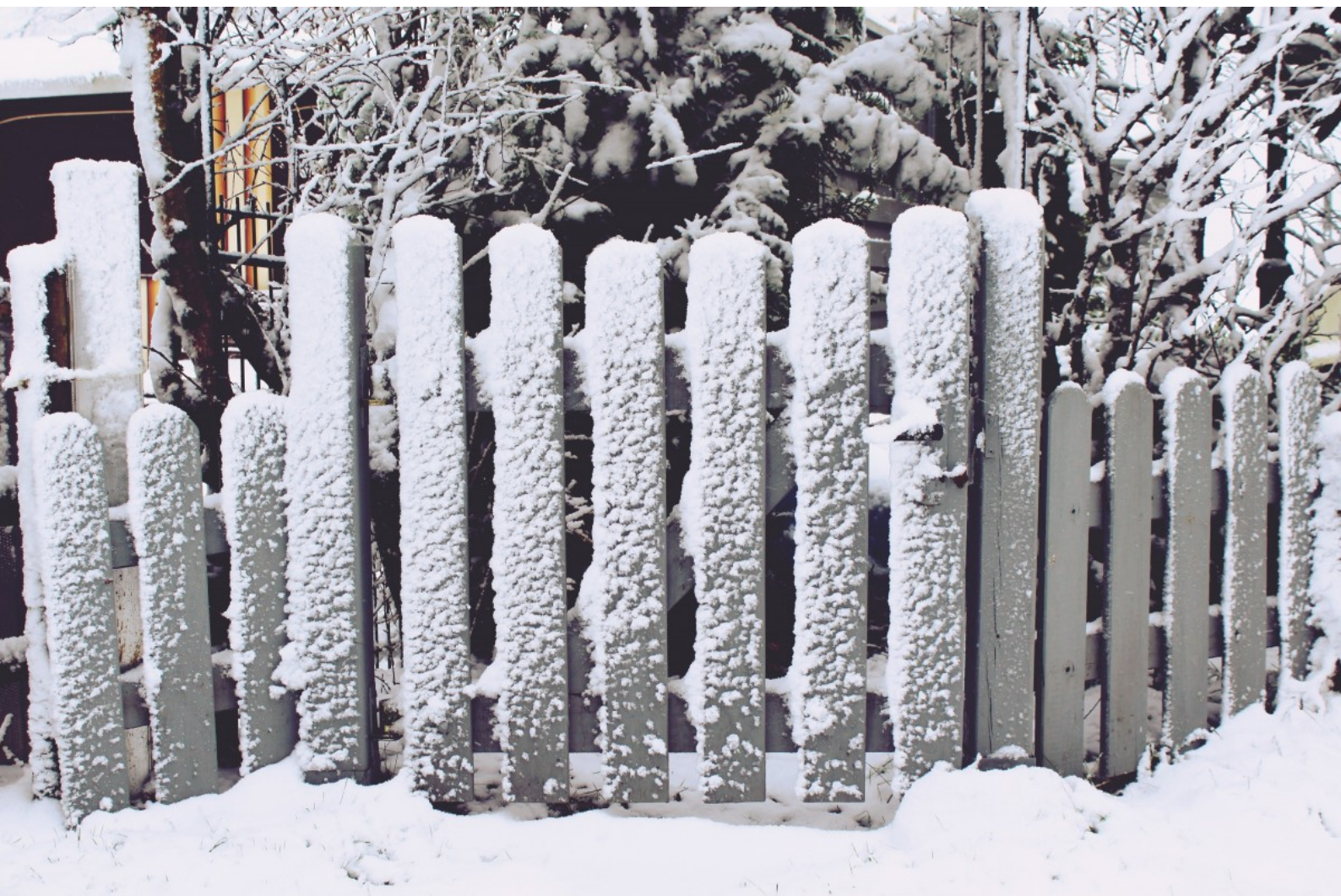


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# THE WREATH BY JIM BATES



The old man pulled back the curtain and peered into his front yard. It was covered with dirty snow, the stalks of forgotten annuals bent and frozen. He frowned. *Should have pulled them last October. Who cared anyway?* He let the curtain fall back and made his way to his worn armchair. He sank wearily into the cushion, grabbed his ever-present glass of whiskey, flipped on the television, and gazed at the flickering image of "Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street." After a while he fell asleep, thankful for the escape. His wife Abby had died that summer, and he lived alone in their home full of memories. All he wanted was to somehow make it through the holidays. Was that asking too much?

Rrrrring! Rrrrring! The doorbell startled him awake. *What the...?* The house was dark

except for the image on the television. He looked toward the front door. Rrrrring! Rrrrring! *Damn.* Outside, he heard singing. "Joy to the world. The Lord is come." *Shit.* That was the last thing he needed. Carolers singing songs of peace and joy.

He stumbled to the door, yanked it open, and yelled, "Get out of here!" He caught only a glimpse of a bundled-up group of neighborhood parents and children before slamming it shut. He leaned against the door, hand on his heart, panting. Then he turned the lights off and went back to his whiskey and television. He raised his glass in a toast to the season. "Here's to nothing." Then he passed out.



When he awoke in the morning, something made him get up from his chair and go to the front window. He pulled back the curtain and gasped. The world outside had been magically transformed by freshly fallen snow. He noticed a red cardinal and its mate flitting in nearby bushes. Out on the street, a man and a woman wearing matching red and green stocking caps were jauntily walking their black and white

terrier. The sun made the snow sparkle like jeweled crystals.

A tear suddenly formed and rolled down his cheek. It was the kind of day Abby would have loved. She would have made a thick beef and barley soup while he was outside shoveling the sidewalk. Then they would have gone for a walk together. Oh, my, how he missed her.







He went to the front door for the newspaper. As he opened it, he noticed a wreath. It was made of balsam fir and had a red bow tied to it. "Merry Christmas," the tag said. There was a set of small footprints in the snow. He didn't have to think, but knew instinctively they were from one of his

neighbor's children. He couldn't help it. He started to cry.

That night, he turned the outdoor light on. When the carolers came to the door, he opened it wide. "Merry Christmas!" he called out and began to sing with them. A little girl stepped forward and took his hand. "Merry Christmas," she said.



CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

JIM BATES



Overlapping memories, overlapping lives, wide open spaces and soft but sometimes heart-breaking reminiscences, with the mighty Mississippi running through it all — let Jim Bates take you on rich, human, intertwining journeys into a landscape of souls where you can glimpse beauty and peace, longing and contentment, the burden of past decisions and their forgiveness, and perhaps find yourself . . .





# CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

## SHARON FRAME GAY



*Sharon Frame Gay has been internationally published in many anthologies and literary magazines, including Chicken Soup For The Soul, Typehouse, Lowestoft Chronicle, Literary Orphans, and others. She has won awards at The Writing District, Wow-Women On Writing, Owl Hollow Press, and Rope and Wire and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. Her first collection of short stories, **Song of the Highway**, was published in 2020 by Clarendon House Publications. Her master storytelling continues in **The Nomad Diner**.*

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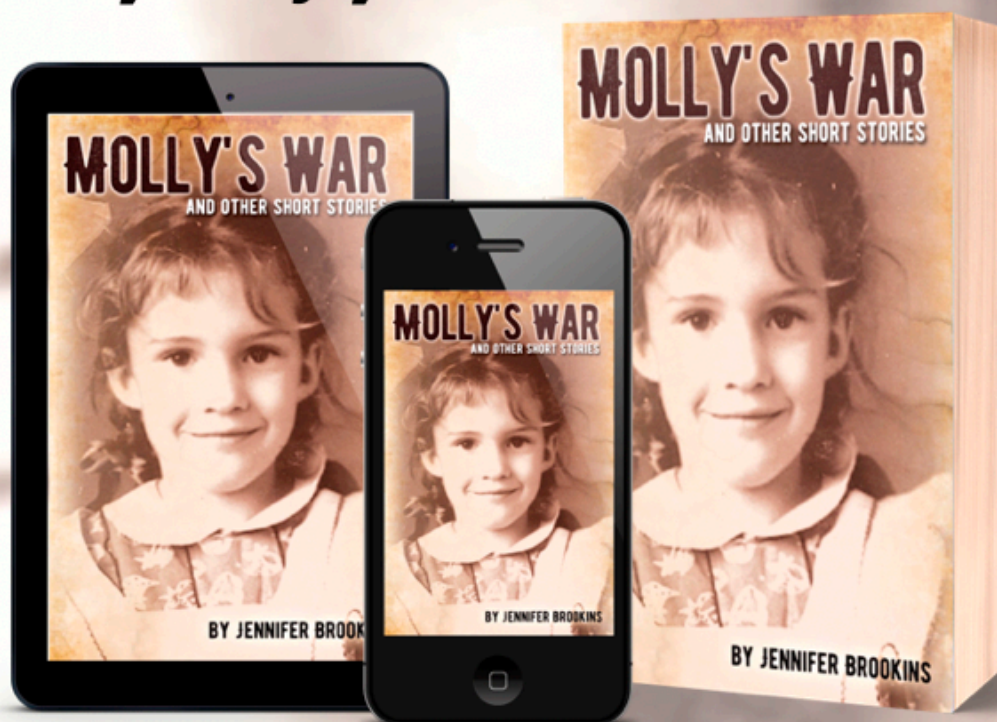
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# Once Offered

## E. J. Nickson

The mini-blinds had several slats bent out of shape, courtesy of a feral kitten Anna brought home weeks before. A sunbeam — smuggled through the damaged aluminum strips — rode dust motes across the room to land on Will's shoulder as he slept. His other arm stretched over his head which lengthened him just enough to make a hint of his ribs appear. Above the twisted sheet at his waist his bare chest was exposed. Here the skin was so impossibly smooth no one would guess a bar of Irish Spring was the only requirement for its upkeep. Anna resisted the urge to reach out and touch him, knowing deep within herself how he would feel under her fingertips. She knew it as well as she knew the feel of her own body.

Will's breathing was deep and steady, more soothing than waves on the ocean. Not like she'd ever seen the ocean, but even in

her imagination it couldn't compare to the peace of being next to this man. Will was here. He was safe. He loved her with the insatiable fervor with which she loved him. There was nothing, real or imagined, that could compete, not even something with the strength of the tide.

Will murmured and shifted slightly. His long dark hair, uncut in the years since his return from Saigon, slid down across his cheek. His face stayed relaxed and calm, with no hint of the tension that came with his nightmares, so she let him sleep. She became aware of a lump from the dilapidated futon mattress that was pressing into her hip and shifted to relieve the pressure, careful to not jostle him. Heat from the Chicago summer would wake him soon enough.







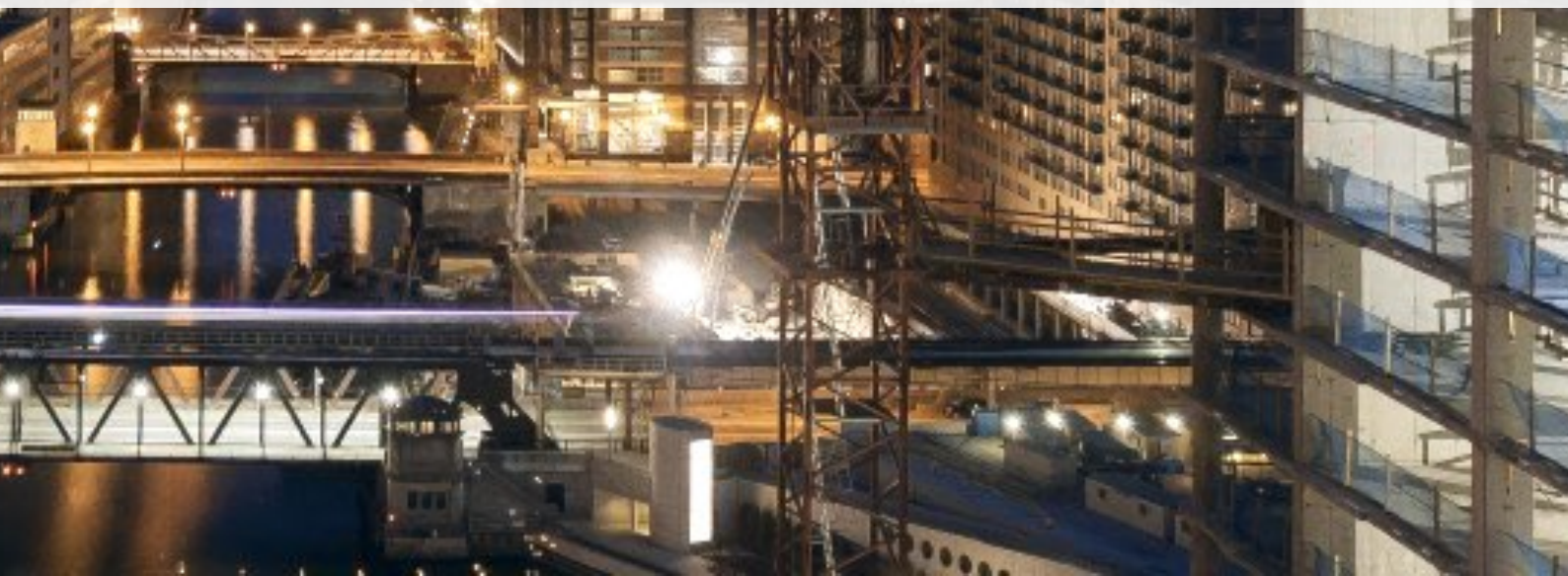
The city outside the window was already coming alive. Their bubble, five hundred and twenty square feet furnished with thrift shop finds and milk crate shelves, was not immune to the bustle of downtown. They wouldn't want it to be. The streets had a heartbeat and they both craved the excitement that came with being in the epicenter of the pulse.

Another mumble from Will, but this time his eyes fluttered open and immediately found hers. His lips pulled into a sinful grin as he wordlessly reached for her, knowing she craved him as he craved her, invariably and overwhelmingly. They made love all morning, playfully, slowly, as if the world would wait for them. And it did, that day.

In the blink of an eye the summer of 1976 would become a distant memory. That flawless snapshot replaced by the responsibilities of

marriage, kids, and a different life, one spectacular and full but perhaps never as perfect as that singular moment had been. In the forty years since, there had been joyous times — their children's first steps, their grandchildren's first steps, holidays, birthdays, vacations. There had been terribly challenging times — angsty teenagers and slamming doors, several years of counting pennies and coming up short, moments where their world felt like it could no longer be held together with love alone.

Life had happened. It hadn't waited for them after all. Their time together had been beautiful and brutal and everything in between. Anna would have relived it with him a thousand times if the universe would allow it, but of course a lifetime was only once offered.







"Ready?" Will's voice pulled Anna's attention to him in the present.

Her eyes searched his face, finding it so familiar but also foreign due to the miniscule changes that happened with every second of aging. Seconds upon seconds that worked together to cancel out who he once was. He was handsome still, to her mind, but no longer the man from that perfectly cramped studio apartment. She too was no longer who she had been. Together they'd become different people but also somehow stayed the same. It was as if there'd been an exchange, perhaps during a moment of inattention, when capable youthfulness had abdicated to impotent

maturity. When had that happened? When had these new people come to be?

Anna looked down to stare at his hand holding hers, resting on the car's center console with their fingers intertwined. Gone was the elasticity of youth, replaced with this cursed fragility. Hands, no longer robust and ready to take on the world, were only here to passively survive their remaining time.

She looked up to him again and forced a tight smile, the reason for their errand kept her from producing a true one. Will's face became somber when he registered the weight of her emotion. His eyes, perpetually kind, became even more gentle.







"Hey." He reached up to cup her jaw and rub a thumb across her cheek. "It's going to be okay. You're going to be okay."

Anna's gaze traveled through the windshield to stare at the industrial columns of the veteran's hospital. In that building a room existed with the sole purpose of pumping chemotherapy into her husband's body. Poisoning him in order to kill the Hodgkin's Lymphoma that a different poison had caused. Doctors had been very frank about the grim diagnosis and the nonexistent chance of beating it. Yet here was Will, consoling her, the one without the disease-riddled body.

Of course he was not as scared as she was. He was brave. He was strong. She was not. How could she be? She'd never lived in a world where

he didn't fill all the space. She existed because life was sustained by his vitality. If that were gone, what would she be? Not whole. Not a person. Not recognizably alive.

"I can't be here without you," she admitted.

"It's not up to us," he said with a soft knowing smile.

She let a protracted moment pass, then sighed. "Well, it's bullshit."

Will turned back to her and burst out laughing. His expression was more lighthearted than she'd seen in months. "It is ... *absolute* bullshit," he echoed, and they laughed together at the absurd unfairness of it all.





CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

PETER TOEG



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GABRIELLA BALCOM

# Where Could She Be?

"I can't find Mittens, and I looked everywhere." Ten-year-old Luci sniffled, her lower lip trembling.

"She probably wandered off," Mama replied. "Cats do that sometimes."

"But I called and called... She *always* comes when I call. Where could she be? What if that mean old tomcat hurt her?" Tears welled up in the girl's eyes, and she began sobbing.

"I'm sure she's fine." Her mother hugged her tightly.

Later that day, Mama asked, "Isn't tomorrow the day your class is exchanging gifts? Have you wrapped the one you're giving?"

Eyes downcast, her daughter shook her head. "No."

"Why don't you do that now? I'll get the Christmas paper."

"I was going to wrap the blanket I crocheted for Mittens, but she's gone. What if she never comes back? What if she's lying somewhere hurt?"

"Oh, Honey..."

*The following evening*

"It's Christmas eve," Mama said. "You can open a gift. One of the small ones."

"I don't wanna." Luci's face crumpled. "Not until Mittens is here."

"I'm sure she won't mind you going ahead."

"But I want her to watch like she always does. And she's supposed to get a gift, too."





### *Christmas day*

"Sweetie, I know you're worried," Mama said. "But this is supposed to be a happy day. A time to think of our blessings. All the good things in our lives."

"I *can't* be happy. Mittens is gone."

Her mother sighed and kissed her cheek. "Help me set the table, okay? The turkey'll be done soon."

Several minutes later, Luci moped in her room, grimacing when she spied the cat bed on the floor nearby. It'd never been used because Mittens always slept curled up beside her. She remembered when the cat was an itty-bitty ball of fur and took a shuddering breath, agony welling up inside. Mittens was her best friend. If anything happened...

A faint thump came from the direction of Luci's closet. Could it be a mouse? A rat? She tiptoed that way and yanked open the door. She didn't hear anything, though. Didn't see anything, either, but the closet light hadn't worked for weeks.

Dashing to the kitchen, she rummaged through drawers, looking for a flashlight. She found one, used it in the closet, but saw nothing. A rustling sound caught her attention and sounded like it was coming from behind storage tubs. Directing the light that way, she gasped.

Mittens lay there on the carpet, several small shapes squirming at her side.

"You had *babies!*" Luci exclaimed. She counted five, one a calico like its mother.

The cat mewed softly and stood. Coming out, she rubbed against the girl's legs.

Luci picked her up and snuggled her close. "I love you," she said. "And I've missed you *so much.*"

After setting Mittens down, she watched the mother lie by the kittens, licking one furry body after another. She smiled to hear contented purring.

"They're *beautiful,*" she murmured.

Moments later, Luci ran toward the kitchen. "Mama," she yelled. "This is the *best* Christmas ever."



CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

# GABRIELLA BALCOM

*'Some authors have a range so wide and a scope so varied that it's difficult to 'pin them down' in a few words. Best-selling author Gabriella Balcom can write science fiction, fantasy, children's literature, literary fiction, poetry, horror, humour, romance and more — and you'll find all of the above in this eclectic collection of tales...'*



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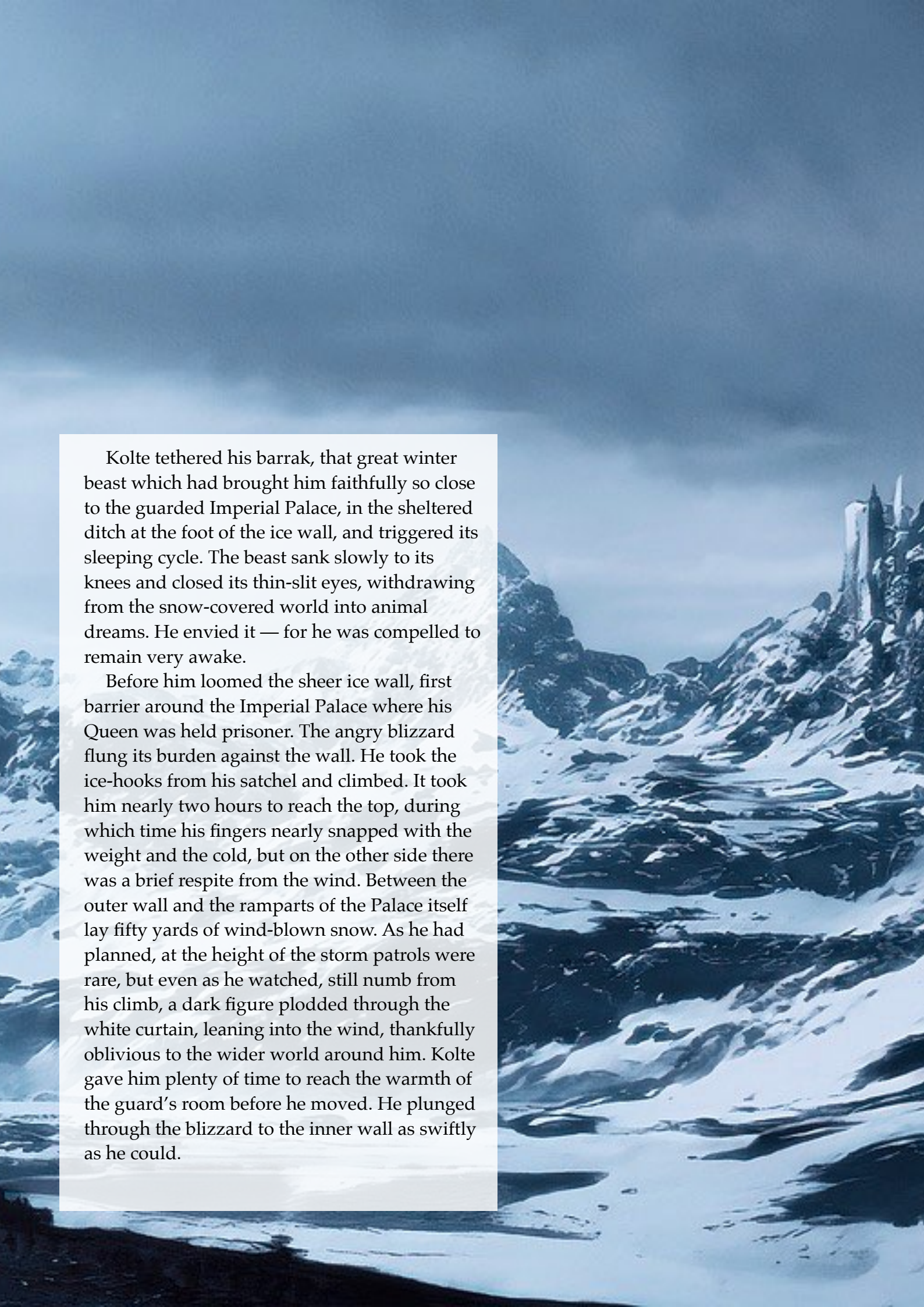


A person with a feathered headdress stands atop a dark, jagged rock formation, holding a flag. They are perched on a dragon, which is mostly obscured by the rock. The background is a vast, snowy landscape with jagged, icy mountains under a dark sky. A large, bright full moon hangs in the sky, and small, glowing blue particles float in the air. The overall mood is mysterious and epic.

# THE DRAGON IN WINTER

ALEXANDER MARSHALL





Kolte tethered his barrak, that great winter beast which had brought him faithfully so close to the guarded Imperial Palace, in the sheltered ditch at the foot of the ice wall, and triggered its sleeping cycle. The beast sank slowly to its knees and closed its thin-slit eyes, withdrawing from the snow-covered world into animal dreams. He envied it — for he was compelled to remain very awake.

Before him loomed the sheer ice wall, first barrier around the Imperial Palace where his Queen was held prisoner. The angry blizzard flung its burden against the wall. He took the ice-hooks from his satchel and climbed. It took him nearly two hours to reach the top, during which time his fingers nearly snapped with the weight and the cold, but on the other side there was a brief respite from the wind. Between the outer wall and the ramparts of the Palace itself lay fifty yards of wind-blown snow. As he had planned, at the height of the storm patrols were rare, but even as he watched, still numb from his climb, a dark figure plodded through the white curtain, leaning into the wind, thankfully oblivious to the wider world around him. Kolte gave him plenty of time to reach the warmth of the guard's room before he moved. He plunged through the blizzard to the inner wall as swiftly as he could.





The snow had mounted high and was packed hard against the stone, and it was a simple matter to scale, but the battlements at the top were filled with it, looser and deeper, and Kolte sank to his shoulders as he tried to get across to the other side. With some difficulty he pushed and swam and crawled along, and, just as a head poked around a stiffly-opened shutter in the nearby tower, he plunged into the empty darkness over the inner wall, landing heavily in a shallow drift in the courtyard. The shutter closed again.

As Kolte lay bruised and buried in the snow, thankful that the cold was numbing most of his pain, a clustered group of guards, shivering, marched by, hastening to shelter. In their wake he gathered himself and dashed across the courtyard.

The stone door to the secret way thankfully opened to his touch and he was suddenly in the strange and windless silence beyond it. The air seemed almost warm. He rested there in the hidden passage for a few moments while the pounding blood of his youth found its way back into his limbs and fingers, carrying with it the sting of cold bruises and the unbearable tingling of reviving flesh. He moved on, slowly and painfully, into darkness, chanting the directions to himself in his mind. Only the Royalists knew of the secret passages in the Palace — he was hoping that they had remained hidden from the agents of the accursed Rebellion, who held his Queen.

Light at last glimmered through a thin slit along the bottom of an inner door, and Kolte drew breath to listen through the thickness of stone.



\*

Somewhere a gong struck midnight.

Tua Vespria, Empress of Teshring,  
Monarch of the Margin, snuffed the candle's  
flame between finger and thumb, and the  
room was dark but for a shadowy, shifting  
paleness from the high window slit, and  
silent but for the distant howling of the storm  
through the stone.

Tua stood in the night for some time —  
she dared not hope again that someone  
would come, but prepared for her nightly  
ritual without emotion. Taking her cane she  
moved to the wall and paused again, head  
bowed as though listening. Suddenly,  
sweeping a tapestry aside, she rapped her  
cane sharply three times against the wall.  
Then she turned to her bed.

It became cold as the wall opened and a  
shape stepped into the room, a young man.  
She drew her cloak around her.

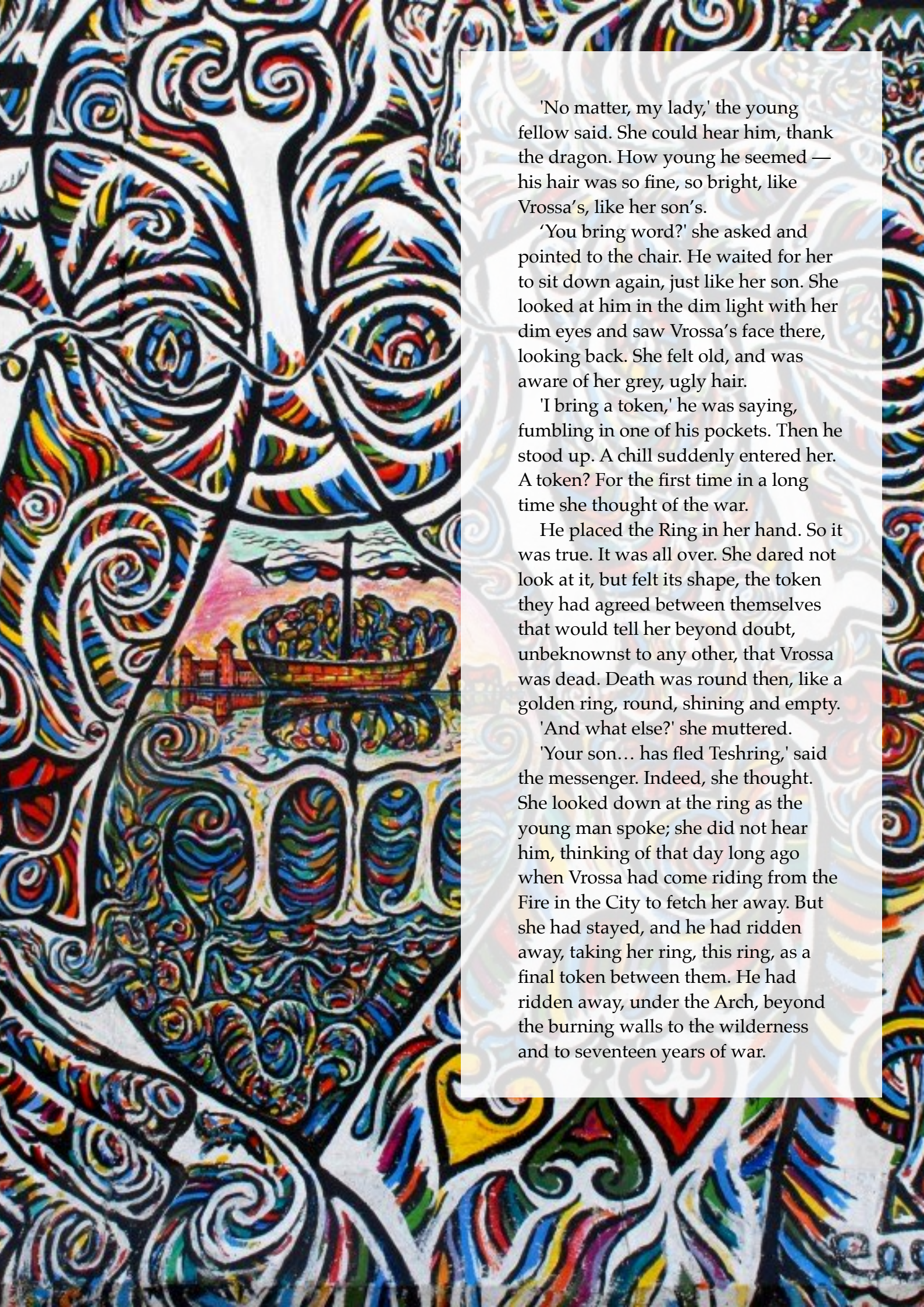
Tua turned up the light from the lamp, but  
no light other than the sun's own could bring  
things clear to her old eyes now. The young  
man was a blur. He knelt down. That meant  
she had to stand up. Her bones were still  
trembling with the shock of his sudden  
appearance; she cursed her age. She stood  
and walked to him as gracefully as she could  
manage; after all, the boy had risked his life  
to get here to see an old woman who was no  
doubt the subject of many rumours and fears  
outside, the great Empress of Teshring,  
whom they were afraid to kill. Ha!

He was young. His hands were cold.

'Rise,' she said, her voice croaking deeply.  
'Speak softly. I am alone, but a guard may  
come to the door. I have no fire — you are  
cold.' She hoped he would not speak too  
softly — she could barely hear anything  
these days.







'No matter, my lady,' the young fellow said. She could hear him, thank the dragon. How young he seemed — his hair was so fine, so bright, like Vrossa's, like her son's.

'You bring word?' she asked and pointed to the chair. He waited for her to sit down again, just like her son. She looked at him in the dim light with her dim eyes and saw Vrossa's face there, looking back. She felt old, and was aware of her grey, ugly hair.

'I bring a token,' he was saying, fumbling in one of his pockets. Then he stood up. A chill suddenly entered her. A token? For the first time in a long time she thought of the war.

He placed the Ring in her hand. So it was true. It was all over. She dared not look at it, but felt its shape, the token they had agreed between themselves that would tell her beyond doubt, unbeknownst to any other, that Vrossa was dead. Death was round then, like a golden ring, round, shining and empty.

'And what else?' she muttered.

'Your son... has fled Teshring,' said the messenger. Indeed, she thought. She looked down at the ring as the young man spoke; she did not hear him, thinking of that day long ago when Vrossa had come riding from the Fire in the City to fetch her away. But she had stayed, and he had ridden away, taking her ring, this ring, as a final token between them. He had ridden away, under the Arch, beyond the burning walls to the wilderness and to seventeen years of war.



The messenger was describing the battle: some detail of interest to the world but nothing to her, not anymore. They had fought their way to a river, he was saying.

'Frozen?' she asked, without listening to him — nor could her eyes see anything now but the darkness, the great swirling snow-filled darkness of time which rushed to meet her. How could she live now? Her throat burned. The young man was asking her something, wanting her to command him.

'What do I know more than the commanders of the army? More than you? I am old — too old for this wind that howls about me. Too old for this snow which falls upon me,' she said abruptly.

She laughed then, a harsh, ringing laugh which sounded fey to her. Life then, indomitable even in her own heart, even in the face of death, put words in her mouth still. Her own blood burned her. How she longed for an end! But, like the ring, there was no end. She crushed it in her hand, turning away from him. It would be better for him not to see her weep, she thought.

'You want guidance from me? Fight on! Tell them to fight on. There is no ending. Fight to the last!' she said. And when she looked again — who could tell how much later? — he was gone, and she was alone in her own darkness.







\*

Somewhere a gong struck midnight.

Tua Vespria, Empress of Teshring, snuffed the candle's flame between finger and thumb, and the room was dark but for a shadowy, shifting paleness from the high window-slit, and silent but for the distant howling of the storm through the stone.

Tua stood in the night for some time. Then, taking her cane, she moved to the wall and paused again, head bowed as though listening. Suddenly, sweeping a tapestry aside, she rapped her cane sharply three times against the wall. Then she turned to her bed.

The wall moved. A faint grating of stone against stone, an almost imperceptible darkening of shadow, a light movement of air. Tua drew her fur cloak around her and at once lit her lamp.

A young man stepped into the light. He peered into the room, and stood there staring at her like a blind man restored to sight.

There, to his eyes, on the edge of the bed, sat the Empress Tua Vespria, Empress of Teshring, Monarch of the Margin, the royal heroine whose undying spirit he worshipped as though she were a goddess, and to whose cause he felt he could give his life. Tall, graceful, an image in the light of the lamp of majesty itself, she waited for him to deliver his message as she waited every night for word from beyond the walls of the Palace where she was held prisoner by the Rebellion's forces. He found he could not speak — darkness had no place here.



'My lady,' he whispered at last, and knelt. She did not move at first, then rose and drifted towards him in her long furs.

'Rise,' she said. Her voice was deeper, older, than he had expected — but the strength was there. He slowly stood.

Her face was in shadow, the lamp behind her. 'Speak softly — I am alone, but a guard may come to the door. I have no fire — you are cold.'

'No matter, my lady,' he said. There was a silence. She waited for him.

'You bring word?' she asked at last, signing for him to move to a chair. He waited for her to sit again on the bed, then sank gratefully into deep cushions.

Her face was lined with wisdom to his eyes, the cares of a kingdom in torment. Her hair was a silvery cascade about her thin shoulders; her eyes saw through him.

'I bring a token,' said Kolte, and brought from its place in his jacket the Ring. He stood and gave it to her — she did not move. She said nothing, looking at him, ignoring it.

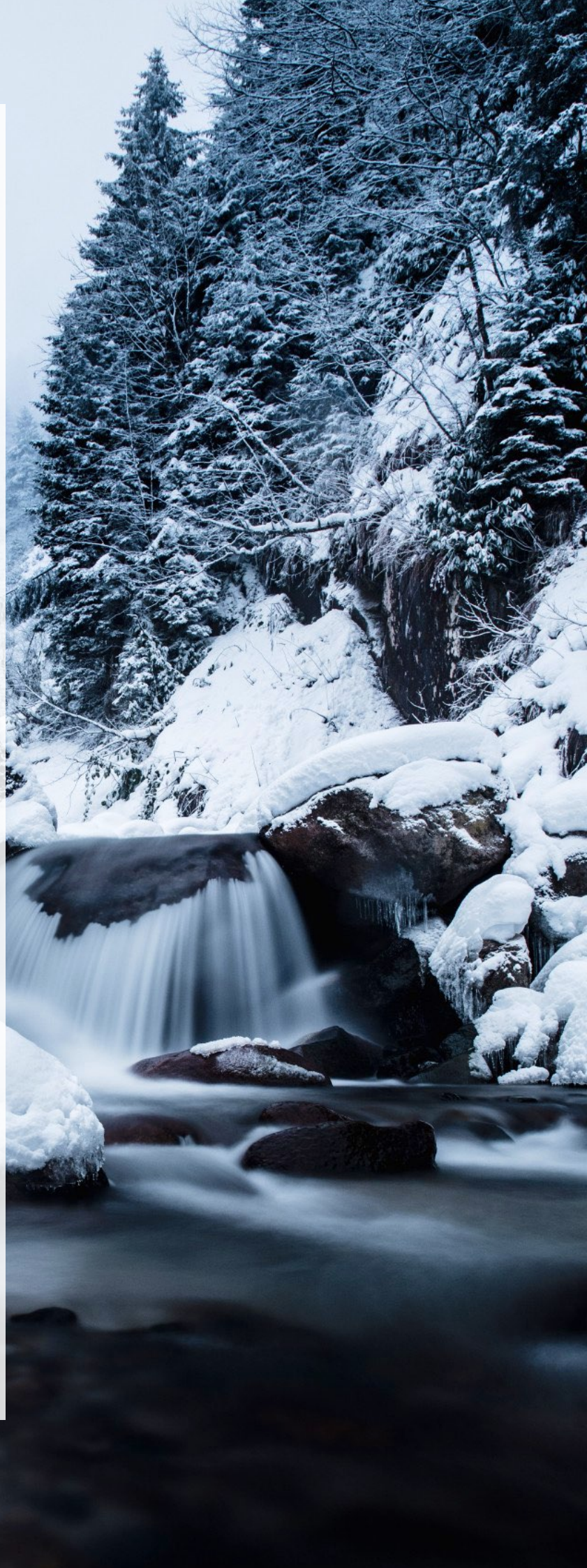
'And what else?' she said at last.

How could he tell her that Vrossa, her son, captain of the Royalists, was dead?

'Your son... has fled Teshring,' he said.

She looked down at the Ring.

'He led a company into the North. They fought long and hard this autumn, but the Rebel Imperium is too strong now in the North. He was driven out — but hope will return with the spring.'







She looked up at him.

He was talking nonsense, he knew — but it was as though he had stepped into the world of stories, speaking as he was to the Empress herself at last. She listened, she believed, she was patient with him; fleetingly he was reminded of his own mother.

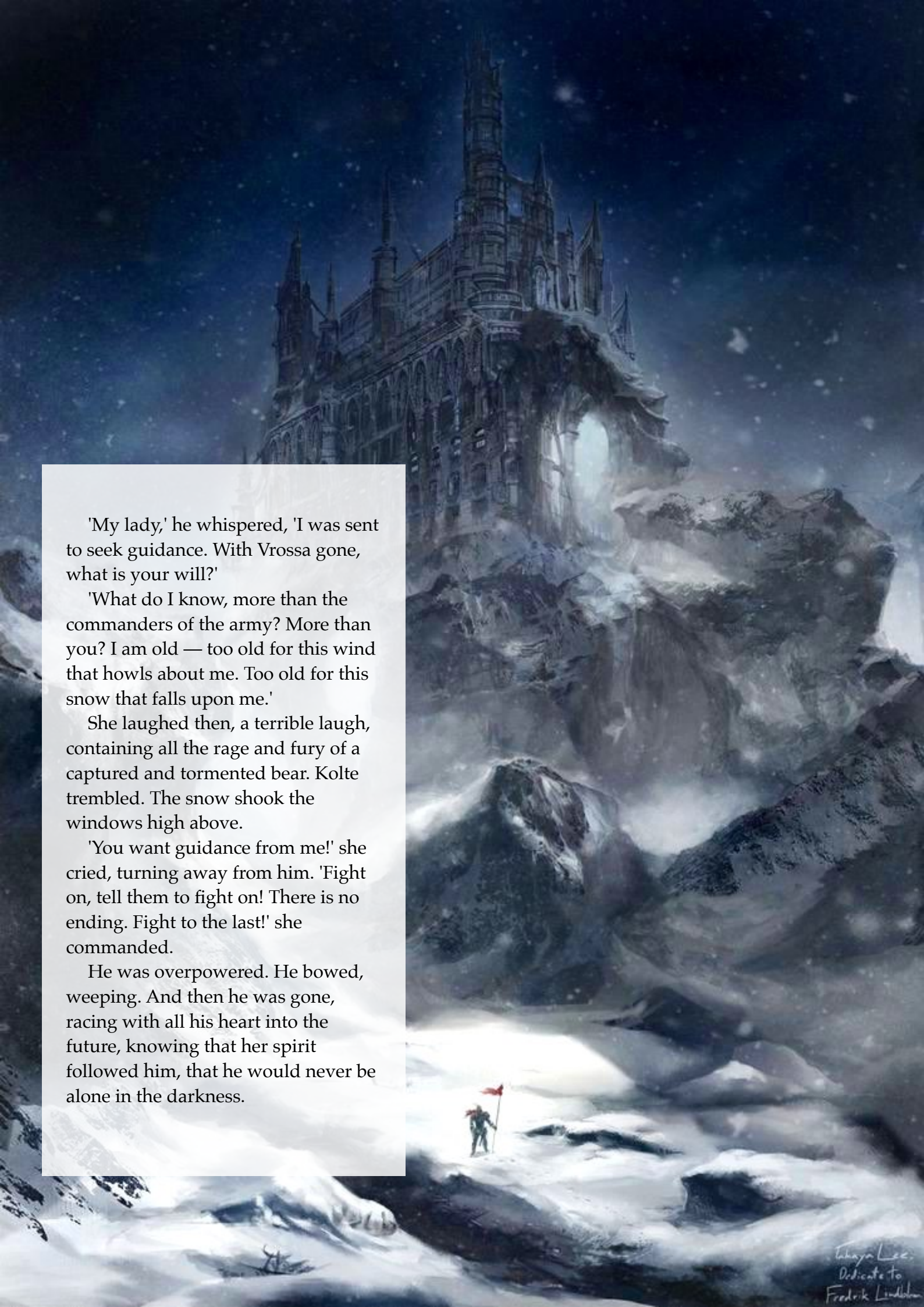
'There was battle at Koralvan,' he went on, drawing near to the terrible truth. 'It was a hard meeting. Vrossa, captaining the Shard, was cut off, but the company of Heressal, coming from the east, hacked a way through their troops towards the Banner of the Flame, rescuing the captain and pushing towards the river.'

'Frozen?' she asked, looking up, but her face was still in shadow.

'At this time of year, yes, but only just beginning to freeze at the time of the battle. Many were lost. But Vrossa escaped, into the mountains,' he lied.

Again she said nothing — but this was the way of the great, he thought, to speak only at need. Sitting there in the pale glow of the lamp, surrounded by shadows, Kolte felt the burden of events lifting from him, passing silently across the room to her. What would she now bid him do? How would she command those forces still loyal to her beyond the palace which was her prison?





'My lady,' he whispered, 'I was sent to seek guidance. With Vrossa gone, what is your will?'

'What do I know, more than the commanders of the army? More than you? I am old — too old for this wind that howls about me. Too old for this snow that falls upon me.'

She laughed then, a terrible laugh, containing all the rage and fury of a captured and tormented bear. Kolte trembled. The snow shook the windows high above.

'You want guidance from me!' she cried, turning away from him. 'Fight on, tell them to fight on! There is no ending. Fight to the last!' she commanded.

He was overpowered. He bowed, weeping. And then he was gone, racing with all his heart into the future, knowing that her spirit followed him, that he would never be alone in the darkness.



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# RIHAM ADLY

Trigger Warning: This short story contains adult themes

## The Brief Chronicled History of The Girl as told by the Realist but yet Optimistic African Fortuneteller



Girl, before your father implanted you in your mother's womb, before being assigned your X's and not the salubrious Y's, you were in the water, in the air, in the elements: a tri-atom that didn't belong to any tribe, any clan, any *Kabilah*.

### **In your first incarnation,**

You were given the name Mary. You splashed in the mud and played with Abdullah and Abel. You bathed in Central Eriteria's River Mereb near your church, your curiosity always hovering like that rare blue-tailed damselfly eager to soar high during rainfall. You knew you were different than your sisters, your sad-eyed aunts, and all your kin. You were whole, uncut, every inch of flesh still your very own. When the time came and one of the boys was to wed you, they pointed to that place between your legs. *Impure*, they'd said. The womenfolk in the village knew they had work to do—turning you into one of *them*, into the woman Abel and Abdullah approved of. So, when the midwife sliced off your clitoris, the womenfolk came out, satisfied, proud. You didn't resist because you had so much trust, so much love. You became hollowed-out: emptied of all what made you, *You*.

### **On your second incarnation,**

You wanted to resist what they deemed as your purification, but submission had always been the currency of survival.

Your pain spilling faster than your blood, filled Kenya's Tana River.

You simply, died.

### **In this third incarnation,**

You push away the head-cover they force you to wear in the mosque. You scream when your mother drags you to the barber in *Beni Suef*. You push his hand when the blade nicks your labia minora. You run, bleeding your own River Nile, and when your balking feet can no longer run, you almost lift off with your wings; you smile for the freedom to be had, but girl...

You will stay.

You will repeat it all in another incarnation.

You will not let them use your trans-vaginal traumatization as a metaphor for chastity.

You will not let them veil or erase you because you are not the making of sin.

You will not let them de-flower the love you have for YOU.

Girl, you will stay because it is amazing how tree stumps sprout back after they've been cut.



CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

RIHAM ADLY



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CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

PETER ASTLE



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