

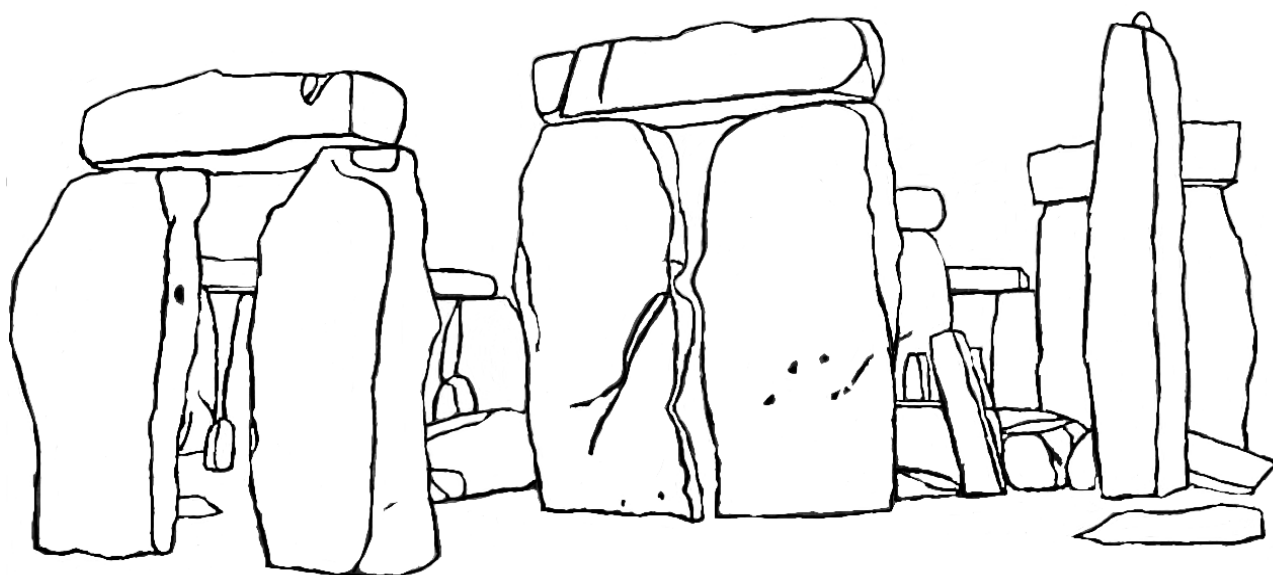
Volume One

Special Three

December 2009

# Emerald Tales

A Bimonthly Journal of Short Fiction



**Winter Solstice**

**Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror Special Edition**

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### *Emerald Tales*

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# *Winter's Cackles and Kisses*

by  
Wynne Huddleston

While the world still sleeps, the Snow Princess blows  
a storm of gentle white kisses to freezing Earth.  
Each one whispers her promise to cover him with  
her beauty. In disapproval, Spinster Wind shrieks,  
expelling the frigid from her breath—this tickles  
Fire; he jumps in the hearth with a gasp, then nearly  
dies cackling. Old Man wakes up to feed him logs  
of big, dry pine; Fire brightens at once, licking his lips,

panting like a dog, spit flying as his master pets him  
and sets his plate just right, then he chomps down  
contentedly on his dinner. The already-dead leaves  
have let go at last to reveal green Matchmaker  
Mistletoe held up by one of Great Oak's long arms.  
Dressed in pearls, she peers down expectantly.

The nests are empty; most of the birds have flown  
out to a family reunion in the south. Sun is going  
on vacation, too; he peers out of the frosted  
glass window of his aircraft and sprinkles  
a dust of magic, rainbow-colored glitter  
to sweeten the mounds of white kisses below.

# *When the Spring's Heart is Broken*

by  
Marie Croke

She clutched the *mirracur* tighter, its edges eating into her fingers, as she waited for the voices to fade. Then Lanali stayed crouched behind the gravestone longer, listening to the evening's festivities in the village. The frost from the ground crept through her clothes and sunk into her skin, as if reminding her of the Elder's words.

As if she needed reminding.

Tayan was not the only one to have been heavy in his blame; the whole village placed the entirety of the harsh summer on her shoulders. They had simply not spoken of their anger out loud. She knew what they must think, though. That she'd rushed or skimped on her design, or had some hideous sin or personality flaw that would have marred her work.

"When Amatisa, the sun god's daughter, sheds her corporeal body and steps from her cave, she must see how beautiful she truly is reflected in the purest of vessels for her to bless the world with her warm presence in the new year." How many times had she heard those words repeated by the Elder? How many times had she watched her parents struggle to perfect the mirror's frame when they'd Etched? She couldn't remember.

Picking herself up, Lanali took tiny steps towards the fresh grave, refusing to let her eyes wander to the fields where so much had been frozen by an unusually early frost. The summer had, at first, been burning, stealing the little water they'd received and starving the plants. Then disease had run rampant after the frost, the fevers coming sooner and claiming more.

Mekkai had been the most recent.

The dirt was loose at his grave, and Lanali stumbled at the sudden give in the ground. She used the headstone to catch herself then looked up to the chiseled letters spelling out her brother's name.

He'd been an Etcher, same as she. He'd been the one to finish this year's mirror, and *that* had been a rushed job as the sickness made his hands shake and his body sweat. She'd had to steady him those last days or else the mirror's frame would have never been completed, and that would have likely sparked more ire in the sun-god's daughter.

The job had been completed, though, before Mekkai had succumbed. Yet, after all his work, the Elder had declared that Lanali would not be allowed to attend his funeral for her part in the deaths.

It wasn't right. Mekkai deserved an Etcher's tribute. It shouldn't matter what blame they placed upon her.

Lanali lifted the *mirracur*, gauging the sun's low position, then tilted her hand. The rays glinted off the tiny mirror; its lacquered glass had been touched by the wizened ones so as to give the sun's reflection a sharpness like no other light. She let the reflected rays burn into Mekkai's name until the letters smoked.

She'd not had a design in mind before she'd started, but now memories came unbidden and her hand moved on its own, dancing in the fading light as she decorated Mekkai's grave as only an Etcher could.

Last Ceremony, everyone had thought her design had been flawless. Only Mekkai had still held onto that belief even after the hard year. He had seen her months of practice and preparation and then

the months of painstakingly Etching each individual petal on every flower she'd created on the silver frame. Lanali had only used the purest of sun, as well, refusing to even glance at her *mirracur* on overcast days.

The light flickered dangerously, Etching her memories into the stone until her eyes grew blurry with held tears and the *mirracur* slipped and scorched the grass.

It was her first mistake in years. Had Mekkai been alive, he'd have mocked her ineptness. She could hear his lilting tone in her mind - the only place she'd ever hear him again.

The tears came again, not as hard, but as a steady stream leaking down her face. Mekkai had claimed it wasn't her fault, that her work had been beautiful, that the drought, disease and frost would have come to the village anyway. The fever had not been so fierce in his body then, and Lanali had not been brave enough to ask if he still believed of her innocence as he took his last breaths.

She traced Mekkai's name with a shivering finger, the cold wind biting into her despite her heavy shawl. Then she looked beyond the graveyard to where the cave was barely visible in the fading light.

It was forbidden to approach Amatisa's cave, other than for the Mirror Ceremony the morning of the solstice, but every year, the mirror from the year before was gone, taken by the goddess in a show of her approval.

"I'm sorry, Mekkai, if this is indeed my fault," whispered Lanali, her words barely audible even to herself.

A chorus of louder shouts echoed from the village. At least they were finding the strength to celebrate the upcoming Ceremony. All that dwelled in Lanali's heart was dread at what would be waiting for her in the morning mist at Amatisa's cave.

The long shadows shifted, and a tiny edge of her *mirracur* caught the light and reflected out, luckily away from the village. Lanali quickly flipped the powerful tool over. Her second mistake. Any good Etcher worth a *mirracur's* price would never leave it so foolishly unattended. She was slipping, her mind becoming sluggish and dragging, with every thought struggling to push through the cloud.

Then a little bit of fearful clarity burst through - she certainly didn't *have* to wait until morning.

"I've already broken the rules, why not break this one. It's not like the villagers aren't already angry with me," said Lanali to Mekkai's grave. It was something Mekkai would do. She could almost see him nodding in approval, happy that he'd started to rub off on her.

It felt good, not the disobedient part, but that she could sense some of her brother still living within her. So she obeyed the thought and, after scooping up her *mirracur*, ran through the dead fields, the cave square in her sights.

As she approached, her legs grew leaden and her mouth dry. With a heaving chest, the cold burning her lungs, Lanali slowed to a walk, a dread easing its way through her veins at what she would find. Every step felt as if Mekkai was literally shoving her forward, forcing her to face the truth.

For long moments, she kept her eyes in the darkening sky, noting with amusement that it looked as if it would snow upon the Ceremony that should signal in the warmth. Then, bit by bit, she let her eyes drop until the cave's open mouth and the rock that would close it off filled her view.

There was no mirror.

Dropping to her knees in relief, Lanali raised a prayer to Amatisa in thankfulness that her gift had been found pleasing enough to take. She could feel Mekkai laughing at her, mocking her with words her own mind supplied, *See. And you were so scared, sister. I told you and told you that your Etching was by far better than mine. Amatisa likely found your work more beautiful than either of our parents.*

"So why the hard year, Mekkai? If she loved the mirror, then why the deaths?"

Silence answered her.

With the night folding around her, Lanali pulled her shawl tighter; her emotions were conflicted, but a stronger sense of worth started to take root. She had been going to stay, despite what Elder Tayan had said. This had been her home all her life. It was where she'd first learned how to handle her *mirracur*, hers and Mekkai's bought with almost all of their parents' savings.

Now, though, finding a new home sounded tempting. Etchers always had work, their skills much more refined than a carver's, as they used the sharpness of the sun rather than metal.

That's what she would do. Picking herself up again, this time with more confidence, Lanali made her way back towards the village and sought out Tayan, ignoring the annoyed glances thrown her way.

"Lanali," said Tayan in way of greeting, "you should not be here. Amatisa has already shown how you displease her." He put his arm around her shoulder as if in comfort, then steered her to the fringe of the festivities.

"Amatisa was not displeased," she blurted out, then at his sharp expression, she amended, "I don't believe she disapproved. I spent more time on her gift than any other Etching in my life."

He nodded, his face shifting to one of condescending sympathy. It was the same expression he'd used when he'd told her she could never Etch the mirror again, and it spiked her ire now she was sure of how Amatisa truly felt.

"I'm sure you poured more of your spirit into last year's mirror than could ever be described, Lanali," said Tayan. "It is always possible that it is not your work she disliked, but a part of who you are."

"I highly doubt it." She let her voice drip with venom. The fear that Tayan could be right was long gone. "It doesn't matter. I've not come to argue with you, Elder. I've come to demand Mekkai's *mirracur*. As his closest relative, it falls to me."

"That's not in the best interest of the village, even if we still had it. We buried it with his body, as is proper for a true Etcher. Although, and I had been putting this off, but the village needs you to hand over your *mirracur*, to give the next Etcher a tool with which to work with."

Lanali was left speechless at the Elder's audacity. How had she ever allowed him to preach at her before?

"It's for the good of the village, Lanali; as I've said, we need an Etcher who Amatisa can find favor in, and with your brother dead, our choices are limited."

Finally finding her voice, Lanali spoke so fiercely, the Elder stepped back, "I don't care what the village or you thinks it needs, I *am* a true Etcher. This is *my mirracur*. Bought and paid for by my parents. Even Amatisa agrees; I've seen the cave and my mirror *was* taken. Perhaps, you should be looking to others of the village to find fault with, for it is not just me she judges." Then she spun around and left him.

She was glad for the village following tradition and burying Mekkai with his *mirracur*; she'd been worried they would have been keeping it either to use or sell. No, they had wanted hers, and since she would not give it, she wondered if they would dare to disturb Mekkai's grave instead of scrounging for the money and buying another one. Doubtful, as hard pressed Tayan was about keeping to tradition. Possible, though, but then that action would be on the villager's heads and likely Amatisa would find fault.

Avoiding the rest of the festivities was easy, for no one, not even friends, dared to express the wish that she stay. Instead, she packed, ready to leave after the Mirror Ceremony, after seeing the villagers' reactions to the proof of her innocence.

The next morning, Lanali trailed the others in the procession, her own spirits as high as the villagers. The mirror, the one Mekkai had Etched with her help, was held high, a cloth draped over it. She wanted to see it - Mekkai's last Etched piece - revealed before she left; she owed him that much for his steadfast confidence in her.

As the villagers gathered in a semi-circle around Amatisa's cave, a hush came over them. Then the whispers started, and the glances, or more accurately, the avoidance of glances began. Lanali straggled in with the last few people and held back a horrified gasp.

Sitting proudly before the cave was the mirror she'd Etched the year before, its silver frame still as perfect as when she'd allowed it to be carried from her home.

Her legs went weak, but her knees locked, refusing to let her fall into the frost-covered grass. Blood pumped so loudly it drowned out any other sounds, and she felt her cheeks flush and her breath grow short as her vision narrowed so that only the mirror was in focus. It hadn't been here the night before, she was sure of it. Yet, she'd dared to step near Amatisa's cave, dared and perhaps was now seeing the price of her disrespect.

A voice calling out pulled her back, "This is our folly! This past year was our fault for letting something so tainted be presented to the sun-god's daughter! Now, though, we have learned from our mistake and will remove the offending sight and replace it with a far more glorious piece!"

Lanali brought her hand to her head as the words of the Elder pierced it. As the men brought their clubs up, she turned away, but she couldn't escape from the sickening crunch of glass. Cringing at the sound of each blow, she willed the anger to override her pain to no avail.

Then, where she stared from behind the others, she saw the distinct impression of cart tracks. They came around, parallel to where the procession had come in, the dirt disturbed just enough to be noticed by someone looking. It'd been getting dark the night before, but it'd been light enough to see the grass, and those tracks were new, new enough to have brought back the mirror.

Lanali scanned the crowd, wondering who had had the audacity to mimic her behavior, a part of her wishing that she could potentially share the blame for the bad year. They all avoided her gaze, as if she could contaminate them. Her eyes slid to a stop when they met Elder Tayan's. He gave her a slight smile before turning back to address the villagers once again, just as the first snowflakes began to fall.

She didn't stay to listen to him. Instead, she ran back to the village, not caring who saw her or what they might think. At first, she let her steps aim towards her home, intending to grab her pack and leave the Elder to lead the villagers in as many cold years as he wished, playing the part of Amatisa. It would be without her and without her *mirracur*.

As she passed the graveyard, the morning's rays, perfect for Etching, caught on Mekkai's headstone making her pause. She owed it to him, at least, to bring down Elder Tayan's lies.

She ducked behind the Elder's house, searching for the cart, or at least the tracks, but where the ground was frozen solid, there was nothing, and where it was not, the morning's activities had long since cleared any traces that could have been there.

Failing to find anything, Lanali tested his closed door. It was latched shut, the long key likely with Tayan, but Mekkai had taught her tricks. She had always suspected they were what he'd spent most of his time learning. She pulled out her *mirracur* and, catching the sun's rays, she held them in the tiny mirror until the glow emanating from it was trying to lick the skin from her fingers, then she dropped her hand, letting the rays release in a strong burst through the latch.

The door swung open as if in surrender. She stepped inside, the room familiar and strangely uncomfortable. Then she starting searching, yanking his things aside, uncaring where his clothes fell.

She found nothing out of the ordinary in the front room, but in his bedroom, wrapped in a bright cloth was Mekkai's *mirracur*. It angered her further to find proof of the Elder's blatant lies, spurring her into ripping apart his room, wishing the sun was coming in his window so that she could Etch his very house apart.

Mekkai's *mirracur* she placed in her boot; she wouldn't pull him from the ground to return it to him, but at least now it would be with someone who would value it far more than just as the tool it was.

When she found the drawer under Tayan's bed, its contents jangling, Lanali cursed out loud. She didn't dare touch the coins, not wanting to taint herself by touching what was likely the Elder's payments for the mirrors her parents had Etched.

It was in that quiet moment, when she sat staring at the cursed drawer, that a scuff behind her caught her ear. She turned, but too late, as the club came smashing upon her head.

She awoke to a dreadful headache in the dead of night. The moon must not have risen yet, for she could see nothing, not even her hand before her face. She rose, her aching head causing her to be unbalanced, so she reached out and found rock to steady herself. Keeping her fingers lightly upon the rock, Lanali crept along it, not daring to call out in case Elder Tayan did not know she had awoken.

With feet that refused to completely cooperate and a pounding in her head, it took Lanali three passes of the shallow cave to realize where she was. Her first reaction was to bang against the side of the cave where she thought the rock had been rolled, screaming for help. And when that only served to instigate her headache and send a spasm of nausea through her stomach, she curled into a fetal position mumbling the same prayer to Amatisa over and over again, hoping the goddess would forgive her.

When Amatisa did not answer, Lanali began to laugh at her plight, finding the possibility of her being suffocated in the cave amusing. There weren't many who could claim that their body could be used to represent a goddess's corporeal self. That was probably Tayan's intent. Smart man, twisting the villager's ingrained beliefs for his own benefits, albeit horrifying.

When calm finally overrode her hysteria, Lanali finally took the time to think clearly. Her *mirracur* was gone, taken from her belt when she'd been unconscious. She could imagine the story Tayan would tell them. How she'd been so overcome with guilt that she'd left him her *mirracur* and fled into the night. It wasn't as if she hadn't made it easy for him, with her pack already full and waiting to be hidden. She'd have been smarter to have just fled.

*But then who would champion the villagers?* The lilt in the imagined tone in her head was distinctly Mekkai's, as if he'd suddenly gone all noble on her in death. That wasn't like him at all.

*Fine, I'm more concerned with myself. Who's going to punish the man responsible for my death?* Yes, that was more like it, something she could see him saying.

"Well, I tried, Mekkai. I'm sorry," whispered Lanali, "Amatisa is likely just as angry with me as she is him."

Her mind couldn't come up with another argument, so she stopped thinking about it. Time became nonexistent as she sat there in the dark, feeling as if she were waiting to die. Sleep was intermittent and useless, as she always awoke tired and aching in the same choking darkness. She would think she heard voices and jump up, calling out, hoping to be heard, but no one ever answered and she would find herself sinking back onto the ground.

To pass the time, she spoke to herself, or to Mekkai or Tayan, and sometimes even to Amatisa, holding entire conversations that somehow always managed to have her more confused than when she'd first opened her mouth.

"What I don't understand is why, if it's true that the harsh year was Tayan's fault, why then, did you take Mekkai, why have it all on my shoulders?" This question she directed to Amatisa, the cave's stifling air making her breath short.

There was a sudden whistling outside the cave, too faint to hear clearly, but Lanali struggled to her feet and called out, hoping that it was a person this time. There was a great flapping and a squawk, then a loose chunk of rock fell to her feet, letting free a tiny hole of light. She gasped as the bit of daylight brought time back into her life, then almost sobbed when her eyes were pierced by the sun itself.

That couldn't possibly be a coincidence, could it?

*No, you idiot, now use the sun before it moves.*

She bent to her boots, pulling out Mekkai's *mirracur*, ripping the cloth covering in her haste. Then she raised her brother's gift and caught the light, burning through the rock until the hole was wide enough that the entire sun was visible. She was sweating at how fast she'd worked, fearful that the sun would be lost before she'd had the time to burn the hole larger, but she'd managed it.

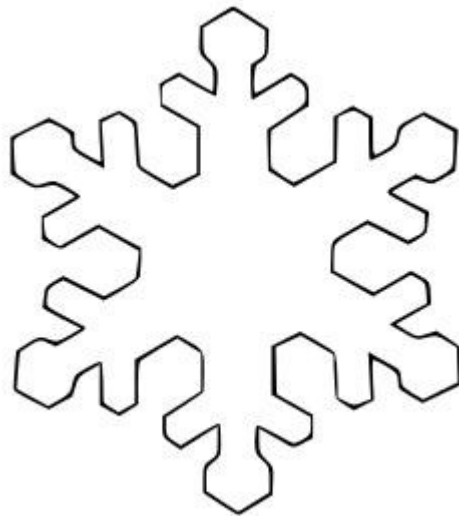
Then, as she paused to examine her success, Lanali smiled sadly as the answer to her own question came to her: motivation.

Would she have still found Tayan's manipulations and lies without Mekkai's death? She wanted to say yes, but the truth of how long they'd lived, letting the Elder create every rule in the village, spoke for itself. Motivation, indeed, of the most dreadful kind, but when people did not appreciate the warmth Amatisa brought year after year, perhaps, it was in their best interests to have it stolen away to force themselves to search their ranks, and themselves, for those who stained them.

Using Mekkai's tricks, the rock covering the cave's entrance crumbled easily under her Etching, and she breathed heavily of the air, warm despite the snow upon the ground.

Then she walked back to the village, Mekkai's *mirracur* in her hands as proof of the Elder's lies, Amatisa's strengthening warmth following in her wake, melting the snow with every step she took.

END



# *Delicious*

by

Jason Flum

Let me start with the truth: I am not a vampire. “Well, of course you’re not,” you may say, “vampires aren’t real.” That’s true; vampires aren’t real, as far as I know, and all the Edward Cullens and Bill Comptons in our cinemas and living rooms will do nothing to convince me otherwise.

The fact is, I’ve been accused of being a vampire on more than one occasion. Friends have teasingly nicknamed me “Vamp,” but more often than not the term was used as an invective and chased by several far nastier words, slung by those who’d like nothing more than to see me six feet under. Kind of ironic, seeing as if I was indeed a vampire, the last place you’d find me would be rotting away in my coffin. No, I’d take full advantage of it all for sure, none of that moody, lurking in shadows for me!

You see, like the song says, I only come out at night. I make my living, if it can indeed be called that (small joke, I’m not a vampire,) by fleecing unsuspecting, lonely men of their money. It’s not that difficult, and I suppose there is a bit of vampirism in it, but fangs are tacky and blood makes me faint. No, what I do is an art, and I’m a Grand Master, baby.

At least, I was. You see, things took a turn last December 21<sup>st</sup>, one I never could have anticipated, and one that changed me forever.

I was frequenting *Rice Stoker’s* downtown then, as all the old hangouts had gone dry or been busted. *Rice Stoker’s* was a newer club, and it was full every night. The music was thumping, keeping the pulse of the place, moving bodies on the dance floor and creating a rhythm for hunting at the bar. They had a killer light system on the floor; greens and reds and yellows flooded the place merging with the strobe light to create a stop-motion rainbow effect of bodies pressed together and vibrating with the music. I could see everything from my corner booth where I sipped my whiskey sours and watched the local riff-raff as they parlayed their hard-earned money into hard-ons for each other. Horny men leaned well-worn elbows against the sticky bar, desperately trying to make a connection.

I often carried a book with me. It helped me blend into the background until I was ready to make myself known. I held the book in front of me, obstructing the riff-raff’s view of the real goods in the dive. I peeked out over the top of the book, waiting for that special someone to make themselves known. The place was a blur of amber and tan but I was waiting for another color to pop.

It was the delicious green that caught my eye that night, not the usual rainbow flash of a diamond or sparkling golden cufflink. The green flew from a hand attached to a well-dressed masculine body, and my hooks were in.

On the solstice and therefore longest trolling night of the year, I watched as a gentleman with a perfect coiffure and perfect suit reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a perfectly large billfold. I felt my lips moisten and I lowered my copy of Ambrose Bierce stories. I leaned forward a bit in my seat, not at all unconscious of the view I was providing anyone who chose to notice. And he would notice me – they always notice me.

Sure enough, not five minutes later, he sauntered over and slid into the seat opposite me. “Hello, beautiful.”

I needn’t bore you with the details of the ensuing tete-a-tete. The conversation is always the same, whether the gentleman is a millionaire or a would-be player. Race, religion, size, and height don’t

matter in the least when sex is the subject at hand. Anyone who tells you otherwise has a skeleton in the closet, trust me. I've heard every line and have even gotten to the point that I can predict which line any given man will use on any given night. It all starts the same, and it all ends the same.

The only difference that night should have been more time for more fleecing as the solstice dragged the moon slowly across the blackness above. Dean was no more nor any less than any other man, and that was just the way I liked it.

We left together, my arm linked in his, my lips turned to extra pouty and my dress hitched just an inch too high and dipping just an inch too low.

I agreed to go to his place as it was just two blocks away. It was only six o'clock, but it might as well have been midnight. The stars were shining somewhere above the street lights. Only the moon's silvery sliver was strong enough to blaze through. It was unusually warm for December, more like mid-September, and the walk was pleasant. Christmas lights swam in windows we passed, and open car windows played us traces of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" and "Rocking Around the Christmas Tree." Dean didn't say much. He walked quietly, satisfied to have me on his arm. I was happy to oblige.

Time flipped forward, and we found ourselves moving from his Spartan living room - no decking the halls here, I thought bleakly - to his stylish if sparsely furnished bedroom. A simple bed with a plain brown headboard and red silk sheets, a couple of chests, and a closed closet door were all the adornments he needed. Simple tastes, I supposed. We started on the bed, and Dean was no better nor worse than any other man I'd been with in the past couple of years. Perhaps it's not them, perhaps I'm just jaded. There was nothing that I hadn't seen or done dozens of times before, though he'd never know that. No, to him, just like to every man, this was my first time. At the very least, he believed that this was "something I never do." In order to get what I want from a man, I learned early on that it's just as important to stroke his ego as it was to stroke anything else. Dean was no different.

I excused myself to the bathroom to freshen up while he did whatever it is men do to get themselves ready. From my experience, it isn't much. In the end, it hardly matters, because it never gets further than this. In the bathroom - sleek, brightly lit, white marble, must have come like this - I called in to Robin and told her where I was. You didn't think I worked alone, now did you? I keep in control at all times, it's important you understand that, but the potential for something going wrong is always there. Robin is my backup, my security system. She knows where I am at all times and gets fifteen percent. Fair is fair.

I took off my dress; my infallible black teddy was beneath, as it always was on nights when I was working. I adjusted the straps, adjusted my makeup, and adjusted my hair without so much as glancing at a mirror, and I was raring to go. Not quite the same as poor Dean, I'd imagine, but my engine was purring.

Dean was lying on the bed in his boxers - red, silk, more ostentatious than expected - and a white T-shirt. At least the T-shirt wasn't stained like Billy-Bob-Joe- Whatever the hell that southern guy from Mobile's shirt was that time I was down in Alabama. At least Billy-Bob-Joe-Whatever was loaded. I'm like a shark sniffing a paper cut from a mile away. When will people learn that appearances are deceiving?

I made my way over to the bed and stretched seductively. I gave Dean my smile, that killer smile, and he smiled back. He patted the bed next to him. He probably saw it in a movie or something.

I obliged, and lay down next to him. I rubbed my hand along his shorts and felt the silk beneath my fingers. I purred agreeably.

He rolled over onto his elbow and rubbed the silk of the straps of my teddy between his thumb and

forefinger. How many fingers have these straps been run through? “So how’s this work?” he asked.

“If you don’t know, it’s going to cost extra,” I said, smiling at my joke.

He chuckled. Good. “I mean, is there protocol?”

“Not at all, though I do offer a wide range of. . .extras.”

“Extras?” he asked, intrigued. Had him all figured out. Easy.

“Sure, toys, blindfolds, handcuffs. . .”

“Handcuffs?” he said. Pegged him in the bar. I always peg them. Only missed once, and that got messy. I don’t like to talk about that. But that was a long time ago, and I’ve trained myself. I know these men like an author knows the characters she’s written about in novel after novel. A friend of mine once told me she felt like God to her characters. “Nothing like feeling like God in bed, honey,” I’d responded. She’d begrudgingly agreed.

I leaned over and reached into my bag. It was empty but for my unread old book and two pairs of handcuffs. Like I said, pegged him easily. Plus, who knew what would fill the bag before I left? The one great unknown, but I suspected Dean wouldn’t disappoint. I lifted the handcuffs and dangled them over his chest, giggling innocently. Or at least, I gave it my best imitation of innocent.

“Just to be sure, you want me to?” I asked coyly.

He nodded. “The night is still young.”

I smiled again. Perfect.

I deftly slipped a cuff on each of his wrists. I tugged playfully at each, making sure it was secure. He thought it was a game. He gave me a toothy grin and snapped his jaw at me, laughing. His toes were already beginning to curl, and I hadn’t done a thing, yet.

I reached across him - nothing is an accident, right? - and locked the end of one handcuff to the bedpost. I lingered a little longer than perhaps was necessary, letting him smell me, see me, feel me.

In the same manner, I clipped his other hand to the bedpost as well. He gave a tug on each hand and grinned again.

I gave him a kiss on the mouth (take one for the team, my dad always used to say), and got up from the bed.

“Where you going?” he said, a hint of concern crossing his face.

“Sorry, buddy, but like you said, the night is young. That bar is full and I’m way too good to waste any more time.” I went around the bed and picked up his discarded pants. His wallet produced three hundred and sixty bucks – not a bad take. My record was in San Antonio about four years ago; I snagged an oil tycoon, partner, and he had a cool three Gs siphoned off, thank you very much.

“The night is indeed young,” Dean said, watching me like a hawk. He didn’t move a muscle, but his eyes followed my every movement. I do find men’s reaction to this moment interesting. Some squirm, some shout, some get very quiet. One guy passed out. I had Dean pegged as a squirmer. Guess I can’t be right all the time.

I went into the bathroom to put my dress back on. When I returned, Dean was gripping the handcuffs and still watching me. I smiled and gave him a little wave. It’s the little touches that count, you know?

The door was on the other side of the room, and I wouldn’t be lying if I said there was a bit of a swagger in my step. It’s a rush, you know, when everything falls into place. Delicious.

I was nearly at the door when I heard two clinks behind me. That was a new one. I turned back to the bed. It was empty.

What . . . ?

“The night is young,” I heard. I snapped my head around, and there, in front of me, was Dean.

“How did you . . . ?” I never got any more out. Before I knew it, he was on me, biting my neck, sinking himself into me, taking me for all I was worth.

I certainly hadn’t pegged him on this one (staked would have been helpful), and that was the night I changed.

I lied to you before; forgive me. I am a vampire, and that night, the night of the solstice, the longest night of the year, when predators have more freedom and time than any other night to stalk their prey, I became the hunted. You’ll forgive my little lie, I hope. You see, I’m on the prowl now as ever before, and I can’t afford not to keep myself protected. I’ve come to like you, though, and perhaps one day we’ll meet.

A final word: green doesn’t matter quite so much any more, so no worries if you’re not amongst the wealthy. No, blue and red attract my eye now, and believe me, mister, it’s everywhere.

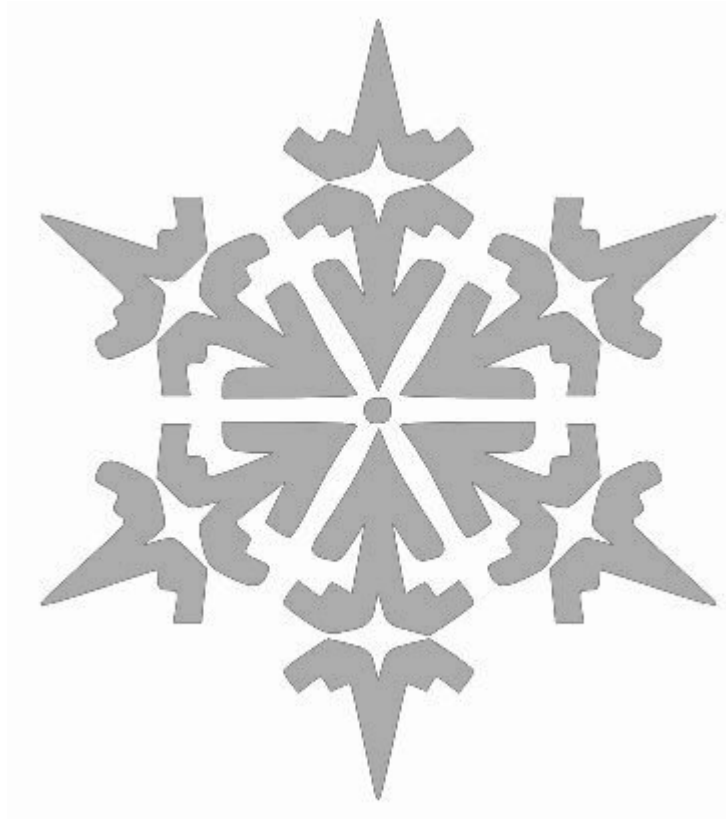
The bars are still my hunting ground, and men are still my victims.

Men are such simple creatures. So predictable.

So delicious.

If you care to meet me, *Rice Stoker’s* is just around the corner. . .

END



# *The Sacrifice*

by  
Faith Boughan

Wind whipped through Amata's hair and cloak, garments and dust swirling around her legs as she gazed across the darkened city. Dawn came quickly these days, and with the dawn came responsibility – these few moments of silence were more precious than gold-trimmed robes, particularly on a day like today.

In the streets, people began to emerge from their homes, just barely visible in the fading moonlight. Soon, Shamash would take his place in the sky, and Amata would be called to the temple court. Unlike the rest of the city, this was the one festival she could do without.

“Blessed Nanna,” she murmured, “If only I could disappear with you at Shamash's rising.” Amata lifted a hand toward the moon and closed her eyes, taking slow and steady breaths. The coming twelve days would be like no other during the rest of the year, and yet each year, it was the same – the same dread, the same weariness, the same tedious rituals that everyone else in the city seemed to love with a strange and unrelenting passion.

Amata opened her eyes and gazed back down at the streets. The rising sun's first rays spilled across the city gates and illuminated the inhabitants, dressed in their finest robes and carrying or pulling their finest animals for sacrifice. For twelve days, the streets would run with blood. For twelve days, Amata would hold her breath so as to not retch from the stench of the hot, sticky liquid.

A cymbal sounded from below her feet – the call for all the Nadîtu to assemble in the courtyard. This was to be her fifth Zagmuk – five winter solstices as a priestess of Inanna – and the routine would be the same. Courtyard, sacrifices, songs, and mourning for the king's impending – but ultimately fake – death.

Amata took one final breath and began her descent to the courtyard. At the very least, she would avoid the rush of readying herself for the day, unlike the other women. Young and old alike ran past her with hurried greetings, fetching their robes from the wash lines and gathering water to clean and paint their faces.

“Amata!”

She turned to find Banunu, a fellow priestess of Inanna, rushing down the corridor toward her. “Is it peace, Banunu?”

“Yes, by Shamash, yes,” Banunu slowed to a halt in front of Amata, breath heavy and labored. “But I have half a mind to slap you, as you are awake and ready for the gathering before the rest of us!”

Amata smiled. “And I have half a mind to stand here and take it, because I'll still be beautiful when the stinging ends, and you'll still be scrambling to apply your kohl.”

“Bah, you talk too much sense. Still,” Banunu leaned toward Amata, her eyes and voice lowered, “there are rumors of who has been chosen for this year's surrogate.”

“Oh, for the love of the gods, Banunu, you gossip too much.”

“No, Amata! No, you misunderstand me.” Banunu found Amata's gaze and held it. “I think this year, you will care.”

Like a stone in the mire, Amata's stomach sank. A cold tremor worked its way back up her spine, drying her lips and parting her mouth. "Do not bother me with rumors. Don't you dare, unless you are certain."

Banunu shook her head, her dark and tangled hair adding force to the chaos behind her words. "I saw Nutesh's name submitted myself. I swear by the goddess, Amata, I swear it. I was there when..." She stared at the floor. "When the Entu requested him specifically. Out of all the prisoners, she asked the king for him alone."

"Please," Amata whispered, her voice shaking. "Tell me it was for release. Tell me he was chosen as this year's prisoner for release." She grabbed her friend's cloak at the shoulder. "*Tell me!*"

Banunu placed a hand on Amata's cheek, eyes glistening. "I am so sorry, my sister."

"No..." Amata's face grew hot. "Oh gods, I can't think of this right now. The courtyard... we must go, the gathering will begin soon..."

"Amata."

"No, Banunu. It was so long ago, I should have buried my sentiments and forgotten him by now. I..." She wiped the corners of her eyes with the edge of her sleeve, ugly black streaks of kohl staining the expensive fabric. "I am a priestess of Inanna, and thus we can never be."

"We've not taken celibacy vows, silly woman." Banunu dropped her hand from Amata's cheek. "And you can't lie to yourself. You and I both know that Nutesh's release was impending."

Amata's felt her throat tremble as she breathed in. "But no longer." She stared at Banunu. "Today, he will be crowned surrogate king. In ten days, he will become Anu and unite with the Entu for the good of all the people. In twelve days, he'll be dead..."

"For the good of all the people." Banunu whispered.

"No." Amata shook her head. "Not all of them."



Banunu accompanied Amata to the courtyard in silence, neither woman caring to stop and fix the kohl around their eyes.

"Let the Entu see me," Amata declared, "and may her womb open to Anu, so all may see what she has done to me."

Banunu twisted Amata's ear and chided her against saying such things where others might hear it – others who didn't share Amata's contempt for the high priestess.

Upon reaching the courtyard, it was only a matter of time before the Entu revealed the names of the two prisoners chosen for release and sacrificial surrogacy. A stabbing pain surged through Amata's stomach upon hearing Nutesh's name, the dread becoming reality.

As the list of duties for the following twelve days were read – as they always were, year after year – Amata felt her feet moving of their own accord, turning her around toward the courtyard exit.

Banunu's hand grasped her shoulder. "Amata, wait! Where are you going?"

"I have to see Nutesh."

The priestess's mouth gaped open. "You can't... they'll crown him within the hour, and the Entu will see you've left—"

"I hope she does." Amata turned her eyes on the high priestess in the center of the courtyard, where she addressed the gathered women with an exultant voice. "I hope she does, and when she does? May she be taken by Nergal to his fiery abode. I am leaving."



Amata's legs shook as she left the courtyard, taking deliberate steps so as to not lose her balance on the polished stone that led to the compound's main entrance. She had to see Nutesh before he was crowned; once the priests and guards collected him, it would become near impossible to come within one hundred feet of his presence, even with her elevated status. The surrogate king was perhaps even more precious to the people than the true king during Zagnuk: without his sacrifice on the final day, the true king would have to die... not that it would be much of a loss. Enlil-nadin-apli might as well be a granite statue for all the good he'd accomplished thus far. Even now, he was away on another useless campaign. So much for inspiring his people during the celebrations.

Quickening her steps, Amata pushed her way through the crowded streets, trying to ignore the blatant stares from those around her. How often did a lone priestess venture forth into the streets of Babylon? She was an independent woman, certainly – like all Naditu priestesses – but on a day like today, she should be far from the dark alleys and thick crowds.

She took several wrong turns before arriving in front of a large, windowless bastion. Waving at one of the guards, Amata held her head high, hoping her status would allow her to gain entry without too many questions.

“Amata, priestess of Inanna, second only to the Divine Entu of Marduk, requests an audience with the Chosen.”

The guard stared at her, silent.

“Are you mute? He shall receive me immediately.”

The guard continued to stare, shaking his head. “I don't have the authority—”

“But I do. Shall I call blessings or curses on your family? It is your choice.”

The guard shifted his weight and shrugged. “All right, enter. But I take no responsibility. They'll come for him soon, so you'd best make it quick.”

Amata nodded and brushed past him, pausing only to allow the entrance gate to be opened. Nutesh wouldn't be difficult to find – they always kept the Chosen prisoner in the same place.

Moments later, she stood only a few paces away from the cell door. Behind the heavy iron bars, Nutesh stared as though she was a ghost. Amata smiled despite herself – he was too thin, and yet... they had already cleaned him up for the procession and crowning. She had wondered whether she would recognize him, dirty and fully-bearded – but here he was, handsome as the day he'd been dragged off like a common criminal.

“Nutesh.”

He stood, palm against the wall for support, eyes wide with disbelief. “Amata?”

At the sound of his voice, memories flooded Amata's senses. She rushed forward and grasped the bars of the cell, a small cry escaping her lips. She let the tears come this time, spilling down her cheeks like Ningirsu's rains. “Nutesh...”

Nutesh squeezed his left hand through the iron bars, cupping Amata's cheek. “You shouldn't be here, priestess... this is no place for you, not today.”

Amata shook her head, eyes burning. “When Banunu told me you'd been chosen, I couldn't believe it. My gods, Nutesh, only a few more months and...”

“What's done is done, beloved.”

“No. By the wrath of Nergal, I will not stand aside and see you slaughtered for the sake of ritual.” Teeth clenched, Amata gripped Nutesh's hand. “You are a better man than Enlil-nadin-apli, and you would make a better king. Best he should die as in days past; we would all—”

“Amata!” Nutesh’s fingers strained to cover her lips. “By the gods, Amata, you’ll be killed where you stand.”

“And I don’t care. Not if I must spend the rest of my life without you, Nutesh... this will all have been for nothing, and you know it.”

“Amata...”

“You and I both know how much I despise these... traditions, these useless sacrifices. I’ve done this for us, and once you’re released, we can live an honored life... I have no end of gold or precious gems at the temple—”

“Amata!”

She closed her lips, wanting nothing more than to fall into his arms and stay there.

“You must go, before they come for me.” He placed a second shaking hand on her face. “We *will* be together someday, I swear it. Even if we have to wait until... if I have to wait for you in Nergal’s realm...”

“No...”

“Go, Amata... please, before they find you here.”

“No...” She took a step back, her legs unwilling to carry her further.

Nutesh slipped his hands back through the bars, tears streaming down his face. “I love you, my beautiful priestess. You are a likeness of the goddess herself.”

Her tears refused to stop, but she knew he spoke the truth. She had to leave, and needed to do it now... she could be of no help to him if she died before he did. Forcing her legs to move, she hurried back down the corridor and slipped out the front gate, running past the guards before they could ask questions.

She had to do something. Five years of prayers and sacrifices in the temple had to be enough... why hadn’t Inanna accepted the atonement? Why would Nutesh be chosen as the Zagmuk sacrificial king, just before his release? By the gods... Amata coughed, choking on the mix of air and water in her throat. They were so close... so close...

Everything would be so much easier if she were high priestess... which would happen, someday. But for Nutesh, it would be far too late.



The crowning ceremony and the days that followed were full of nothing but pain and tears. It seemed neither Inanna nor Marduk cared for the injustice put upon Nutesh, and no amount of sacrifice made a difference. She attended the celebrations and participated in the rituals out of duty, but took no joy in the festivities. Perhaps that was the reason for the gods’ silence, she considered. Perhaps they were angry at her heart’s refusal to rejoice.

On the morning of the tenth day, Amata dressed in her ceremonial garb and headed to the roof, daring to dream that a gust of wind might send her tumbling over the side. At least in death, she wouldn’t have to witness what this day would bring.

“Priestess.”

Amata gasped and spun, her foot slipping on the tiny stones that covered the roof. She shot a hand out to break her fall, but was righted by the grip of the cloaked man who stood directly behind her. She stared, dumbfounded. “Who are you, and how did you...?” She allowed her voice to trail off as the man released her arm and drew back the hood of his cloak.

With a soft cry, Amata fell to her knees. Before she could prostrate herself, he caught her under the arm once again, bidding her to stand.

“Priestess, I see you recognize me?”

Amata inclined her head out of respect for a member of the royal household. “It is my duty. You are none other than Marduk-nadin-ahhe, uncle of our most respected and worthy king.”

He grinned, but the smile did not reach his eyes. “You miss nothing, daughter of Inanna. Indeed, you shall quickly find that I too miss nothing. This is also my duty, as uncle of our beloved king.”

Amata allowed her eyes to meet his, uncertain. “Honored uncle, I’m afraid I don’t—”

“Understand why I’m here? Of course you do. We both have something the other needs.”

“Blessed uncle, I am second to the Entu. Many of the younger priestesses would be pleased to assist you with—”

“I am not here for coupling, priestess.” Amata stared as he continued. “I know about your visit to the Chosen, and the words which were exchanged.” He held up a hand before Amata could protest. “I know that our surrogate king is your former lover, and I know his petty crime was small enough to secure his release in only a few months.” He leaned in close. “I also know that today will bring you more pain than perhaps even his death two days from now. The primordial coupling with the Entu... you must feel viably betrayed.”

“The Entu simply chose someone young and strong, that is all.”

He laughed. “Of course, she did. She certainly wouldn’t have done it out of spite for you, yes? You are second to the Entu. You are next in line for her position, and you have followers of your own. She would never endeavor to break your spirit by choosing your former lover for ritual sex and death, would she?”

Certainly, Amata had considered this over the past ten days, but... it was difficult to believe. Then again, perhaps not so difficult, considering the man standing before her. “And what is it you want of me?”

He nodded. “I sense some kinship with you, priestess. I am in position to take the throne, should any misfortune befall my young nephew during his reign. What a tragedy it would be if anything should happen on the final day of Zagmuk.”

Realization wormed its way into Amata’s mind. “If misfortune were to befall the true king... it would be an acceptable sacrifice for the god.” Her lips grew cold as she spoke the words, knowing that the man in front of her could kill her in an instant for treason, regardless of his own treacherous thoughts. “Nutesh would be free.” She shook her head. “But what have I to do with this? I have no power beyond that within the compound; only the Entu can—”

“Your part is small, but necessary. My nephew is young and inexperienced, and his impulsive actions have damaged his reputation more than once.”

Amata nodded, recalling the days of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign. The temples had been full of lavish gifts and offerings, and music filled the streets simply for the pleasure of hearing it. Babylon was glorious in those days, but with the young Enlil-nadin-apli on the throne...

Her mind was set. “What must I do?”

Marduk-nadin-ahhe pulled his hood up and over his face. “In two days, my nephew will return from his campaign to the provinces. He intends to be present for the re-crowning – I intend to be crowned in his place.”

“And I?”

“The Entu will be engaged in her duties, preparing for the sacrifice. You shall serve the king his refreshment upon his return. That is when you shall strike. Use poison, if you wish to live.”

Amata shook her head in disbelief. “That’s impossible... the king has tasters and slaves to refresh him. I am but a priestess of Inanna; how can I poison the king without notice?”

He shrugged. “As you say, you are a priestess – you’ll think of something. Remember this, should your will falter: with me as king, you and your lover may be reunited. Beyond that, the time for your rise as Entu may come quicker than expected.” The flash in his eyes told Amata more than she needed to know. If she didn’t complete the task, there would be consequences.

“You shall have your throne.”

The usurper returned a bow. “You shall have your beloved.”



Despite herself, she had watched the reenactment of the primordial coupling. She had to bite her tongue to keep from crying out, but watching the high priestess – the woman who was supposed to serve as mother and friend to all the priestesses of Babylon – with Nutesh was more than enough to fuel the fire.

And now, on the twelfth day of Zagnuk, she stood in the king’s reception chambers, a tray of delicacies and rich wine resting in her arms.

The young king arrived with much fanfare, the people cheering his return and eager with anticipation over the public execution scheduled in mere hours. The king would first refresh himself and prepare to greet his people, with the re-crowning to immediately follow the sacrifice of the surrogate.

The king entered the room and settled on his reclining couch, the air growing dense with the stench of men long away from the comforts of civilization. Amata took deep breaths, praying she might keep her hand steady. She greeted Enlil-nadin-apli with a bow, and turned to pour him a drink.

“Priestess!” Amata’s head turned sharply at the king’s voice. “You need not perform such a task. Come tell me of the festival.”

Amata’s heart pounded in her chest, throat constricting. She couldn’t contradict him, and yet she couldn’t afford to have another serve the drink. “Glorious Enlil,” she bowed again, “it would be my honor to refresh my king after his absence.” Hoping to appeal to his ego, she lifted her eyes just enough to catch his, and spoke softly. “It is as though the god himself has entered our presence.”

The king’s mouth broke into a wide smile, his eyes studying her face with a bit more enthusiasm than she liked. “How can I refuse such a beautiful woman? Bring me the cup and come sit beside me.” He gestured to a cushion near his feet.

Amata tensed her arm as she lifted the wine pitcher, praying to Inanna that it would not spill. She poured a glass for herself and one for the king, positioning her back to the men in the room. With her index finger, she flicked open the latch on a ruby-studded ring on her left hand, carefully positioning her hand above the king’s cup as she reached across the tray to replace the pitcher. Trusting that the powder hidden in the ring had spilled into the cup, she closed the ring by knocking it against the cup as she picked it up.

Her legs felt like soft wax as she walked the short distance to the king’s feet. She raised his cup and he took it, his fingers brushing against hers for a lingering moment. “My lord, let us drink to your health.”

Smiling, he gestured to the cup in her own hand. “Priestess, my taster has already informed me that the quality of this wine is like no other. I delight in sharing it with you... I hope that we share much more in the days to come.”

“You flatter me, son of Nebuchadnezzar.” She lifted the cup to her lips and took a delicate sip. Closing her eyes, she took a second sip as though it was too delicious to resist. “Your wine-master has chosen well.”

The king’s eyes lit up at the sight of her pleasure, and he raised his own cup. “To a successful campaign,” he addressed the room, “and to the glorious god Marduk who we celebrate today on the twelfth day of Zagmuk.” With his eyes trained on Amata, he tilted the cup against his lips. “And to my future bride, this inhuman beauty of Inanna.”

Amata's breath caught in her throat, words ringing in her ears. *Bride?* By the gods! If she became the king’s bride, she could save Nutesh... if she agreed right now, perhaps they could anoint a different surrogate for the final ceremony! The king was drunk with happiness at returning home; doubtless he would agree to just about anything asked of him by a beautiful woman after so many months among men... and as priestess, she could maintain Nutesh as a lover at the temple...

No one had to die. Amata raised her hand to knock the king’s cup from his grasp, but it was too late. He’d leaned back and was drinking deeply, savoring the exquisite vintage of the palace’s choicest wine... a wine that hid the flavor of the poison. His uncle had seen to that.

As the king swallowed and released his breath, Amata was shaken out of her thoughts. There was no time to mourn the alternate choice that had been given and ripped away so quickly. She needed to act and act fast.

“My lord...” She hoped she hadn’t waited too long. Groaning, she grasped her stomach and sank to the floor, allowing her cup to slip from her grasp and tumble to the floor, splatters of liquid staining her robes.

“Priestess!” The king stood in alarm, his legs failing him even as he took two steps forward. “What treachery...?” He swayed in place for a moment before collapsing onto the steps of the dais. Amata listened as retainers rushed forward to catch him, surrounding their king with cries of fury and alarm. She kept her breath steady, concentrating on playing her part. Within moments, a physician would arrive to administer the antidote, but it would be too late for the king...

“I’ll see to the high priestess,” a familiar voice murmured in her ear. “How unfortunate that the king and the Entu should meet their fates on the same day.”

Amata’s eyes flew open to meet Marduk-nadin-ahhe’s stare, direct and intense. “Priestess!” His mock alarm pierced Amata’s heart with guilt. “Praise the goddess... it appears that the gods have seen fit to anoint new leaders on this glorious, final day of Zagmuk.”

She opened her mouth to speak, the words catching in her throat.

The new king nodded, understanding. “He is safe. For now.”

“For now?” Forgetting herself, Amata sat up in alarm. “But—”

“Indeed, priestess.” His smile shifted into a sneer. “For what good is a high priestess if the king cannot control her? And now I have my pawn.”

Amata stared, horror and relief battling for control. Nutesh was safe. That was all that mattered... for now.

END

*December 21, 2012*

by  
Penn Kemp

Insects shrill. A thrum as of clacking bones.  
Today tallies a long count of creation cycles.

On this winter solstice we climb our Sacred  
Tree to enter wide zones of silence through

the doorway of darkness, our canoe riding  
white rivers of night. The elliptic crosses

Milky Way precisely now, when elements  
merge in a dark rift of source and return.

Cacti and palm leaves rustle dry in the ruins.  
Terror cracks the heart open. Rivulets run

a scarlet sap to appease unknown gods be-  
yond us. Blooming and blessing, this wound

wound tight round knots of surmise reveals so  
little before our offering is received in sunrise.

# *The Sentinel's Son*

by  
Jennifer Azantian

My body lay trembling below the cold machines whose probes dug into my essence and drained me of my strength. I struggled to find a wisp of energy left in the dimming light of my soul. At last, I pulled an image of my former-self out of my being and tore her away from me.

She was beautiful.

“Go to him again. We are running out of time.”

She nodded as if she were a separate entity from myself.

Through her, I floated invisibly along the streets of the forsaken underworld whose lamps were powered by my very life force until I found the child resting in his comfortable bed. I easily slipped myself into his mind. It knew me well.

“Ethan, please, you have to come get me. I’m your friend. For this entire year you’ve let me suffer, and now you’ll do nothing as I die? Be my hero.” I cringed slightly at the sentiment. The very idea that I now relied on one of THEM to save my life was disgusting.

“I can’t,” he pleaded with remorse in his eyes, “My father would kill me.”

“Your father! Do you know what he and his fellow Sentinels do to my people? They take us from our homes and bring us down here to be drained of our magic to power your city.”

“But if I release you, there will be a blackout. Everything will die.”

Panic, it bubbled up inside of me. I forced it down and tried to stay calm. Perhaps a switch of tactics? After all, the image I used was that of a thirteen year old girl.

I moved my surrogate close to the dream version of Ethan. I grabbed his hand and knew he could feel it.

“If you rescued me, we could find a different way to power the city.”

Ethan looked doubtful, but his hand didn’t move within mine.

“Or, I could take you with me to the surface world. You could finally see what the sun looks like. You could breathe fresh air instead of this recycled muck.” I moved closer and kissed his cheek. “Most importantly, you could be with me.”

Before Ethan could respond, my true body collapsed within itself and began to shake violently. The end was close. As the final ounces of my life were drained from me, I clung to Ethan as a last chance. I held onto his shuddering body until, in a blurred rush, everything disappeared.



I jumped up in my bed and touched the side of my face. I could still feel the imprint of her lips. Elaine had never kissed me before. I wanted more. When she first arrived in my mind, it was terrifying. She would interrupt my thoughts during the day and haunt me in my dreams. Early on, she would even materialize in my room. I begged her to leave, but she stayed with me every day, then every other day, and soon, hardly at all. I was so close to getting my wish.

I let my head fall between my knees. The thought of being free of Elaine no longer seemed like a victory over the voice in my head. It felt more like losing the only person who let the son of a politician, warrior, and Sentinel leader talk about his art. Someone who shared stories of a world he only drew pictures of and hid under the floorboards of his room.

The next day, the day with the longest night, my father and the rest of the Sentinels would go to the surface world and hunt for her replacement. Then, they would drain Elaine completely and put the remainder of her energy in the reservoir. My stomach churned.

Perhaps there was enough power from the old Luminariums that the city would survive the long night without Elaine's power. My father was already packing for the "acquisition," as he called it. Someone would be taking her place soon, and then, what would it matter where Elaine was?

I got dressed as quickly as I could. She was right. I couldn't just let her die.

I knew exactly how to get the keys. I had thought about doing it a hundred times in the last year. On the way to my father's study, I stopped at the kitchen. Dad always worked late around Winter Solstice, so I figured a glass of water would be perfect to get his fingerprints.

"Hey, Dad."

My father lifted his head from the masses of maps on his desk. "Ethan, what are you doing up so late?"

"I couldn't sleep. I brought you some water."

"Oh? Well, thank you, son. You can leave it there."

I walked over and handed it to him. He needed to at least touch it.

"I don't want any right now. You know what day tomorrow is, and I need to get these plans finished."

"I'm just worried about you." My father's head twisted sideways, and I knew I wasn't fooling anyone. So I spilt the water on him.

He jumped up, and I pretended to be flustered.

"Oh, Dad, geeze, I'm sorry. Here hold this. Let me get that for you." I grabbed some tissues off the table and wiped his shirt. Then I took the glass back.

"I really am sorry about that. Night, Dad."



The steps creaked as I made my way to the basement where my father kept all his Sentinel things. The fingerprint scan worked perfectly. Afterwards, I typed in my birthday. Clever password, Dad, clever.

The door swung open to reveal a dark room with a single yellow light hanging above. The back wall was lined with weapons for the acquisition. In the center of the room, two objects rested on a wooden table. One was an oval-shaped black box that held the main key to the power plant. The other was the glowing acquisition orb used to subdue Luminariums.

I hesitated before grabbing the key. What if all the stories about the Luminarium were true? An image of my beautiful Elaine, with her face in her hands as she intently watched me paint scenes of her home, helped me push through the doubt. There was no way SHE had any part in forcing humans underground. We were the villains this time. We hurt her.

I took the key, snuck outside, and ran to Alison's house. Her father was in charge of the second key.



I knocked on Alison's window, and she immediately appeared while rubbing her blue eyes into focus.

"What's going on? What are you doing here? Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Everything is fine. I came over because I couldn't sleep."

Alison instantly brightened, not just in demeanor, but in her cheeks as well. "Come on in." She smiled widely. "So, what's up?"

"Nothing, um, do you want to play exploring?"

"Sure."

"Great, why don't we start in the vault room and work our way up."

"Oh, no. Dad wouldn't like us going down there. He keeps all his Sentinel stuff there."

"Which is why it's so cool, right?" I could see her thinking about it. "Come on." I grabbed her hand. "No one will find out."

She looked down at my hand, blushed again, then nodded.

What was wrong with her?

At the moment, I didn't care. It had worked. She led me to the room and typed in the password. No fingerprints required. Good.

The moment we entered the room, I saw the shiny brass key hanging on the side wall. It was amongst many other keys, probably to throw people off, but it looked just like the one I had in my pocket.

"So what did you want to look at first?" Alison asked.

"How about the weapons?" As Alison walked over to the opposite wall, I grabbed the key I needed and jammed it into my pocket.

"Oh, crap!"

"What?" She spun around with a worried look on her face.

"My Dad usually checks in on me before he goes to sleep. I don't want him to know I snuck out. I'll be in a ton of trouble for sure."

"Aw, well, if you have to go." She looked genuinely sad. Part of me felt bad for using her, but still, the thought of losing Elaine erased all other emotions.

I hugged Alison goodbye, and she held on a little more than I was comfortable with.

"Maybe, we can hang out tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yeah, that sounds fun." I didn't even know if I would still be a part of her world "tomorrow," but agreeing seemed like the thing to do.



I came to within the chamber that held me prisoner. My light, which was once strong enough to illuminate the entire dreadful cage, had faded to where I could barely make anything out in the darkness. Why hadn't the stupid child come? I struggled to hang on and slowly realized he might not show up. The anger within me radiated through to my core. If that was how it was going to be, he was going to feel every moment of my death. The stir of hatred over a wasted, tortured year fueled my spirit to come forth from me for a final time. I watched her race through the wall screaming like a banshee.



As I turned to walk away, I felt a familiar chill take over me. Elaine. But this time, it was different. The emotion that overtook me was one of more pain than I had ever felt. A high, terrible scream filled my ears followed by strained shouts into my mind.

“I’m dying. It hurts! You didn’t come for me!”

I dropped to my knees and pushed my palms tightly around my ears. Behind shut eyes, I saw Elaine, but she looked cold and pale. Her body trembled violently. Her eyes were filled with blood.

“I’m coming,” I whispered. “Hold on.” In an instant everything stopped. Elaine suddenly returned to her former self.

“You’re coming?” Then, she was gone.

When I finally realized where I was, I met Alison’s horrified gaze. Lights within her house turned on.

“Are... are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I have to go, though, my dad and all.”

“Ethan, you were just shouting. You’re not all right.”

“Bye, Alison. I will see you tomorrow. We can talk then.” I took off before she could ask any more questions, or before either of her parents could come out and discover the missing key.



When I arrived, the power plant was dark and empty. On Winter Solstice, the place would be crawling with tech-workers prepping for the new arrival. But, for now, I had both keys and free rein. The first door was easy. I knew I had the right key.

I heard rustling behind me and froze with the key half in the lock. My heart raced. When I didn’t hear another noise, I slowly turned around and squinted through the darkness. I didn’t see anyone, so I finished turning the key and rushed inside all the while hoping no one had seen me.

I walked down the black hallway while hugging the walls for stability. In slow, sideways movements, I edged closer to the door with the faintest of light seeping out. I hesitated when I reached it. What if I grabbed the wrong key? I remembered Elaine’s blood-filled eyes and hoped that I hadn’t. With my breath held deeply, I pushed the key in.



I heard a jingle at the door. I masked my true form and felt strangely revived. The door swung open to reveal a boy of about twelve who was small for his age. At last, all the work I’d done prepping Ethan’s mind was finally going to pay off. The humans were going to pay.



The moment I saw her, my heartbeat quickened. Even with all the probes jammed across her body, she was more beautiful than she had been in my dreams. Her hair looked how I imaged the sun would look. Her skin glowed like nothing I’d ever seen before. She was otherworldly in every way. I wanted to paint her.

She lifted her head up slightly and choked, “Help.”

I ran over to her and started pulling at the probes. Loud, piercing alarms went off.

Elaine cried out in pain and grabbed my forearm. In that instant, an icy, electric rush shot through me. My body convulsed and fought the intruder. But it couldn't win. I was completely immobilized. The moment my body surrendered, the attack moved to my mind. Something was backing me into a dark corner. I would suffocate! I pushed against it, but it only squeezed harder. My mind swelled under the pressure then, pop, and nothing.



I had to think fast. The gates were closing and human bodies were not known for their speed. Luckily, Ethan was not only smaller but quicker than the average clumsy man. So much time had already been wasted squelching my host's mind that there was barely enough time to dash under the gate. No one from the patrol had arrived yet. Perfect.

Outside the power plant, I felt a cool breeze rush across my face. Of course, it was not real fresh air, but instead an illusion created by milking the powers of my sisters and me. Nonetheless, it felt better than the still, stale air in my prison. I paused behind some bushes and gathered my, well, Ethan's, thoughts. He must know where the acquisition orb was. Slowly, I worked deep into his brain and through his memory. It was a delicate process, like peeling the skin off a grape. Oh, how I craved my sweet reward!

At last, I found it. He kept it practically unguarded within his own home. How foolish. But I expected nothing less. Humans were known for their shortsightedness. Bad for them. Good for me.

I raced through the streets as fast as Ethan's body could carry me. My legs instinctively knew the way back to his home. The sooner I could destroy the orb, the sooner I could return to my beloved surface world and get out of his repulsive body.



When I returned to whatever it meant to be conscious, my breathing was no longer mine. They were the shallow intake of someone else. Someone much calmer than I was. Where was I? My thoughts jumped to Elaine. Had I managed to get her out in time?

“You really are stupid, Ethan.”

“Elaine?”

“Of course, who else would it be?”

“What's going on. Why can't I feel my body? Are we going to the surface world?”

“Hahaha! You really believe I would take a human to the surface? Your stench would reek for miles around. My sisters would murder me for the thought of it! Take you to the surface, a laughable concept, really.”

“So then what is this?”

“You are my host. Now shut up. I have work to do.”

I was stunned by the way Elaine was speaking. She had never talked to me that way before. My thoughts raced and the darkness suddenly felt infinitely more vast. I had heard stories that the Luminarium could cloud your mind, but I thought they were just tales told to keep children from asking

questions about the surface world. Besides, only powerful Luminarium were supposed to be able to pull it off, and Elaine had been so weak.

“Weak? Me? You fool. Now stop your pondering: you’re distracting me. What’s your birthday?”

“What?”

“I need your birthday.”

“Why?”

“Because I am going into your father’s basement and destroying the orb. Tell me now, or I will take it from you and it won’t be pleasant now that you are aware.”

“Elaine, please, stop this. Go back to the surface. Leave the city alone.”

“Fine.”

“Really? You’ll leave my body and go?”

“No, you idiot. Fine as in I will have to take it.”

I felt a cold ribbon enter my mind and push deeply within. She was right, it felt violating. I screamed for her to stop, but she didn’t until she had taken what she wanted from me.



I slipped into my host’s house with ease. A smile crept up my face. It was the first one in nearly twelve months.

I headed downstairs to look for the fingerprinted glass. It wasn’t where Ethan had put it in his memory. Strange.

I understood the change when I entered the basement to find the light on and a young girl inside.

“Ethan, what’s going on? I followed you to the power plant. Why did you take my father’s key?”

“Ethan is no longer in control. If you have any questions, you can direct them to me. If you do not, then please, step aside.”

The girl’s eyes widened as she realized her nightmare was coming true.

“Y-You’re Luminarium.”

“Yes, dear. Now kindly move aside so I can do what I came to do.”

My eyes shifted for a moment to the orb and then back to the girl. She followed my gaze. Before I could stop her, she grabbed the orb and cradled it tightly in her arms.

“No, I won’t let you touch this.”

She was brave. I’ll give her that. “Yes, you will. Dead or alive is up to you.”

She grew frantic. “Ethan! Fight her. I know you’re in there. Please, I can’t have lost you.”

“If you do not move, I will destroy you along with it. You have until the count of three. One, two...”



No! I screamed over and over again in her mind. In MY mind. I felt helpless, weak, and tired. Fighting Elaine was draining me, and she hardly seemed to feel it at all. I worked my way into some sort of vision. I could see through my own eyes again. Alison looked terrified.

I kept my mind's eye on Alison and slowly, I began to hear her plead. I heard her need for me. I felt the words she didn't say. She cared about me. That's why she was there, and that's why she was about to get untold energy torn through her body.

I kicked at the expansions of my mind. Through the holes, I pulled everything I had away from Elaine.



I felt a slight stir in my head. Down, boy.

"Three." A burst of my energy blasted directly at the girl's core. Only a large shape intercepted the shot. A man fell to the floor with a heavy thud. I focused in on his face and shivered slightly. It was the great Sentinel leader himself-my captor.

What an unexpected treat.



Dad! My heart did somersaults, and I nearly threw-up from the nausea. He wasn't moving. Alison was crying. Elaine was recharging for her next shot.

"You will not do this!" My words shouted from my lips.

"Ethan!" Alison begged.

"I won't bother counting again, girl. You human scum deserve to die in darkness."

"Run," I shouted at Alison who was completely frozen. She clutched the orb in white-knuckled fear. If only she knew how to use it. Elaine's energy was about recharged, and she balled it into a concentrated beam. I felt the same tug as I had before, but just as she focused her power onto Alison, I broke through the barrier Elaine had put up in my mind and absorbed the ray.

"What are you doing?" Elaine screeched.

"This is for my father you sick, twisted bitch."

I turned the wave back on her, and everything she was about to throw at Alison now consumed nearly every last bit of her being. The clash within my mind jolted me back into full consciousness.

I flexed my fingers first. Then, in slow, shocking tingles, the rest of me came back.

I carefully wobbled over to Alison. She had fallen to her knees and was sobbing silently. She still hadn't let go of the orb.

I draped my arms around her. "It's okay now. I'm in control."

She pushed her body against me, but her eyes were frozen in one place. I knew exactly what she was looking at, but I couldn't will myself to get up and check if my father was really dead. In that moment, the thought that I had released an evil into the underground and the result was a heap of unmoving Dad was too much for me to handle.

My mom had woken up from the commotion, and I heard her running down stairs. The sound of her scream and the image of her cradling my father's head in her lap will haunt me forever.



The next day was Winter Solstice. My people were terrified. The energy in the reservoir was nearly drained. I slowly packed my father's maps, weapons, and the orb into my sack. It was time to make my first journey to the surface world in a way that was not as happy as I had imagined the day before.

My mother cried the entire morning, and as I said goodbye, she begged me to stay. I told her I couldn't. It was my responsibility to restore the drained city. She knew I was right. It had always been assumed I would follow my father as the leader of the Sentinels. What no one had thought was that I would have to do it before I hit thirteen years old.

Outside, Alison was waiting for me. She had tear streaks down her face, but she didn't cry in front of me. Point for her.

"I don't want you to go."

"I know. Join the club. My mom's the president."

She laughed a little, but it was more of a release-the-tension kind of laugh.

"You'll come back. I know it. You'll bring the best Luminarium with you, too, I bet."

"I'm glad you have confidence in me."

"Of course I do! You fought one off even when it had taken over your mind. Not many people could do that. You have skill. Still, be sure to listen to my dad, too. He's done this before, you know."

"I do know."

"Okay, um. Bye for now." Allison thrust herself at me and kissed my cheek. She pulled back for a moment with her arms still around my neck. Then, she kissed me on the lips.

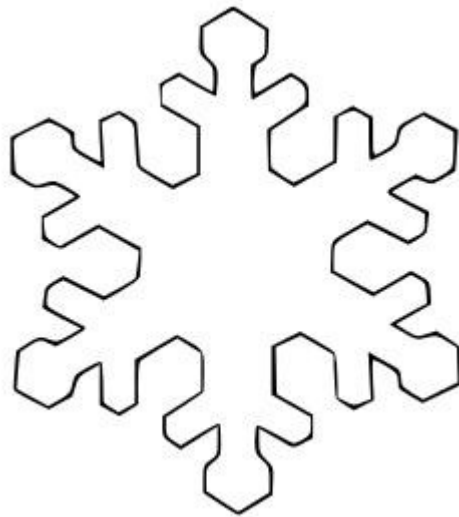
I smiled at her. She didn't know it, but that was my first kiss.

I walked away like the warrior I knew my father would be proud of. Yes, I had made mistakes, but I was going to spend my lifetime fixing them.

"Aw, how cute," a sarcastic voice mused in the back of my head. "You two are disgusting."

"Shut up," I responded, "I have work to do."

*END*



# *A Voice in Winter*

by  
Bill Moon

Silas looked at the sky over Mount Brocken. It wasn't the deep cloudy skies, the last light of the setting sun, or the mountain's majestic beauty that interested him. He was looking for the fires that signaled the witch's return to the area. And with them, he hoped, his wife Tinna.

He had watched the mountain, especially on the old high holidays. His Tinna had disappeared on the vernal equinox this past year, and his life had been empty since. Yes, his children and the farm kept him busy, but his life had no real spark since his wife had gone. Without Tinna, Silas' life was bleak and full of pain.

He hoped the fires would be lit. He hoped the witches would dance their dances and practice their mysterious rites. They had returned at the summer solstice and the autumnal equinox this year. They would return again. The winter solstice would happen in a very few days. This time, he would find the courage to confront the witches directly. If Tinna were there, he would take her home.

As the light faded, the dinner bell sounded at the house behind him. Silas silently shifted his eyes from the dark silhouette of the mountain to scan the fields. His eldest son, Tomas, was driving the sheep from the low pasture towards the pen. He strode to the pen by the barn and opened the gate to let the sheep enter.

Jilla glared at Silas when he and Tomas finally came into the house. His eldest daughter had just had her sixteenth birthday, and her attention was beginning to wander a bit. Silas smiled to himself. Jilla was a catch, and more than one of the local boys had already noticed.

"Wipe your feet, Pa!" the girl commanded. "You too, Tomas!"

They sat at the table, each in their places. Jilla and Nippi worked to put the food on the table. Tonight it was a stew with mutton and some late carrots. The kitchen crops had not done well this year, and the family's diet had suffered. It was difficult to feed the family. Tinna could have handled it with ease. Jilla did well enough and Nippi showed some promise as a cook, even at eight years old.

"Nippi, did you help your sister with supper?"

"Yessir, Pa."

"Good. You got to learn cookin'. Jilla's probably gonna get married next year and she'll be away. We'll have to fend for ourselves, then."

"Pa!" Jilla protested.

Silas laughed. "I'm just a'kiddin' with you, girl. You'll be happy with a family of yer own. My only question is which feller will you pick. I'll need to know, so as I don't chase the wrong'un off. So you 'member to tell me when you decide." His smile defused his daughter's response.

"Are you goin' to town tomorrow, Pa?" Tomas said through a mouthful of the lamb stew.

Silas glanced at Tomas seated where Tinna used to sit. Just seeing her place at the table still made his heart ache. "I got to see if the butcher got that lamb ready for us. And how many he wants next week." Silas watched his eldest son slop another spoonful of the stew into his mouth. "Slow down and eat them carrots, too. And that goes for you, too, Jimas. Jilla put 'em in the stew for a reason you know."

“She don’t like ‘em no more’n me,” Jimas piped in. His middle son had just turned ten this past summer and was still excited from helping chop down the tree this afternoon. He was already as tall as his older brother, still with a lot of his growth ahead of him. The boy did seem to enjoy helping. Silas had done most of the work, naturally, but Jimas was surprisingly helpful. *Maybe Anson will need some help with his woodcutting come the spring*, Silas thought. *Jimas’s ‘bout the right age and he’ll certainly be big enough.*



The next morning, Silas was on the road early. Since Jilla and Nippi had the house chores today, he took Pectin and Emmie with him. His youngest, twins and just turned five, were happy to get to visit the little village of Valsborg. It was good for them to be out of the house; Jilla and Nippi were going to clean the sleeping loft today. Getting these two out from under their feet would help their task go so much faster. They didn’t own all that many toys, but the twins could make more of a mess than any of his other children had.

“Hello, Silas!” someone called to him as they walked into the village of Valsborg.

Silas looked around to return the greeting but didn’t see anyone immediately. He turned to the road again and started to walk away.

“Wait up, lad! I need to talk with you.”

Silas stopped again. Mayor Wilhem crawled out from under a large stand of shrubs that served as a gateway on either side of the road. The mayor waved, brushed his clothes, and walked to Silas and the children.

“Whatcha doin’ under them shrubs, Mayor?” Silas asked as he shook the Mayor’s extended hand. “Some new kind of mayorin’?”

“You could call it that, I suppose. My wife was looking to set me in to some chores today. It’s my duty to the people to be available should they need any mayoring done.” Mayor Wilhem smiled and shook Silas’ hand vigorously. “So, I was a’keepin’ myself ready, should the need arise. You and your kin need anything official-like?”

“Not that I know of. Why the shrubs?”

“Would anyone really look for me in a garden of any kind?” Mayor Wilhem chuckled and pulled at Emmie’s pigtail. “Just don’t let my secrets be flyin’ off your lips, will you lass?” His daughter stepped behind Silas’ legs and out of the Mayor’s grasp. Wilhem continued, “Anyway, you doin’ anything special in town today?”

“I’m just in to see the butcher. He dressed a lamb for me last week. Maybe I can sell a few to him today,” Silas said as he patted Emmie’s hand to reassure her. The Mayor was a harmless old prankster, feared by many children and all the gardens in the vicinity.

“Cora’s off to her sister’s in Willowby last evening. Since the Solstice is day after tomorrow, I guessed you’d want to speak with her. But she’s already gone. Every time one of the old high holidays comes around, you been speakin’ with the Widow Cora about your Tinna.” Wilhem tried another grab at Emmie’s hair, laughing all the while. “If you have the time, stop by the house for some lunch. The kids’ll be hungry by then. It’s a long walk to your farm, ‘specially if you’re young and hungry.”

Wilhem bent down and whispered towards Pectin, “I think I saw some oat sweet cakes goin’ in the oven this morning. Maybe my wife won’t miss one or two.”

Even the promise of sweets couldn't bring Pectin out from behind his father's legs. The mayor's wife was a very good cook, probably the best in the area. Silas wasn't going to pass up the opportunity for his children or his own sweet tooth when it came to it. *Besides*, he thought, *it just wouldn't be polite*.

"Thanks, Mayor." Silas said. "That would be nice. The farm didn't do too good this past year."

"Nobody 'round here did well. But we do what we can. Next year'll be better." Wilhem looked at dark shape of Mount Brocken in the distance. "If you need help, you know where to find me. I'll round up some stout lads if we need 'em."



The night was just getting cold as the sun set beyond the horizon. The wind was picking up as Silas looked silently towards Mount Brocken. The peak was still shrouded in the darkness of the early night. The mountain itself seemed to jut into the sky as though it was trying to blot out the stars. A steady breeze blew off the mountain. *It'll be cold tonight*, Silas thought. *I'd best get a heavier cloak*.

By the time he had retrieved a cloak and his thick leather gloves, his sign was finally there. Through the deepening darkness, he could see the glow of a large fire. *The witches' bonfire!*

"Tomas," he said to his eldest son, "keep everyone inside tonight. I don't know what them witches are doin', but I'm meanin' to talk with 'em."

"Can I come, pa?" Tomas asked.

"No, not tonight. You don't need to go up there."

"But I got to go the last time," his son pleaded.

*And saw too much for your own good*, Silas thought. "You need to stay here and keep the young'uns inside, son. If I don't get back by morn, you're gonna have to get the young'uns up and goin'. You know the chores and what they gotta do. Take Pectin and Emmie with you when you take the sheep to the field."

"I can help with them witches, Pa. Jilla can handle the kids."

"No, son. You need to keep your mind on the chores. You and Jilla will need to keep the kids safe 'til I get back. If I don't come back..."

"What'cha gonna do, pa? Somethin' dangerous?" Tomas asked as he closed the barn door.

"I'm gonna get your ma," Silas said firmly as he started off the porch. "Get on to your supper. And keep the house closed up tonight."

Silas stopped at the step only long enough to get a walking stick before striding into the darkness.



"Why Tinna?" Silas asked. "Why not one of your kind?"

"She is local. That is important." The tall witch spoke strongly. Behind her, the bonfire glowed a pale red as it burned some foul substance. Other witches scurried around tending the fire with reverence and moving drums around the clearing. The tall witch continued. "And she is well suited for her task. The creatures of the other realm will hate her, though. They will rend the lands and attack her. She will have to endure."

"Is she safe?"

“For now,” the witch spoke slowly, “yes.”

“For now? She’s in danger? You mean that she could be hurt by them creatures?”

“They cannot harm her directly, try though they may. They will hate her and will hate her more the longer she stays. She will fail her task only if she hates them. If she returns their hatred, even in the tiniest degree, they will win. Then she would be vulnerable. That is the only way she can fail. Only hatred allows them to win and remove her presence from the portal.”

“Tinna couldn’t hate them.”

“That is why she is was chosen. She is well suited for her task. If she fails, the creatures from the other world will surely kill her.”

Silas’ voice dropped to a low whisper. “Does... does Tinna know this?”

“I do not know.” The tall witch turned away from Silas and watched the fire burn in silence. Without turning to face him, she spoke again. “She was not told everything. She only knows that she and she alone protects everything that she loves... loved. She may have guessed by now. But only those that know hatred can see it in others.”

“Can I see her?” Silas said, stepping up to stand next to the witch.

“Only in a very limited sense. Your Tinna is the portal now, or part of it, anyway. She blocks traffic between this world and the next.”

“Does that mean she is dead?”

“No. She chose to become the portal. Blame me if it eases your mind, or blame the old ways and those that still revere them. Hate us, if you need. Only Tinna could do this, and she chose to take the task upon herself.”

“Can you let me see Tinna? Now?”

“We can open this end of the portal only. Her presence prevents the portal from opening completely. But maybe you can sense her presence in the portal. It will be difficult and the spell may not last long.” The witch looked at him, as if she were trying to read his soul. “It might be very dangerous – dangerous for you, for her, for this world. Should opening the portal break the previous spell, it may destroy us all. If you threaten the world, we will break the spell and strand you with your wife. Do you wish to risk this?”

“I will. I must.”

The tall woman pushed the hood of her dark cloak back to fully reveal her face. She was much prettier than Silas had expected, but her eyes seemed distant and her mouth sad. “Then be ready an hour before midnight. We will attempt to open the portal then. Leave this place until then. We must prepare.”



Silas struggled to find a foothold, but there didn’t appear to be anything solid in this place. The sensation of near falling unnerved him somewhat. *If ghouls and elves can tolerate this, so can I*, he thought. The light was not as intense as he had first thought. As his eyes adjusted to the strange brightness, Silas could see that the light came from everywhere but nowhere.

*Sightseeing ain’t finding Tinna.* He tried to walk, but his feet didn’t contact anything. Still, his intent to move seemed more important than the actual movement of his legs, and Silas soon found strange shapes moving past him. He turned. His passage disturbed the air as if he had walked through a dozen spider webs. *I shouldn’t get lost, leastways.*

“Tinna!” he called out. “Are you here?”

Nothing answered him, so he continued moving about trying to find something. The witches had promised him only one hour before they would have to close their portal.

Thump! Something solid blocked his way. There was nothing there that he could see, just more of the glowing air that was all around. But he could not move through it.

“You cannot go through. Turn back before you hurt yourself.” A calm female voice sounded through the eerie atmosphere. Silas knew that voice; it was Tinna’s voice. He had missed hearing the sweet nature of his wife’s voice full of love, of hope, and of promise.

“Tinna!” Silas yelled his wife’s name. “Tinna! Where are you?”

“You cannot go through. Turn back before you hurt yourself.”

“Tinna! It’s me, Silas! Come back with me!”

Only silence answered him. Silas looked frantically around, trying to find where the voice was, where Tinna was. Not seeing anything, he pounded his fists on the invisible barrier causing a great hollow thumping that seemed to linger in the air like smoke. In the distance, a thud answered.

“You cannot go through. Turn back before you hurt yourself.” Tinna’s voice said.

“Where are you, Tinna?” Silas called out. “Come home with me.”

The distant thudding sounded again. It seemed closer.

“Tinna! Come back. Talk to me, Tinna! It’s me, Silas. I’ve come to take you home. Where are you, Tinna?”

In the mist, beyond the invisible barrier, Silas saw something moving, a dark spot on the glowing light. Before he could think it was just a hallucination, it saw him. It rushed towards him, bashing into the barrier separating them. Silas jumped back at the creature’s ferocious attack.

The creature that stood before Silas looked like a man, but it wasn’t. It was tall, taller than Silas by an arm’s length. It was broad with massive arms. A head that seemed far too small for its body waved about on a sinuous neck. Its body was covered with a greasy green fur, or maybe, it was wearing a green cloak. The creature slapped its hand against the barrier, making the thudding noise.

“You cannot go through. Turn back before you hurt yourself,” Tinna’s voice sounded again.

The creature lunged towards the barrier, slapping and punching with its hands. It searched vainly for some handhold in the barrier, some place where it could pull the barrier apart. There wasn’t any. The barrier was flawless. The creature grew frantic, its arms flailing in the air. Eventually, the creature seemed to accept defeat and calmly sat down to watch Silas.

They stared at each other until a thumping noise in the distance lured the creature out of sight. The light from the portal seemed dimmer. *It must be well after midnight now*, Silas thought. Tinna’s warning sounded again through the misty air.

“Tinna!” Silas called out. “It’s gone now! It’s safe! Come out of hiding! Where are you? Let me see you, Tinna! Come home with me.”

“You cannot go through. Turn back before you hurt yourself.” Tinna’s voice sounded; traces of love echoing in her voice.

“Tinna!” he called out again. He sat back down and watched the mist swirl around. *She can’t hear me. Whatever them witches done to her, she can’t hear me no more. I need you, Tinna. There’s too much for me to handle. Jilla’ll be married soon, I expect, and then what will we do? Tomas and Jimas will have to find work outside the house. That will leave Nippi and the twins. Nippi’s just too young to care for them kids still. She helps her sister, but I don’t think she could do it alone. We need you,*

*Tinna. I need you.* He called out, “I miss you, Tinna. Come home with me. The kids want to see you again.”

“You cannot go through. Turn back before you hurt yourself.”

Silas could not even tell if she was responding to him. The kindness in her voice seemed metered out, a small portion of love casually folded into each sentence. He thought of Tinna standing in the kitchen, dispensing seasoning into the family’s food with a casual but confident flip, giving each loaf a pinch, and tasting each stew or soup that came from her stove. Smiling all along, at the children, at the roasts, at him. That was Tinna. That was love. *Is that what Tinna is doing now, dispensing a tiny bit of love every time she speaks? Has all her love gone, wasted on these infernal creatures? Will she run out of love, like we did with salt occasionally? Will she have enough love left for me? Does she still love me? Could she still love me?*

“You cannot go through. Turn back before you hurt yourself.” A thousand knives could not have cut him more than his wife’s voice at that moment.

Silas sat down again, too stunned to move. Every few minutes, he would call feebly to his wife, but she never answered... never appeared. The peculiar world began to fade as the power of the witch’s portal faded slowly. Silas simply sat there; he didn’t even try to scramble out to his own world.

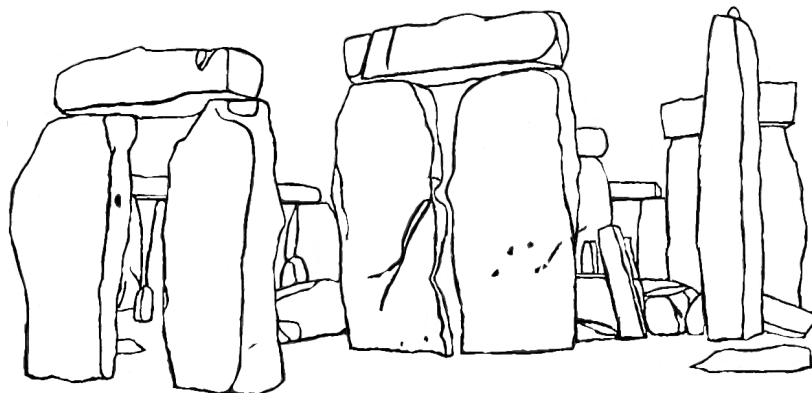
*Maybe Jilla will take the twins with her when she married, or maybe Mayor Wilhem will find a new home for them. A new mother; a new life, that’s what the children need. That’s what I can’t provide. Not without Tinna.*

“Tinna, I need you! I will find you!”

He would stay in this place with Tinna. Once he found her, maybe he could find a way out. He would have to.

Darkness covered the strange land as the witches’ portal closed.

END



# *The Heart Within*

by  
Alice Godwin

“It’s such a shame you have to go tonight.” Sammy helped lift her friend’s case down to the car. “There are some great parties on for the Summer Solstice.”

“I know.” Poppy sighed. “It just didn’t click when I was booking the flight home that it was anything other than a regular Saturday night.” Poppy stamped her foot in mock disappointment. “It would have made the perfect ending, too, a Solstice party in San Francisco. One of those things you remember.”

“Might not be that good,” Sammy said sympathetically. “You know, sometimes the imagining is better than the actual.”

“It’s going to be better than my night, whatever it is like. I’m heading into the winter solstice and my absolute longest night; the flight might be only fourteen hours, but the reality is, I leave here Saturday night and arrive in Sydney Monday morning.”

“Messes your mind, doesn’t it? Our very own form of time travel. Still, you got an extra day on the way here,” Sammy said as she started the engine ticking over.

“Leaving summer and arriving in winter. My holiday is over and I don’t want that. It just went so fast.”

“Always does.”

The next few hours were the usual blur of airport bureaucracy, customs, security, and finally, the departure lounge. Poppy looked at the darkening sky tinged with violet hues and sighed a goodbye. Soon the plane was above San Francisco, twinkling lights on hilly contours of black, before veering to the west and the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. For close to fourteen hours, all that would be beneath her would be water. Poppy settled into her chair, accepting a light supper, some wine, and flicked through the movies on offer. *Maybe I’ll even manage to sleep*, she thought as she tied back her unruly black hair and settled under the soft blanket that had been provided.

Time went by; the cabin lights dimmed; the only sound was the constant vibrating hum of the engine and the shuffling of a few hundred people trying to get comfortable. Poppy closed her eyes and tried to sleep; somewhere between her body’s complaining and her mind running like a movie reel through her holiday images, she did manage to doze and then woke abruptly to a gripping cramp in her left calf muscle. Since she was in an aisle seat, she decided a little stroll might help her leg unclench. She walked to the back of the plane and leaned over to look out the window into the nothingness of night flying.

“Excuse me.” A melodious voice interrupted her thoughts.

She turned and looked into the face of a very tall man. His fair hair hung to his shoulders and there was an unusual silvery sheen to it. His face was stern but striking, and there was something very familiar about him. She smiled.

“I need to escort you to my sister.” He gently took her elbow.

“Do I know your sister?”

“You are Melangell Finlay?”

She nodded, surprised at hearing the name she so rarely used. He ushered her up the aisle past her seat and towards the front of the aircraft.

“Who is your sister?” She half turned around. He remained silent, just smiled that enigmatic half smile and motioned her to continue.

She racked her memories trying to recall anyone who had a brother that might resemble the man behind her; he did seem familiar, but she couldn't think of anyone, and besides, ever since she was a baby, she had always been known as Poppy. Even her passport had that name on it. Perplexed, she continued: at least it might make the flight more interesting to meet his sister. They were now about to enter the Business Class section; he gestured to her to go through. It was quite surreal in the dim lights; there was something not quite concrete about everyone, as though, they were all cardboard cut-outs, imaginary somehow. Must be the subdued lighting, she thought.

“What's your name?” she asked.

They were standing in front of the First Class section; beyond, a sliding door defined the perimeter.

“Taliesin.”

She noticed he was rather unusually dressed: a longish cloak hung from his shoulders, his trousers had the sheen of expensive chamois, and his long boots looked more suitable for riding than sitting on a long haul flight. *It probably doesn't matter what you wear in first class*, she thought. She could almost hear Sammy's whisper, *It's a different world when you're up in that stratosphere*. Sammy had accompanied a few rising actors on publicity tours.

Taliesin reached for the door and slid it open, and into a different world they went, so unlike anything Poppy could have imagined only a few seconds ago.

*I know First Class is vastly different from economy, but not this dissimilar*, she thought. She was standing on the crest of a hill. Above her a scimitar moon hung, eerily white in the night's blackness. The shadowy forms of huge standing stones circled them. She moved back, straight into Taliesin, who was behind her.

“What? Where am I?”

His cloak blew around her, and it was then she became conscious of the cold. It was very cold. Beneath her bare feet swirled white dust; not dust, though, powdery snow that was beginning to melt from the warmth of her body. She shivered in her light clothes. Taliesin looked concerned. He muttered a few words, took something out of a pocket, and sprinkled it over her. It was golden glitter, and as it cascaded over her, the coldness dissolved, and all she felt was sweet, toasty warmth.

“What was that?” She stared at him. “Where are we? And who are you?”

A woman's voice spoke from behind her. “You are in the realm of the Tylwyth Teg. And that was Faerie dust; ill used, Taliesin; we owe her no favours; none whatsoever.”

Poppy turned and looked into the face of a woman, regally beautiful and most certainly unfriendly. Poppy had not ever seen such a cold expression. She was tall like her brother, and her hair, the same silvery shade, was woven into intricate braiding that circled her head like a crown.

“It is usual to bow before royalty,” the woman said disdainfully.

“I don't know who you are. Why should I?” Poppy retorted, deciding if this was just a dream, she didn't have anything to lose.

A figure came from behind and roughly pushed her to the ground; she looked up to see the gleaming silver edge of a sword that looked incredibly sharp. “She is Arianwen, mortal, and you will show our Queen respect.”

Then Taliesin was beside her, helping her to her feet. “Sister, there is no need for such discourtesy. She is a guest in our realm; an invited guest, what’s more; we owe her the least of our hospitality.”

“I really don’t understand what’s going on,” Poppy muttered, feeling vulnerable and a long way from home.

Arianwen stared at Poppy. “We have been waiting for the right time, an equinox or solstice when the elements of air and water create the correct mix of conditions to bring you here. It was so very fortunate that you chose to be where you were on a night like this. No earth to magnetise you, to hold you, to bind you. Very, very fortunate for us.” There was a glittering menace in her eyes.

“Why?”

“You have been summoned because you have something of ours which we want back. Something that was stolen from us.”

“I think you have the wrong person.”

“No, we do not.” Arianwen shook her head. “You are Melangell, great-granddaughter of the treacherous Eirran.”

“Melangell is my name. But I know nothing of my real parents or grandparents. I was left.” Poppy stopped, trying desperately to remember to breathe. She always found this story hard to tell, rarely did. She preferred to think of her adoptive parents as her real ones; they were the anchor of her life: kind, loving, patient, and more importantly, there. “I was left in a basket in front of a church. I know nothing of my ancestors, their names, nothing.”

Arianwen looked into her face, discerning whether she told the truth or not.

“I think you have the wrong Melangell,” Poppy repeated, wondering how many other Melangells were likely to exist.

“No. You are she.” Arianwen walked slowly around Poppy, looking her up and down. Poppy caught a glimpse of Taliesin’s face; stern though he looked, she knew he was friendlier than his sibling. “Who is this Eirran? What did she do?”

Taliesin glanced at his sister; Arianwen nodded.

“Eirran came to us at Samhain when the gates between the worlds are open and the faerie paths can be found under moonlight. She came to our realm with her laughter and her voice that was said to be more beautiful than the angels. She enchanted us, and we, the Tylwyth Teg, found the magic of this human woman irresistible. We invited her to stay, for a year only. One year.”

“Witch. She was a witch. She seduced my brother and stole the one thing that could outshine her. Stole it like the gypsy thief she was.” Arianwen spat the words out.

Poppy looked over at Taliesin. *Brother— was this the brother?*

He shook his head. “Meilyr is still disgraced. Until what was stolen is retrieved, he is and will remain exiled on the isle of Llyn Y Fan Fawr.”

Poppy breathed out. *Go Great-Grandma*, she thought, *she must have been one intrepid traveller to have travelled across the borders of Faerie, sung her way into their court, and stolen the heart of a prince. Some woman.* Poppy wished she could have met this relative; she would have certainly been an inspiration at Grandparent’s Day. Then she reminded herself that her family had abandoned her with nothing but her name and a locket. Her hand involuntarily went to her neck. The locket, was that what they were after? She looked up to see Arianwen watching her intently.

“So you were abandoned as a babe?” Arianwen smiled. Her face glowed even more beautiful in the moonlight, but the smile was as alarming as a treacherous waterfall falling into a dangerous ravine. “What was left with you?”

She came closer, reached over, and clasped Poppy's hand. "This?"

The golden locket sparkled in Arianwen's hand. She yanked it over Poppy's head, and it dangled free, spinning like an autumn leaf.

"It's just a heart pendant." Poppy gasped and tried to grab it back. She felt two arms restrain her.

Arianwen rolled the locket in her palm. "What's inside it?"

"Nothing. It doesn't open."

She laughed, a tinkling laugh like a brook running through a verdant forest of oak and foxglove. Poppy found herself imagining it, and alongside ran the white stag, its antlers silvery and majestic. Poppy pulled herself back from the vision. *Where had that come from?*

"If you have the correct key, anything will open." Arianwen called out something in a lyrical language, and a small elfish man appeared. He rummaged around in his case and handed Arianwen what looked like a strand of golden hair.

"What is it you think you'll find?" Poppy asked.

"A heart. A heart within a heart." She inserted the tiny thread into a filigree of gold and the locket clicked open. Arianwen smiled. "The heart of the nightingale."

There was an audible moan from those gathered who seemed to have grown in number since Poppy and Taliesin had arrived.

"It is returned. At last." Arianwen lifted the tiny, shrivelled, mummified heart out of the locket. Music and singing seemed to percolate in the air around them, whispers of songs, currents of melody, a tiny chorus of melancholy evening flitted between the stones, and flowers opened their petals and bloomed like moths against the harsh rock face. "Yes, it is home at last." She smiled triumphantly. "Once more, the nightingale will sing and the rose will bloom. Once more, our lands will be a place where magic will thrive and prosper."

Poppy looked around at the gathered. There was awe and hope on their faces. Poppy wondered what legacy her grandmother had left when she had stolen this thing, Poppy could hardly believe that this woman, who she had only just discovered the existence of, could have been as cruel and savage that she would have yanked the heart out of a living, breathing bird, surely not? There must be another explanation.

"Kill the mortal."

Poppy gasped and almost fell over.

"No, sister. Surely we can be above such petty vengeance." Taliesin had stepped beside her.

She stared at him. He really was taking the role of protector knight quite literally, and she was more than glad of it.

Arianwen sneered at him; for once, her face became almost ugly. "Why do you bother? She is mortal. She will die soon anyway. Their lives are like our leaves: one short, sweet summer before they fall into the cold embrace of the earth. Why not now? What is there to be gained by prolonging her life?" Arianwen stared at her brother. "You men are all the same. A pretty face is a pretty face. There are many, many flowers in the field, Taliesin, why is this one more or less than any other? Why pluck this one and say let it live when tomorrow it will wilt and fade?"

Taliesin stood firm. For the first time, Poppy noticed he had a sword sheathed to his waist, and in a weird moment, she wondered how he had managed to get on the plane with it. But then, none of it made any sense, not if she really thought hard about it. She concentrated on what he was saying: her life depended on it.

“We invited her here. We have what we want. We should now return her to her realm. It is the honourable thing to do.”

“Yes,” said Poppy, “please just send me home.” *Or at least let me wake up*, she whispered to herself.

Arianwen smiled her treacherous smile. “I think not. Justice must be served.”

“You can’t punish someone for a deed that their ancestor did.” Taliesin had removed the sword from its sheath and stood defiantly next to Poppy.

Arianwen shrugged. “She will not leave here alive.”

Poppy looked around. The guards of the Queen circled them. Their swords shone brightly in the moonlight, a metal unlike anything she had ever seen before. Although, really, how many drawn swords had she seen in reality? she thought to herself, her heart beating so wildly she didn’t know how her body could contain it.

“I beg to differ, my Queen.” A new voice spoke, deep and with an authority that caused Arianwen to turn abruptly.

“Rhydian,” she acknowledged the older man who joined them. His companion was cloaked in a dark crimson robe that seemed to flicker like flame.

“To kill her is to kill one of our kin.”

Arianwen laughed. “You jest, surely.”

“Haven’t you guessed yet, sister?” The other man threw back his hood.

“Meilyr,” both Taliesin and Arianwen gasped. Taliesin strode over and clasped his brother to him, while their sister looked coolly on.

“Don’t you know who she is?” Rhydian stood beside Poppy.

Meilyr approached them, took one of Poppy’s hands in his, lifted up one of her long black curls, and smiled. “You look so much like her. It’s as though she were back again. And yet you are not she. You are you.” He lifted her hand and kissed it reverently.

Poppy looked into his face, a face so very familiar and so very similar to his brother, Taliesin: the same silvery fair hair, the same stern look, but there were lines and sadness written on his brow and in his eyes, as though he had lost something truly precious.

“She is Eirran’s daughter,” Meilyr whispered. “And she is my daughter as well.”

“No.” Arianwen shook her head. “That I won’t accept.”

“Whether you accept or not doesn’t change it from being the truth, Arianwen.” Meilyr held Poppy’s hand tightly.

“If she were of faerie blood to that degree, she would know. She would have been searching for us; we would have felt her presence amongst our sacred pools and rivers. But she has displayed no interest in our existence at all.” Arianwen stared at her brother coldly. “Mortals with one tenth the blood of the Tylwyth Teg haunt our sacred places, aspire to observe the ancient festivals. If she were your daughter, it would be more pronounced, more manifest.”

Meilyr smiled kindly at his sister. “I know she is my daughter. While in exile, I have had much time to devote to studying our realm and that of the mortals. Time flows differently here: just as their lives burn brightly and then fade like a firefly that is born, mates, and dies within the space of one night, so does the running of their days and years. Fast like water cascading through a gorge, fast and furious their time goes. Eirran stayed with us for one year, one of our years. But when she returned to her realm, it wasn’t one year that had passed but decades, a century perhaps. Rhydian has also

researched this through manuscripts, ancient papyrus, and scrolls that survived the drowning of Atlantis. It has been described, this divergence of time.”

“She was with child when she left here, she told me. She had no intention of staying in her realm; she was always going to return. But I think when she arrived, everything was so dissimilar, so disorienting, that she was unable to find the way to return.”

Meilyr was looking at Poppy intently, his grey eyes kind and compassionate, and she realised something then: his eyes and hers were the same shade and colour. She felt like she might collapse with happiness, with shock, that she was here holding hands with her father, her biological father. A prince, no less, of this magical place.

“To your claim that she has not frequented our sacred groves, she lives very far from our influences. So far, to the ends of the earth almost are her lands. The southern latitudes where other Gods guard their dominion, claim their sovereignty, rule over their spirits. Is it any wonder that she has not felt the stirring of her blood? But she does, has done these past few weeks, and even in her very brief time here, she has resonated with our kingdom, felt the running of the Royal Stag, sensed the dryads and the naiads.”

Poppy looked at Meilyr and wondered how to address him: Prince, King, father? As though he sensed her thoughts, he whispered, “Call me Meilyr. And you want to know about Eirran, I can see. The questions are bubbling to come out of you.”

“Yes, I do. What she was like? And maybe more importantly.” Poppy hesitated. “How she came to take the heart of such a sweet and innocent creature like a nightingale?”

“Ah, I understand.” He nodded. “You have not heard the tale of the nightingale and the rose?”

“No.”

He began speaking, his voice melodious and soothing, “Eirran knew the tale, but I suspect the stories and folklore of your people are easily blown away; part of the detritus that is lost as you seek and exchange what was for what is to come.”

“First, you must understand that the animals and plants in our world are the quintessence of their kind; an archetype, if you like. They embody the physical, as well as, the symbolic. The nightingale and the rose both symbolise love. The nightingale is the active, passionate aspect. The song it sings fills the night sky with such clarity and beauty. The rose is the passive facet, the sensuality of its form, colour and scent.”

“One night of every year, love must sacrifice itself so it understands what it is to surrender all. The active, passionate songbird must find stillness, and the passive, sensual nature of the rose must attain boldness and courage. So the nightingale impales itself on the thorn of the rose, and as it sings, its blood flows into the veins of the rose and creates a flower of such a crimson hue it is almost black. The rose becomes, for a moment, a powerful, vigorous player in this tragedy of sacrifice, accepting this profound gift into itself. In the morning, all that remains is the heart of the bird still pierced to the rose bush. Eirran would have found it, that misty morning when she left. I’m sure she planned to return with it. Perhaps she thought it would be the link she needed to bring her back to us.”

He smiled a poignant smile. Poppy nodded and realised that tears had flooded her cheeks without her realising it.

“The nightingale does not die; it will be reborn again; the heart will be placed into the centre of a rose bloom on the eve of a new moon, and come morning, a new bird will fly forth to sing its song. Unfortunately, Eirran disrupted this, so that particular magic was halted in our lands, and many of our flowers refused to bloom, became dormant, buried themselves within the earth. As well, birds and

butterflies also retreated, cocooning themselves away until the nightingale's heart could be restored. One small event can have quite big repercussions."

He smiled. "Your mother was no thief. Impetuous, headstrong, and reckless, yes. She would not have found our lands without those qualities. But she was also intelligent, kind, and compassionate. Her father was an earl, an educated man with a strong sense of fairness and a belief in equality; unusual in the times he lived. Her mother was a gypsy girl, true enough. She brought intuition, vibrant, passionate earth magic into his life, and their daughter, Eirran, combined all those qualities within her."

"Is she still alive?"

Meilyr was very still, his voice much sadder. "I think, if she was, she would have found her way here with you. I think she may have been close to death when she left you and the locket in that basket, because she wouldn't have done that unless she was dying, unless she had no other option. Your name means, 'dear angel,' did you know that?"

Poppy shook her head. He traced her face with his hand, very gently and with such love. "And now, my dear, you must return. Although you haven't been here very long, time is literally flying where you come from. To stay longer would not be advisable."

Meilyr hugged his daughter, and Poppy felt like she had never been so happy and so sad all at the same time. He whispered, "You can always return for a brief time. Solstice or equinoxes are times of power. Find a spring or a waterfall, some place away from people— the more natural the place the greater the magic it contains. Wait and call my name. I will come."

Taliesin took Poppy's hand and led her away. She was looking at Meilyr when it happened: suddenly, she was standing in the aeroplane in front of First Class, and for a brief moment, she felt Taliesin's hand in hers, heard his whisper, "Farewell, daughter of Meilyr," and then he faded. The smell of breakfast bacon invaded her nostrils.

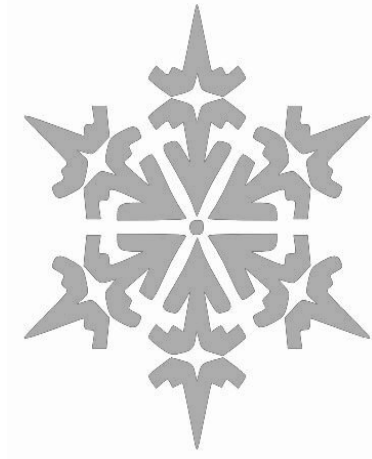
"You right there, miss?" a familiar accent called.

Poppy turned around; the galley was a jumble of heavily laden trolleys.

"Best get to your seat. We're serving breakfast, and we're due to land in just over two hours. Ahead of schedule, thanks to some helpful jet streams on our tail."

She stumbled back to her seat and sat down. Sunshine was streaming in through the window. She opened her palm to find a tiny, silver rose pendant in it, a gift from Meilyr, a gift from her father.

END



# *Sun Stands Still*

by  
Tracie McBride

They feast and dance  
And stoke the fires  
To vanquish the  
child-eating God  
of Gloom.

Yet there is one  
Who honours still  
the Dark.

She sits alone  
And cold and quiet,  
Shaping resentments  
And regrets  
Into a living thing.

At the instant  
Of the Solstice  
She gives birth to  
A grotesquerie.

It spreads its wings  
and red maw wide,  
devours its dam,  
And the Sun  
Stands still.

# *The Feast of Atonement*

by

Thomas Canfield

It was the second longest night of the year; seventeen hours of darkness and silence and cold followed by a scant seven hours of daylight. The sun did not push up over the horizon until just past nine o'clock: a pale, feeble, watery sun, devoid of comfort or warmth. A sun that held no promise and that offered no hope. It struggled to rise thirty degrees into the eastern sky and then, exhausted, began to sink again, like a wounded bird, tracing a shallow arc across the heavens, leaving only a faint palette of orange and pink and salmon to mark its passage.

It was December 21st, the Feast of the Atonement. The holiday revelry commenced the moment the sun began to manifest itself in the eastern sky, the pale, nacreous dawn-light creeping over the vast expanse of the open steppe. There were purists who maintained that, properly, the celebration should not begin until the actual disk of the sun had shown itself. But the villagers had long ago abandoned this practice, had thrown over restraint and resolved to make the most of what little light they were allotted.

Barlas, for his part, would have sided with the purists – tradition was the fabric out of which their lives were woven, after all. But in this instance he had bowed to the popular will. It was the smallest of transgressions – and the most easily understood. Life on the steppe was hard, defined by work, by pain, by deprivation, and by sorrow and random death. Who would deny such men the few pleasures that they had? Who would be so cruel and exacting? Barlas was not such a man.

He stood now at the edge of the village, alone, staring out across the empty steppe. His eyes panned over the featureless terrain seeking something that he never found, something he had sought the whole of his adult life but was never able to define. Barlas was frequently alone, frequently a prisoner of his own thoughts. Or perhaps, in truth, he was always so. For he drew no comfort or solace from the company of his fellow men. He found no enlightenment in their discourse and no wisdom in their hearts. He was not aloof or distant. He participated fully in the life of the village, shared in its sorrows and applauded its few triumphs. But he was not really one of them. Not as it was incumbent upon him to be nor as he himself would have wished.

“Prefect?” Barlas turned. It was Amu Jalair, a senior member of the governing Council. “The Guard are in place. When did you wish to bring forth the Covight?”

Barlas looked back at the village. The revelry was already well under way. The spitted carcasses of lamb and oxen were simmering over a slow peat fire, the rich, fragrant scent of the meat hanging in the air.

“When the sun lies at that exact point,” Barlas raised his staff and pointed, “then bring her forth. Then, and only then.”

Jalair nodded. He hesitated a long moment then asked, “Will you wish to read the Proclamation and kindle the sacred flame yourself?”

Barlas detected a faint undertone of hope in Jalair’s voice. It saddened him. Not for his own sake. He was not bothered that a younger man should wish to assume his authority. But that ambition should find fulfillment in such a manner and to such a purpose seemed an indictment of them all.

“You will attend to the ceremony. You know it as well as I. Only see that it is done with proper decorum.”

“Thank you, Prefect. I cannot thank you enough.” Jalair’s face flushed with some powerful emotion. “It shall be as you say. Everything shall be as you say.”

“When the ceremony is over, bring the Covight to me there.” Barlas indicated the stone columns that the villagers used to mark the changing phases of sun and moon. They had stood in the same spot since a time so remote that no trace nor record of their origins remained.

“Of course, Prefect. And allow me to thank you again. For the trust that you have reposed in me.” Jalair bowed and hurried off into the village.



The high, ululating cry of the herald announced the moment when the Covight was dragged forth from the dungeon. Barlas tensed, listening, for he knew what would follow. The low, ominous rumbling of the crowd rose in pitch and fury, exploded in a torrent of sound. All the pent-up anger and fear and resentment found voice in a communal cry of anguish, a cry that more closely resembled that of a wild beast than anything recognizably human. Barlas shuddered when he heard it and his face contorted in a spasm of horror. He began to pace back and forth with great lunging strides, struggling to regain his composure.

When they brought the Covight to him, Barlas was standing by the stone columns, solemn and severe as the occasion demanded. The jailer had fastened an iron collar around the neck of the Covight, a thick, heavy restraint that seemed to emphasize the girl’s youth and vulnerability. Tethered to the collar was a length of chain that Amu Jalair held in both clenched fists. With it he might direct the Covight like a balky draft animal, might yank or pull or tighten as the mood suited him. Or might, as he did now, bring the girl to her knees with a single, savage movement of his forearms.

“Here is one, Lord, who covets the light,” Jalair pronounced. “Who is ardent in the taking of it and adamant in the keeping. Let her fate stand as a warning to any who might follow her example and embrace her depravity.” Jalair passed the chain to Barlas. A roar of approval rose from a thousand throats.

“It shall be so,” Barlas intoned. “All have borne witness to her transgression. All now bear witness to her punishment.” Barlas jerked the Covight to her feet with a quick, practiced motion that was as brutal and unfeeling as what Jalair had done. He led her out between the stone columns and away from the press of townspeople.

“Please, honorable Prefect! I do not wish to go.” The Covight tried turning to face Barlas, pulling at the collar as she did so. Barlas refused either to listen or to touch her. He did not wish to acknowledge the girl’s agony. But she would not cooperate, would not remain silent, and at last, Barlas turned and looked at her.

The Covight resembled a wild animal. Desperation and despair marked her every gesture. Her face was ashen and she trembled like a newborn foal exposed to the cold. Her eyes sparkled and flashed.

Barlas hated the green eyes. They caught and held the light, swallowed it voraciously. They were filled with accusation and with anguish, with a sorrow too great to be borne. Barlas hated the girl far beyond what was rational, far beyond any strict desire for justice. He sounded the depths of his own soul and found there fear and loathing. Found doubt.

“Not wish to go? You have no choice in the matter,” he declared.

“But I have done no harm! I did not mean to cause trouble. I will change, if you will give me the chance.”

Barlas scowled. "The matter is decided. You must cease this clamor at once. The blame and the fault are yours alone. Had you chosen a different path . . ."

"It is not so," the girl interrupted. "I have done nothing. Nothing! I am only a poor shepherd's daughter. Never have I wished to be anything other than that."

"Even so." Barlas was grim.

The Covights, those who coveted the light, took what was the patrimony of all, equally, and gathered it to themselves. They hoarded the light as a miser might his trove of silver, never content, their hunger never satiated. They bore the mark of their crime upon their faces, the incredible depths and luminosity of their green eyes an open admission of guilt.

Barlas slackened his grip upon the chain now, hating the feel of it in his hands. "Bear in mind that you have violated the edicts," he said. "There is but one means of redress for such an act. One, and no other."

"What care I for your edicts! Guards have seized me from my home, deprived me of everything I had ever known. They have thrown me into the lowest dungeon, castigated and tormented me. All this in the name of justice! What manner of justice is this, and what manner of men who administer it?"

"Hard men. But no harder than circumstances dictate that they be."

"I will not argue points of law. Only if my sorrow is worth anything, if the hurt in my heart is a true measure of my contrition, I would have you consider them. They are all that I have left, all that I still possess."

Barlas looked at the girl, looked at the green eyes which were damp and misty, luminous with some strange, unearthly light. Infernal eyes. Eyes which cut Barlas and flayed him, gave him no peace.

"Enough! Your life is not mine to spare."

"But I solicit your forgiveness. I appeal to your compassion." The girl's face had become gaunt, stripped of its freshness and youth.

"Forgiveness is not the province of my office," Barlas said, and even as he spoke those words, he wondered how it could be so.

"You will not help me, then? You will do nothing to prevent my death?"

"Nothing." Barlas's mouth was a thin, hard line inscribed upon his face. "You have seen yourself how the sun dwindles and fades. How like it is to a dying ember. It must, and it will, be restored. Whatever the cost." And then, hesitating, he added, "Perhaps under other circumstances, in a world less harsh and exacting, this would not be necessary. Perhaps, one day, such a world will exist. I am not prepared to say."

"I understand." The girl looked out across the steppe, and when she turned back to Barlas, all the vast, limitless extent of the far north was contained within her eyes. "You do not hate me then, as the others do?"

"I . . ." Barlas faltered and it was he, then, who looked out over the steppe. The horizon was so distant and so remote that it seemed to empty the mind, to purge the heart of all the dross and sediment of this world. "I do not hate you, no," Barlas said. And discovered that it was true.

The girl nodded. She knelt and removed the felt boots that she wore, not waiting for Barlas to command it. She stood up. "Will you do one thing for me? Will you remove the collar? I would go to my death as a free woman of the steppe. Not as one who has been demeaned by bondage."

Barlas wet his lips with his tongue. This was strictly forbidden, of course. But Barlas felt that he must make some gesture, must alleviate the girl's suffering in some concrete way. Without speaking, he

removed a key from his jacket, fitted it into the lock on the collar and opened it. He cast the collar to the ground as though he could not bear the touch of it.

“The cold is not as bad as I had feared.” The girl lifted one delicate foot from the snow. “Truly, I hardly feel it at all.” She smiled tremulously, concealing the pain. “I thought that I should be alone here at the very last. There was nothing that I dreaded more than that. But I believe that you are with me in spirit. You do not harbor animosity as the villagers do. You are capable of listening and of understanding. It is not too much to ask, I believe, to be understood.” The girl looked up at Barlas then and her eyes were immense pools of green, already divorced from the hardships of this world. Their warmth seemed to reach down into Barlas and melt the harsh, aching emptiness that the steppe had imparted to him so many long, long years ago.

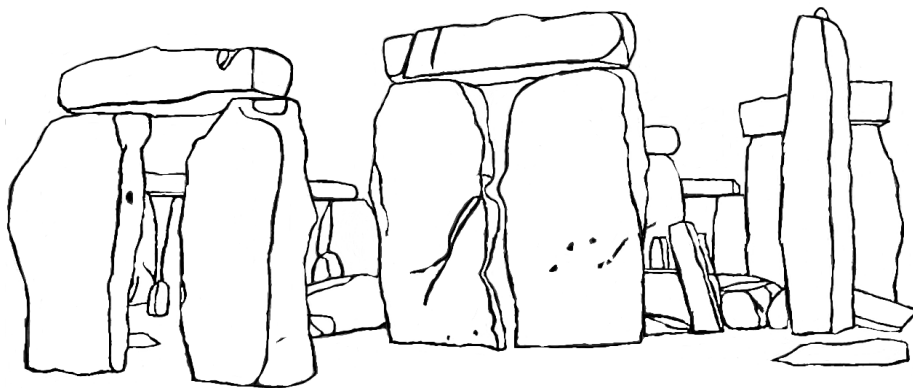
The girl turned then and, barefoot, began to walk across the steppe. At first, her prints were barely visible in the snow only gradually becoming marked by a faint tincture of pink which at last deepened into brilliant crimson as her feet cracked and bled.

The first wolf did not appear for another ten minutes. Large-boned and broad-chested, its muzzle flecked with grey, it loped over the snow, intoxicated by the scent of blood. Within minutes, the entire pack appeared, yipping and howling, their tongues lolling out as they bolted forward in mad pursuit.

The girl never once turned. Her eyes remained fixed upon the far horizon, as though that alone were her destination and nothing, no act of nature or of man, might keep her from it. And then the wolves were upon her.

The sun paused briefly at its apex, a pale, distant globe that bestowed little comfort. It hung suspended in the sky, motionless, as though racked by indecision. And then, once again, began its swift descent toward the horizon. Night rolled in over the steppe: the longest night, the darkest, the deepest and, by far, the most cruel.

*End*



# Tainted

by  
Julie St. Thomas

“I’m tired,” she said, stumbling slightly.

“Shhhh...” he answered with tenderness. “We’re almost there.”

Her words slurred together. “Where are we going?”

He didn’t reply. Instead, he gripped her soft arm just a little harder and led her through the dark hallways; red light bulbs cast a vulgar glow. She leaned into him, her sticky, sweet scent filling his nose and his mouth with saliva.

They passed door after door, all closed, all containing secrets that would break the soul—well, not his soul. That had been broken and burned nearly four hundred years before. No matter, he never had much use for it anyway.

“We’re here.” He led her gently toward (in his humble and often irrelevant opinion) a garishly upholstered chaise. “Relax here... I’ll make you another drink.”

*As if you need it.*

This room, like all the others around it—and there were many more that he had never been in—came with a fully stocked bar, an endless collection of music, and a vast array of pillows meant to comfort and facilitate a sense of ease. His first memory of this room blended with what he hoped would be his last; in his mind, it was nothing more than the dining room of the decrepit and diseased.

He hated this room, this one and every other just like it. It stank of death disguised in perfume and he much preferred the smell of death alone.

“Aeron...” his guest cried out from the chaise.

He hated her. And all the others just like her, an endless supply of fodder for the perversion machine that defined this place. Without fail, they all came willingly—never once had he used force. They wanted this. In the end, even the few that had a glimmer of intelligence transformed into eager whores.

He handed her a vodka and cranberry, knowing she would probably never take a sip: she was too far gone. It no longer mattered anyway: the key to his future was wreaking havoc through her system, and even as she slipped between lucid and unintelligible thought, she reclined obscenely, posturing for his touch.

Soon, the others would come and take their pleasure. They would quench their thirsts and feed their desires.

He hated them, too. For four hundred years, he had been biding his time, paying his debt. He couldn’t remember how he had come to them and he didn’t care. He knew their secrets now—their threats were empty and he feared them no more.

Long ago, he lost count of the degradations of this room and those to whom he served. Not that death bothered him at all—no, quite the contrary—death was the only reason for him to exist. But it should be savored and pure. He was a reaper, a death dealer. They had chosen him, groomed him, and turned him. And he had jumped at what they offered: his service for immortality. His human life of disease and a certain early death could not compete. It was a price he would have paid again and again.

He looked at the clock—fifteen minutes left to wait. In fifteen minutes he would no longer be the indentured servant. So soon his debt would be paid—the contract void.

The girl groaned and spread her limbs apart, draping them over the sides of the divan; she had only a handful of minutes before the end.

He smiled.

Aeron heard them before he saw them—the sound of expensive parchment rubbing together, their skin so thin and dry. They slithered along the floor, six of them—four males, two females. They preferred to remain in the serpentine form and it had deteriorated them. He doubted their ability to return to human form at this point, anyway... another reason to support his timing.

“Aeron,” they said in unison, their voices barely more than a hiss. “The girl is fresh?”

“Yes.”

“Aeron... is she ready?”

“Yes.” He watched as they waited in the shadows, shunning even the dim light cast in this room.

*So pathetic*, he thought. They were lazy and complacent, and *this* is what it had bought them.

“Come now, my ancient brothers and sisters... feast,” he said, the same words he had uttered countless times before, and they accepted his invitation as they had every other time it had been issued.

Aeron watched as they moved forward, near-useless limbs tucked out of the way of their reptilian forms. They would consume her, but not without first satisfying another hunger—one in which death was not the outcome but ecstasy.

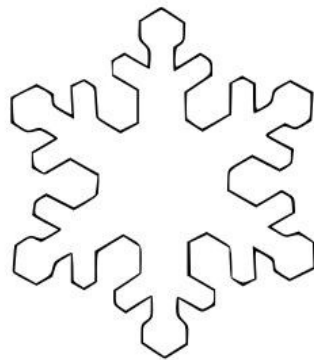
He turned away revolted by the sounds of lust; it disgusted him. Death provided his only pleasure, and soon he would be free to deliver it himself, to drink in the reward of his effort.

The others caressed the girl’s body, preparing themselves to devour her.

On the winter solstice, the contract was void—that was the deal he had made. Four hundred years of enslavement and the ice moon would set him free; the magic that held him would be empty and powerless. But he wanted more than his freedom now. The witch said two drops would kill any parasite he gave it to... so he had fed the entire vial to the girl... and he would feed the girl to them. Her insides should be rotten enough by now. They were greedy; by the time they realized, it would be too late.

The sucking sounds began and Aeron smiled. When the hissing screams started, he was already out the door.

END



# *Darken*

by  
Aubrie Dionne

Syria touched the waning light; her almond eyes wistful and tinged with fear. The sun penetrated through cracks in the reeds of her family's marsh hut, casting shafts of golden glow on her blistered palm. The light felt weak and fragile on her skin, as if the sun was dying or fading away. Soon, dusk would fall like a heavy shroud, and the darkness would last longer than all the nights before. She hoped the offerings would persuade Marduk to tame the masters of chaos for another year.

"Have you completed your work, dear child?"

Syria's eyes darted up to see her mother cradling a basket of corn against her hip. She looked down at the seeds she'd been splitting with her flint knife and nodded. "Almost."

Her mother inspected the pile of broken shells. "We will need more for the fire festival if we are to bring a decent contribution." She waved her free arm. "Go now to the crops and collect another basket."

Syria leaped up and wrapped her veil around her nose and mouth. "Yes, mother." After grabbing an empty clay bowl, she slipped on her sandals and scurried to the entrance.

Her mother's voice followed her on the way out. "And hurry, my dear. The light is giving way."

The warning was unnecessary. Syria could feel the heightened anticipation in the air, like the eager crackling of a fire untended. Scribes scurried to the Ziggurat Temple, carrying baskets of barley and toting sacrificial goats behind them. It was the twelfth day of the Festival of Renewal, and the daylight hours dwindled.

Syria wove through the scattering scribes to the crops behind her family's hut. Stepping over an irrigation ditch, she settled by the nearest shrub and plucked the seeds with nimble fingers. The sun blazed red and gold in the sky, spreading a smear of color behind her on the horizon. She could smell the smoke of the festival fire and hear the low chants of the Priest King.

She walked into a grove with one hand dropping the seeds into the basket while the other prodded the leaves, rejecting all but the most ripe. The darkness was approaching, and she wasn't going to take a chance that she would upset the Gods with underdeveloped offerings.

A young man's voice broke her trance. "It's all propaganda."

Syria peaked through the branches, spying two scribes, one tall and lithe and one short and round. She recognized the tall one as Tigris, the Priest King's son. His friend was a lowly worker from the temple. If they caught her scrambling for more offerings at this late hour, her family might be punished. Syria stopped picking and hushed, holding her breath.

"Every year, we give the best of our harvest to this God when we could use it for ourselves. There are starving families that can ill afford the luxury." Syria looked up at the sky as if it would send a bolt of lightning to fry Tigris right on the spot. But no such harm came. The young man stood unscathed and arrogant, as always, with defiance shining in his brown eyes.

"You of all people would know the answer to that," the round boy responded. "We must obey the words of the Priest King."

"Pah," Tigris spat, "My soul can no longer bear such excessive sacrifice and penitence. When I am Priest King, I will reward my people. The blood of the goats will be saved."

The round boy fidgeted with the corner his robe. “But what of Marduk? With scant offerings, he will not hold the darkness back.”

Tigris sighed and put a calm hand on the boy’s shoulders. “It is a story, dear Basra, fabricated to frighten our people into obedience. Tonight, I will prove it.” His eyes narrowed like the beaded black eyes of a serpent. “You watch and see. When I steal the offerings, no evil shadows will come.”

Syria almost dropped a handful of seeds. She covered her mouth to hold back a gasp. Such words of blasphemy stirred poison in her stomach. She wanted to stand up right then and slap his wrist, but he was the Priest King’s son and she would pay a high price for her insolence. Instead, she clutched a cramp in her side and listened.

Like Syria, the round-bellied boy was shocked into silence. Tigris had to pull on his robe to get him to follow. “Come now, Basra, we must attend the festival. The time of reckoning grows near.”

The scribes disappeared into the wheat stalks at the far end of the crops, the long grasses swaying with the swing of their arms. Syria waited until the fields were silent and still. Her first instinct was to run back and report the sacrilege to her mother, but she held her tongue, biting the tip as if to silence her words. To accuse the Priest King’s son of heresy would draw negative attention on her and her family.

Syria resumed her picking, this time with shaky fingers and a feverish chill. No, it was better to attend the festival quietly and watch the offerings with a protective eye.



The bonfire raged, flames rising to the sky far above her head as Syria danced and sung. Each time she approached the altar, she scanned the overflowing baskets and bowls making sure the offerings were accounted for. Her basket of split seeds lay at the far corner of the conglomeration, the yellow kernels glowing burnt amber in the firelight. She was proud of her accomplishment and horrified at the same time, thinking all the while that Tigris would tip it over to spill in the mud at the dancers' feet.

The Priest King’s son was across the festival, donning ceremonial robes for the final rites. She’d kept a steady eye on his swash of dark hair all night long as it bobbed through the crowd. He’d kept his distance from the altar, but Syria knew it was a ploy. His robust cohort was nowhere to be seen, and Basra’s disappearance gnawed on Syria’s nerves. She felt like she only had two pieces of a three piece puzzle.

The murmurings of the crowd hushed as the Priest King emerged from the temple and paced down the stone steps, his sashes and scarves trailing behind him like undulating waves. His arms rose, palms up to the sky as he beckoned the tribes to kneel at his feet. The chanting began again, loud and low, people digging down deep in their throats to honor Marduk, the Herald of Light.

As the people congregated at the temple steps, they left the sacrificial altar untended. Syria glanced back over her shoulder and saw Tigris dart through the crowd.

“Come, child.” Her mother pulled her arm.

“You go.” Syria’s eyes flashed above the veil. “I’ve forgotten my sandals. I’ll catch up.”

“Very well.” Although her mother’s face was veiled, Syria knew that she was disappointed in her irresponsibility. Syria fumed. If only her mother knew that she protected them all!

“I won’t be long, mother.” Syria pushed through the crowd. It was like treading water against the tide. The throng of tribes swelled around her, and she fought to cut a path through.

When she reached the altar, she saw Tigris and Basra stepping among the baskets like thieves. As she crept up, a white-headed goat bleated, announcing her presence. They caught her with one foot up in the air.

Tigris spoke first, "Who is this? A spy?"

"Stop!" She tried to sound authoritative, but her voice came out as a weak plea. "You mustn't touch the offerings."

Tigris looked at her like he would a gnat. "Basra, tie her up. She'll alert everyone of our plot."

Syria turned to run, feeling like the world spun in slow motion. Her body shook all over from the offense to the altar and the threat to her own freedom. To her surprise, Basra was faster than she assumed and overpowered her, slamming her to the ground with his fat body.

"You'll never get away with this," Syria spat out before he shoved her veil in her mouth. She kicked him in the legs, but he held her down and dragged her back to the altar. Tigris found rope and tied her arms and legs together behind her back as Basra held her in place. She struggled to scream, but the veil was a wet glob in her mouth. The chanting was growing louder, and no one would hear her cries over the reciting of the ancient scriptures.

Wide eyed, Syria watched as they hefted the baskets away from the display. She wiggled until her wrists felt raw but could not break free. Her heart felt like it would break with each offering striped away.

"Oh, most honored Marduk," she prayed in a whisper, "do not take offense." But no higher deity answered her pleas. In fact, as they stole more and more, leaving the altar bare, Syria questioned her own faith in the Priest King. Was Tigris right? Was it all a charade?

Tigris was laughing and whooping at the sky, challenging the heavens with a clenched fist. "Take that, legions of chaos," he said. "You are nothing but foul dreams." Just as Basra's grubby fingers groped a jar of figs, a scream ripped out to soar over the chanting. Syria's head shot up.

Dark clouds stormed above the crowd. Thunder rolled in like the growl of an ancient beast come to hunt. There was movement in the vaulted sky above. Syria squinted her eyes to focus. Wispy shapes flew through the air. At first, she thought it was clouds in the wind. Then, sudden as a dagger strike, one shadow swooped down to disappear in the crowd. The darkness congealed into something more substantial. It grew wings and arms. The talons enveloped an innocent bystander, and the shadow took off into the air with the unlucky man screaming and flailing his legs.

Syria's heart clenched in her chest. The gate of heaven was left unguarded, and the masters of chaos poured from the darkness above.

A woman screamed, her veils falling from the sky, as another winged messenger spirited her away. The tribes scattered, people running for shelter. Syria fought against her bindings. If she didn't return the offerings, they would all be carried away.

"Tigris, bring back the offerings." Her voice was weak against the din of screams.

Tigris stood gaping at the spectacle like a dumb donkey. "Tigris." She tried again. "Bring back the baskets!"

He looked at her, and a strange expression crossed his dark features. His eyes blinked as if he'd been hit in the face with sand.

Tears ran down Syria's face. "Tigris, please."

To her horror, the Priest King's son scampered away, disappearing behind a tangle of marsh weed. Syria turned her head to Basra and saw him kneeling before a large, winged creature made up of swirly

smoke and shadows. Black horns sprouted from its head in wisps of gas. He whimpered, fig juice running down his cheeks, as the monster reached out with elongated claws.

It was then, in her complete desperation, that Syria remembered the flint knife tied in her sash. Twisting her hand at an unnatural angle, she unsheathed the metal and turned the blade on the ropes.

Her bindings came undone just as Basra was taken into the night, leaving her alone at the altar. Syria jumped to her feet, pulling the veil out of her mouth. She searched the area around her for any sign of the missing baskets. Footprints led to several thatched huts lining the main square.

Syria chanced a look at the sky. The minions of chaos were riding the winds above her head, cackling and howling with excitement. If she wasn't careful, they'd snatch her up as well. Catching her breath, she sprinted faster than she'd ever run before.

The first hut was full of children hiding underneath tables and homespun rugs.

"Get away," a little boy hissed, "You'll draw attention to us!"

Syria shook her head. "No, I need your help to bring the offerings back to the altar." She reached for his arm but he slapped her away.

"It's too late," another little girl cried out. "We've angered the Gods. Marduk has abandoned us."

"Not if I can help it," Syria said through gritted teeth. She dipped back under the woven tapestry covering the entrance. If no one would help her, then she'd drag all the offerings back herself. She scoured three more huts before she found the baskets stashed away like looted treasure underneath a tarp in a goat pen.

Looking at the pile of heavy baskets, Syria felt overwhelmed. It would take her several trips. How was she going to bring it all back before the shadows found her? She collapsed on her knees, grabbing the barren earth with her hands. Memories of her mother and the other people in her village came to her. She hoped her family and friends were safely hidden.

Syria sniffed back a sob. She could not let the masters of chaos wreak havoc until they completely ravaged her home and stole everyone dear to her. She had to try.

Grabbing the first basket, Syria dragged and pulled until she reached the edge of the tarp. The sky was still swarming with dark shadows, and the basket weighed her down. She would be a sitting target.

"I'll help you."

Syria whipped her head around and saw Tigris standing behind her, shielding his head from the sky with his arm. He still stood tall, but his eyes had lost their luster. Dark circles belied his waning confidence and the folly of his misdeeds.

Syria was tempted to shout at him how she didn't need a coward's help. Considering the situation, she thought better of it and handed him the basket. "You take the larger ones."

Together, they ran back and forth underneath the storm of shadowy minions. As she ran, Syria forced herself to focus on the task at hand and not glance up. She wondered if she imagined it, but she felt a definite presence at the altar. Every basket that she brought back strengthened that presence until she could make out the hulk of a giant shadow hovering beyond the offerings.

"Come on, we only have a few baskets left," Tigris yelled from across the cobblestones of the main square. Syria covered her head with one of her scarves and met Tigris under the tarp. His arms were filled with two great baskets of barley.

"There's one left." Tigris shifted the weight of the baskets, preparing to run. "If you can bring the last basket, we will be done."

Syria looked down through the baby goats and spotted her own basket of split seeds nudged between the water troughs. She picked it up, careful not to spill one single kernel, and cradled it against her chest.

Tigris had already reached the altar with his baskets, so the final act was up to her.

Taking a deep breath, Syria clutched the basket and ran, zigzagging across the main square. Other than Tigris, she was the last person left in the open. The other tribes had fled long ago or found shelter in the thatched huts.

Syria could feel the shadows closing in behind her, as if the beings sensed their imminent demise. One look over her shoulder confirmed it. The monsters soared toward her, picking up speed. She would never reach the altar in time.

“Tigris,” Syria shouted, “I’ll throw the basket to you.”

But Tigris had other plans. He had that strange look in his eyes again, as if he would abandon her. Syria’s heart skipped a beat. Tigris took off running again, but this time toward the flying beasts. “Run! I’ll fend them off.”

Syria watched in shock as Tigris sprinted into the dark cloud of writhing monsters behind her, arms outspread to welcome death. His white robe vanished into the shadows like a dove flying into the night. She turned back to the altar and ran, trying to blot out the scene behind her.

Her breath came in and out as violent gusts. She felt as though her lungs were on fire, and each gasp of air made her throat burn raw. Syria collapsed before the altar, pushing the basket next to the others with the last of her strength. The woven wicker touched the golden pedestal, a grain of seed tumbling down to bounce off the stand.

Syria heard the hiss of wind and the clink of metal on metal. She gazed up with weary eyes to see a bearded man riding a serpent rise from the ashes of the fire. The God wore a crown of jewels and plates of armor etched in gold. In his eyes, she saw fire and the timeless oblivion of eternity. His head turned toward her and his fathomless gaze touched her own, acknowledging the true savior of the night. She froze, unable to move much less bow, and stared as the God rose to the sky.

Marduk held out his hands and shafts of white light burst forth from his fingertips, littering the sky with falling stars. The shadows cowered in his presence, shrinking back to the dark vault in which they came.

In an instant, the main square was silent, and the immortals were gone. Syria was the lone spectator in the age old battle of darkness and light.



“Syria, you stubborn girl, I’ve been searching for you all night.” Although her mother’s words were harsh, she held her tightly against her stomach, running a hand through her long hair. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“I’m sorry, mother.” Syria’s voice was muted by the fabric veils surrounding her mother’s mid-drift. She was too overcome with relief at seeing her mother alive to be angry with her. “I will be more cautious in the future.”

Silently, she hoped they’d all be more vigilant. The days would lengthen for a time, but the darkness would return again, certain as the seasons and the setting of the sun.

END