

ISSUE 33

ODIN

The background of the cover is a post-apocalyptic landscape. In the foreground, several soldiers in dark, tactical gear are moving through a field of yellowish-brown mud. One soldier in the foreground is wearing a helmet with a glowing visor and a large backpack. In the background, a large, dark shadow of a dinosaur, possibly a T-Rex, is visible against a hazy, grey sky. To the left, a tall, spire-like structure, possibly a remnant of a city or a religious building, stands amidst a forest of bare, skeletal trees. The overall color palette is muted, with greys, browns, and yellows, creating a somber and desolate atmosphere.

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ISSN: 2204-4655

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From the Editor

BETH TABLER

In this issue, we have a diverse range of stories that might not be the typical grimdark fare, but they all have something in common, morally gray protagonists and perspectives. Today's lover of the dark and grim goes beyond blood, gore, and body count. Every story in this issue swims in darkness, albeit in different types. Sometimes it is the gloaming of one's soul, the darkness of giving in to temptation or revenge. And others, we have you covered for straight-up mayhem.

So kick back, pop a cold one, and get ready to enjoy the destruction of foes at our feet or the darkness of our protagonist's souls.

Beth Tabler
Editor

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Bargaining

GARETH RYDER-HANRAHAN

We had eight protective suits, so eight of us trespassed in your holy valley. Eight Guerdonese mercenaries.

‘Protective’ conjures images of steel plate, and war-saints riding off to glory. Put such things from your mind; these suits are mostly rubber and brass. You peer through glass eyeports; you breathe through filters. You sweat like the meat in a stew pot. You can’t eat but you’re thirsty, there’s a valve in the helmet for a metal straw. Your choice of water or Ranson’s Chemical Food, this sticky concoction they give to toothless old men and sick children. Don’t drink too much—there’s no valve down below.

These suits keep out alchemical weapons. Withering dust, caustwind, flash ghosts, yellow mold; manmade miracles to rival anything the gods can inflict on the sinful. My hometown of Guerdon’s infamous for such things.

‘Mercenary’ applied to all of us, but seven of them fought for pay and I was the one who paid them. Running a mercenary outfit has been the family business for generations. By rights, I should be doing battle with the ledgers or arguing contract law well away from the front lines.

When did it start going wrong? I suppose the first mistake was taking this contract, but we needed work, and Old Haith was desperate and rich, which sounded like a good combination at the time. In my grandfather’s time, the Empire of Old Haith was a byword for wealth and culture—and necromancy and colonialism. The Haithi conquered the Varinthian

coast, stomping the barbarians into submission and demanding tribute.

This region used to be sacred to the local tribes. The Empire of Haith—our Honourable and Gracious Employers—decided the tribes' gods were troublesome and wanted rid of them. But as any military theologian would tell you, killing a god is impossible. And killing the locals meant the Haithi couldn't extract tribute from them. So, a generation ago, they brought in Guerdonese mercenaries and doused the whole valley in a toxic stew of withering dust and black salt. The priests died, the groves withered. Holy wells ran thick with toxins. The temples became unreachable. No longer did the people offer sacrifices. No longer did maidens perform sacred dances amid the groves.

'Caustland.' That's the technical term. A place where everything—earth and water, wind and sky—is forever tainted. Artificial damnation brewed by the alchemist's guild.

Professionally speaking, I have to admire the tactic. A few canisters of withering dust put down any chance of insurrection—or inspiration. As far as the gods were concerned, they'd been abandoned by their worshippers. Gods don't care that if one of those maidens tried to perform the blessed dance, her lungs would melt before she took three steps. When they need to think like mortals they use a priest or saint as a mask. Without priests, they lose interest in the wider world. The tribes worshipped their gods from afar for a few years, then gave up and adopted the Haithi state religion. Sullen folk, lost and ashamed.

Only now, the Empire of Haith is at war with Ishmere. Right now, there's an enemy army marching towards Skran Bridge. If they secure the bridge, it'll bring the Godswar to the borders of Old Haith.

That bridge has to be destroyed.

But the only way to get to that bridge in time is through caustland. And nothing survives in caustland, not even the elite undead of Haith. Unprotected bone dissolves only a little slower than skin out there.

But we had eight suits. I told the Haithi that we could make it through—for the right price.

So, eight suits, eight bodies to fill them, and it was up to me to pick who went. I have files on everyone in the company but I didn't have much time to choose. Every moment squandered brought the enemy closer to that bridge. But it's hard to pick who's going to live and who's to die.

Some decisions were easy. Brach, for example. A consummate survivor, the most dangerous man I've ever encountered. Even in a bulky suit, he moves with a panther's grace. Observant, too—always on guard, always ready. That got him into trouble before; he came to us after he knifed one of his previous comrades. But I wanted him in case of trouble.

Marza. Our best scout and a crack shot. If we had to retreat, I wanted her covering us.

Beaky the Gullhead because he's the only one strong enough to carry the demolition charge. Alchemists grew him in a vat. Mind of a child, body of a titan, head of a seagull.

The other choices weren't obvious. Golind: he's from these parts and knows the land; his family fled when Haith poisoned the valley. Now he's back, a pilgrim with a rifle. Old Feodor I brought along not out of loyalty, though he's been with the company since my grandfather's day, but because he could use the extra pay. His wife's got the Stone Plague.

Young Isin was the one I hesitated over. He's the new assistant to the company alchemist, Virek, and he's never seen combat. I'd have preferred to use Virek, but he's had a bad knee since the retreat from

Wallar's Point, and if it slowed us down too much, we've been screwed.

I spent so long vacillating between Virek and Isin that I grabbed the first file for the seventh. Hannette. A new recruit, but trained to use a suit, knew how to fight. I didn't read any further.

And I took the eighth. Brach gave me a suspicious look when we were strapping into the protective suits. I guess he thought I had no place with the squad.

"Feodor's too slow," he said. "Better off without him."

"He's reliable. We'll be fine," I said.

I could tell he disagreed with me. Still, he checked my seals before we set off.

* * *

When you're sealed in a suit, you're cut off from the world. The goggles shrink your field of vision to two little circles. It's hard to hear anything outside the helmet, the thick gloves numb your touch, and all you can smell or taste is the chemical tang of the filter and your own sweat. At first, the precautions seem excessive. The edges of caustland look untainted.

We made good time, marching along old roads that were only partially overgrown.

"This was one of the holy roads," said Golind. The suit muffled his voice. "Processions came this way."

"What god?" shouted Isin.

"No clue."

Brach pointed to a marker by the path. It was so hidden by weeds, I'd walked past it without noticing. "That tell you anything?" The marker depicted a figure wearing an eyeless helmet and carrying a staff or stick.

"Wyrdspeaker," said Golind. "God of justice."

"Gods bad," muttered Beaky. That was all the theology he needed.

Old Feodor sidled up to me. "Boss, I wanted to say thanks for picking me for this. My Ginna's medicine, the doctors' costs. It's hard to carry. You're a credit to your

father's memory. And it's brave of you to come yourself."

I told him what my father told me: *Dietel*, he'd say, *if you want them to follow you, you've got to lead*. I told him that's why I was there, marching with the rank and file. Good man for a stupid aphorism, my dad. *If you're forced to retreat, it's too late* was another favourite. And *always have a contract*.

In truth, I didn't want to be there at all—our employers insisted. A condition of the contract; they wanted me to personally take charge of the mission. The Haithi have loyalty beyond death to their crumbling empire, but I don't. They wanted assurance that the bridge would go down.

"Quiet now," said Brach, "we're coming to the worst of it."

He was right. Soon, we were in caustland.

* * *

Every step threw up clouds of yellowish dust. If I inhaled even one of those grains of poison, I'd be throwing up the liquified remains of my lungs. Brach barked out commands, dictating the marching order. He put Marza and Golind up front and had the gullhead watch over me and Isin in the middle. The message: *stay out of the way of the professionals*.

There was a desolate beauty to caustland. The yellow tinge to the dust made everything feel like it was dipped in varnish. We passed a grove, the trees all stained amber, frozen leaves stiff on the branches. The remains of a village, houses hollow-eyed and jaundiced.

According to the map, we were nearly at the temples. If we kept this pace, we'd get to the bridge ahead of schedule. We didn't stop to rest but kept walking, fuelled by Ranson's Chemical Food.

* * *

We came to a compound on a low hill. A dozen houses and stone outbuildings surrounded a central temple with many spires.

Marza vanished into the temple for a few minutes. We had to huddle close to hear her report. All I could see were her eyes, green behind the glass of her helmet's twin eyeports.

"It's safe, but it's bloody weird, is what it is. There's a corpse in each house. Looks like they were praying when the Haithi dusted the temple. They're—well, look."

We looked. By which I mean, Isin did and the rest of us stood around and watched him shine his aetherlamp at the dead men. Each had a mark on their forehead, an angular rune branded into their parchment—like skin.

"These were the houses of the priests, I guess," Isin told us. We had to duck our heads to stand inside the low-ceilinged building, and I worried about ripping my suit on broken stone.

"God!" shrieked Beaky, looking around in alarm. His beak made his mask bulge like some nightmare codpiece. "God bad!"

"The god's asleep," snapped Brach. "Calm down."

"God bad," said Beaky. "Bad!"

Brach grabbed the gullhead's beak and twisted his head around so he could look it in the eye, goggle to goggle. "Calm down. If you breach, who's going to carry those bombs?"

"Isin, continue," I ordered.

The young alchemist pointed at the jagged mark on the priest's forehead. "This is a sign of... purity. Or absolution?"

"One of the other houses," Marza noted, "is full of skulls with a different symbol."

"Show me," said Isin. We trooped out of one house and peeked into another. Sure enough, a great pile of skulls leered back at us. Isin pointed at the mark on

each skull. “It’s a rune of judgement seared into the bone.” A circular mark, like a target.

“Is that what killed him?”

Isin turned the skull over. The back was caved in. A heavy blow from a club or some other bludgeoning device. “No.”

I glanced through an archway into the main temple. It was underwhelming, a mostly empty room. I wondered what rites those priests performed to end up with so many skulls.

“All right. Let’s move on,” said Brach.

It was Brach who warned us. A cloud of dust beyond the trees, coming at us. Marza brought her rifle up and peered through the scope.

“Hydras!”

I said nothing could survive in the caustland without a suit, and it’s true. For all their strength and size, those hydras were doomed as soon as they’d slithered into the valley. They were godspawn, spirits made flesh, summoned by some Ishmerian saint to kill anything between the enemy column and Skran Bridge.

I froze. I may have pissed myself—it was hard to tell in the suit. The outside world dissolved into chaos — everything was dust and roaring and rifle fire.

“Back to the temple,” roared Brach. We ran, Beaky ahead of me, the bombs on his back bouncing violently. I ran through a patch of thorns. Every time my suit caught, I held my breath, convinced that I was about to die, unsure only if it would be hydra or withering dust that got me. But I survived.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone fall. It took a moment to find them again. I helped them up. I think it was Feodor, but we were all anonymous now, yellow—caked figures stumbling through the dead forest. All identical, except for Brach.

There was no mistaking his ferocity. He put shot after shot into the side of a hydra until one pierced its

scales and let the poison in. The hydra's flesh melted as it charged until it collapsed at Brach's feet. He used that carcass as cover, firing again and again, distracting them until we reached the safety of the temple.

I felt a sharp pain in my forehead as I stepped over the threshold, and thunder boomed. I thought nothing of it and joined Marza at the doorway, providing covering fire for Brach, the only man still out there.

He ran, managing to sprint despite the burden of the suit, throwing himself through the arch as a dozen jaws snapped shut behind him. The hydras writhed at the threshold, slamming against the walls, but they couldn't get in. One by one, they succumbed to the poison and died. It began to rain, washing away the froth of the dissolving monsters.

Though the suit muffled the sound, I heard Brach laugh.

* * *

"Is everyone all right?" I asked, clutching my aching forehead. Isin's eyes were wide and terrified. The little I could see of Feodor looked pale. Beaky's yellow eyes bulged against the glass. Marya waved me away.

Golind was still in the middle of the temple.

"Golind? Are you there?"

"God," he whispered. "I saw the god. When we entered, I saw Him. I saw Him wield the lightning. I heard Him speak in the thunder."

Then I saw Hannette. She was writhing on the ground, twisting in ways humans aren't meant to bend. Reddish slime coated the inside of the eyeports. There was an inch-long tear in the thigh of her suit. Too late to patch. We stood around, helpless, as she died.

Brach swore when he saw her. "Horrible way to go, but those hydras went the same way, and the way's clear. Come on."

"Wait," stammered Isin. "There's something else. I've a pain in my head."

“Me too,” said Feodor. “Like a spike, just here.” He touched his forehead.

“Golind?” asked Brach, but Golind was still fixed in place, gazing at the low dome of the roof.

“He says he saw a god,” I said.

“God bad! God bad!”

“The gods here are asleep,” said Brach. “No one worships them, right? And none of you did anything fucking stupid like touch an altar, right?”

“We brought godspawn to the door of the temple,” said Isin. “That might have done it.”

“Are you blaming me?” snarled Brach.

“We woke up a god,” said Marza, clutching her rifle. “We’re fucked.”

“It’s gone,” said Feodor, feebly. He sank down against the wall, holding his head.

“It’s not gone,” said Isin. “It’s still there. It’s just not manifest.” He pressed his fingers against his breathing mask. “Am I hit? Is there a breach? It felt like something hit me.”

“Me too,” I said. I examined Isin’s suit. I couldn’t see any damage. I peered through the eyeports, but there was no blood on the glass. My head really hurt, too, in the middle of my forehead.

Then I realised the nature of the pain.

“Beaky,” I said, “open Hannette’s suit.”

The gullhead stomped over and tore the suit open. A gory flood gushed out. The same thought had struck Brach and Isin, and they helped me paw through Hannette’s dissolved remains until we found what was left of her skull. I brushed away the slime that had once been hair and skin and muscle, and there was a jagged rune scorched into the bone.

“The god marked us,” I said. Just thinking it made my skull hurt more.

Brach rounded on Golind. “You come from these parts. What do you know?”

“Just stories. My mother said if I was naughty, Wyrdspeaker would mark me.”

“He’ll mark you,” echoed Brach. He rubbed his forehead. “And then?”

“He takes those he’s marked.”

“Takes?”

There was a flash of lightning and a roll of thunder. “Like that.”

“But there were two marks,” said Isin. “The priests had one rune and those skulls bore a different mark.” He nudged Hannette’s skull. “Hannette’s got the priest rune.”

“Hannette was a priest?” muttered Beaky.

“I think the god found her innocent,” said Isin. “I think she was safe.” He looked at me. “What mark do I have?”

“I can’t see. It’s under your mask.”

The next few minutes were farcical. Each of us trying to tug or twist our rubbery masks so someone else could see the rune on our forehead. But none of us could manage it. I called a halt when Beaky nearly tore Feodor’s suit.

“All right!” I shouted. “None of us can see our mark!” I pointed out the arch. “We have a job to do and all that rain’s going to slow us down. But we can still make it to Skran Bridge in time if we hurry.”

Marza stared at me. “You can’t be serious. We’re all dead—”

“Potentially dead,” said Isin.

“And you want to keep going?”

“For all I know,” I said, “I’ve got the same mark as Hannette. The god might have spared me.”

“Why would it spare you?” growled Brach.

“Maybe it spared all of us. Maybe we’re panicking over nothing,” I said. “We’ve no way of knowing. All we can do is press on.”

No-one moved.

“Maybe it only marked Golind,” said Marza. “His family worshipped this god. He’s the only apostate.”

“Maybe it marked you,” snapped Golind, “for what you did at Petrov’s Crossing.”

“What happened at Petrov’s Crossing?” asked Isin and Brach.

Marza shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s nothing to do with this.”

I knew Petrov’s Crossing. My job means I know everything that the company does; all our dirty secrets. Marza shot a kid by mistake. I’d covered it up and buried the report.

Brach prowled around the temple. “We need to find out if this god really did brand us. Someone has to go out there.”

“Who goes?” asked Marza.

“We draw lots.”

The poison softened Hannette’s finger bones enough for Brach to wrench them off. We each drew one from his gloved hand. Beaky thought it was a snack for later. When the rest of us compared our grisly trophies, it was Feodor who had the extra joint.

“Oh,” he said, very softly. “Right then.” He leaned towards me. “You’ll look out for Ginna, won’t you?”

I nodded. I swore I would. I meant it. But I didn’t volunteer to take his place.

To his credit, Feodor didn’t hesitate. He walked out the door and stood in the open, raindrops ringing off his helmet. He looked up, inviting judgement.

Lightning flashed. It didn’t strike him, but he clutched his chest and fell.

“Godshit!” breathed Marza.

“He was marked,” said Golind. “We’re all marked.”

Beaky and I ran out and dragged Feodor inside. Isin bent to examine him.

“It’s his heart, I think,” said the alchemist. “There’s nothing I can do.”

“I saw it,” whispered Feodor, clutching my shoulder as he died. “I saw it.”

* * *

After that, no one was willing to leave the shelter of the temple. The storm continued to rage, and every time the lightning flashed, we flinched—except for Beaky, who wasn’t sure what was going on. The rest of us understood, but couldn’t agree on what to do.

I sat by the door, knowing that every minute brought the enemy closer to Skran, and me closer to ruin. Was there much difference between the judgement of some petty local god and the wrath of my employers? My life would be over either way.

Brach paced about like a caged beast. This wasn’t the danger he could fight. All his strength and speed, all his ruthlessness and cunning, and he was still going to perish at the whim of fate.

The others huddled in the temple. After Feodor died, they removed his helmet. Branded into his forehead was the circular mark.

“Hannette wasn’t marked for death,” said Marza. “Feodor was. We’ve got to figure out the criteria it used. Golind, why might Wyrdspeaker take some but not others?”

“I don’t know. Wyrdspeaker knows the truth of your heart before you do, that’s what my mother told me. He knows your fate.”

“Godshit,” muttered Brach.

“Maybe it’s age,” mused Marza. “Hannette was young, Feodor’s old. She had time to repent and redeem herself. Feodor didn’t. Or maybe it’s courage.”

“Feodor didn’t lack courage,” I said. “It could be random.”

“Maybe Feodor was going to die anyway,” said Brach.

“Maybe it’s that.” Golind pointed at Beaky.

“Beaky? He’s too dumb to sin,” said Marza.

“No. The alchemical bombs. Think about it,” said Golind. “The holy valley was destroyed by alchemical weapons. Beaky’s carrying bombs from the same Guerdon factories, and he was the first over the threshold. You and Feodor were next. Hannette was second—last. If Wyrdspeaker judged Beaky, and the rest of us were caught—or escaped—based on blast radius...” He trailed off, lost in speculation.

“What happened to ‘he knows the truth of your heart?’” scoffed Marza. “One moment this god can tell our destiny, and the next, it’s as random as a grenade? It’s blaming us for things that happened before any of us were born?”

“None of you know shit,” snarled Brach.

Golind ignored him. “Or maybe it’s simpler. It’s the weight of sin.” He looked at me. “Boss, you’ve seen our files. You know what we’ve done. Are any of us... do you think there’s a chance any of us will be spared?”

Before I could answer, Isin scoffed. “We need more information. We need to know how this temple worked.”

“All right,” said Brach. “Search the place.”

* * *

We split up. Any pretence of military discipline was gone; all of them were now scrabbling for some clue, some chance to escape judgement. I wandered about, half-heartedly poking at piles of bones.

Beaky followed me, a child unsure of what he should be doing.

Branch lifted an ugly spiked club from a shelf. I thought of the broken skulls and shuddered.

I found Golind by an altar, hands clasped in prayer.

I passed Marva by a doorway, scanning the storm clouds with her rifle.

Uncertainty drives you mad. For all we knew, we were safe. For all we knew, we were doomed. For all we knew, the Wyrdspeaker knew the truth of our hearts, or he was a mad god casting dice for our fate.

Then Isin found me. Poor loyal, eager Isin, who I'd doomed over Virek's bad knee.

"I've got to show you something."

* * *

He led me into a side chamber. The walls were coated with thick, yellow dust—except one patch. "There was something drawn there." He held up a stained glove. "I brushed the dust away."

The carving was brutally direct in its iconography. Golind's mother had told him stories of the Wyrdspeaker as she'd dandled him on her knee; previous generations of children from the valley had come here to learn the bloody rites of their ancestral god. There were six figures, all marked with the circle-rune of death. One of them picks up a club like the one Brach found. Then, in the next panel, five lie dead and the sixth holds the club aloft, only now he's got the jagged rune of the priests.

"It wants us to perform sacrifices."

* * *

My first thought wasn't "who should we kill?"

It was "thank fuck he didn't tell Brach." If Brach thought that killing one of us would ensure his survival, he would not hesitate. It would be easy, too — any blow that punctured a suit was lethal.

But the suits that kept us alive also doomed us. We had no way of knowing if a single death was enough to buy Wyrdspeaker's forgiveness. Say we all turned on Golind, for example—we could kill him, but we still had no way to tell if the marks changed, not until we got out of the caustland and hosed off the poison. And if one death might not be enough, what about two? Or five? I could imagine Brach and Beaky, or Brach and Marza, or maybe Brach and Golind if the boy got very lucky, skulking around the temple, each trying to kill the other to win redemption.

I thought of the bombs. There was next to no chance of reaching Skran Bridge in time, so the

mission had failed. All that mattered now was the retreat, getting as many of us out as possible. I wondered if we could use them to destroy the temple, to wound Wyrdspeaker that way, but if that worked, the Haithi would have done it a long time ago. Mortals can't threaten gods.

All we can do is argue with them. Persuade them. Bargain with them.

Maybe trick them.

I found Brach in the temple, scavenging the flasks from Feodor's suit.

"Brach," I said, "Come with me. Bring that club."

He followed me into a corner of the compound, away from everyone. "I found a carving. The god... judges killers. Hannette was a new recruit. Green as they come. I've read her file. I don't think she ever killed anyone. And neither have I."

"So that's it? The rest of us are doomed, and you walk away? No."

I saw this glint in his eye, but before he could raise the club, I plunged on. "There's a way to win redemption. You saw those skulls. Kill someone else with the death—rune, and you're redeemed. I think you're safe. You killed Feodor, right? I'm willing to bet you made sure he picked the short straw. You sent him out to die—better him than us, right? I don't think you're marked anymore."

He considered that. "But you can't be sure."

"I've a proposal. You and me and Beak keep going. Without Feodor slowing us down, we can still make Skran Bridge."

He laughed. "All this, and you're still worrying about the mission? About your damn company? You sent us into this hellhole! You got us into this! And I know you wouldn't be here if the Haithi hadn't forced you to go!"

"You've got one judgement hanging over you. I've got another. I'll sweeten the deal. Skran Bridge is on the far side of the caustzone. We can take off our

masks there. You'll be able to see if you're still marked for death. If you are—well, as long as the bridge goes down, that's all that counts."

He had to know that Skran Bridge was out of reach. He had to know that there was no way to get there in time.

"What about the others?"

"If I tell them what I found, then they argue for hours over who's got to die, or they start killing each other. Either way, we'll lose our chance. We've got to go now. I'll order them to stay here, and we go."

"Or they pick you to die," he mused.

"Or that."

"For all I know," he said, "I walk out of the temple and get blasted by lightning. You might be wrong about the mark." But I knew I had him. All a man like Brach wants is a fighting chance. Give him the slimmest chance, and he'll make it out alive. I don't have that sort of courage, that tenacity. I know when I'm beaten.

"If I'm wrong," I said, "then we're all dead. But this way, there's a chance."

* * *

Back into caustland. Back into the yellow hell.

We're not even heading in the right direction. We should be heading north-east, but Brach's leading us due north. I look over my shoulder, and I see your hill behind us, and the southern pole star above it. I'm guessing you're up there too.

The wind's blowing from the west. It whips streamers of dust off the dead treetops. Even dead, your holy valley is beautiful. I'm glad I got to see it.

We'll never get close to Skran Bridge. I had Isin reset the timer for those charges, so there was never any chance of getting there. But we can bargain, you and I, man to god. See, I figure we're a lot alike. You in your heaven; me in my tent, shuffling destinies like files. We're both cut off from the world, too—I'll never

breathe fresh air again, and the girls will never dance amid the groves.

But I don't know your ledgers, your contracts. Isin said you wanted sacrifices, and here we are. I told Isin to make sure that Golind and Marza and Beaky helped rig the charges, so they're all ritually culpable. Maybe my death's enough to remove the mark from them. Maybe it'll take Brach's death too. Two sacrifices seem fair, but should there be any credit left over, O Wyrdspeaker, then let the wind shift south, so any dust kicked up by the explosion falls on Skran Bridge. You'd hate the Ishmerians, too, if you got to know them.

Maybe you're not listening. Maybe you don't hear the prayers of outsiders.

But I pray you'll take this bargain.

Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan is a writer and game designer. Originally qualified as a computer programmer, he took a three month break to see how “this writing thing” would go. More than fifteen years later, he’s still on that break. The writing thing seems to be going.

Gareth has published more role-playing games and supplements than he can even recall, including the award-winning *The Laundry RPG*, *Adventures in Middle Earth* and *The Dracula Dossier*.

He describes writing as “*the process of transforming tea and guilt into words*”.

His debut novel, *The Gutter Prayer* was published by Orbit Books in 2019. Its sequel, *The Shadow Saint* came out in January 2020. The third book in the series, *The Broken God*, comes out in May 2021. More books are in the works.

Gareth lives in Cork, Ireland with more dogs, children and fish than he ever anticipated.

The House of Good Bones by T. Kingfisher

REVIEW BY JOHN C. MAURO

T. Kingfisher combines Lovecraftian horror with a charming sense of humor in *A House with Good Bones*, her new Southern Gothic novel about unearthing long-lost family secrets.

Kingfisher has crafted an irresistibly delightful narrator in Samantha Montgomery, a thirty-two-year-old post-doctoral scholar in archaeoentomology, a field at the intersection of archaeology and entomology. As the novel opens, Sam has returned to her family home in North Carolina. The bad omens start immediately, as Sam is greeted by a vulture perched on their mailbox, keeping a close eye on the house.

Sam is alarmed at the sight of her mother, who has lost substantial weight and seems unusually anxious. The house itself feels strange, with its brightly colored walls now painted a dull white and old decorations from her late grandmother on display throughout the home. Sam is understandably worried about her mother, determined to uncover what is driving her strange behavior.

Sam is an absolute joy as narrator of *A House with Good Bones*. Her droll and somewhat garrulous sense of humor kept me chuckling on almost every page. I especially enjoyed Sam's nerdy digressions on insects and other arthropods, which acted as a lighthearted balance to the dark family secrets that she eventually unearths. Sam's humor also serves as an effective

vehicle to provide biting commentary on racism and generational conflict in the Old South.

The problem with *A House with Good Bones* is that the main plot twist is painfully obvious from early in the book, although Sam herself is oblivious to the clues. Nevertheless, it is a treat to read Sam's thoughts as she employs her scientific training to attempt rationalization of the irrational. Kingfisher is especially adept at presenting the mind of a scientist at work.

The horror aspects of *A House with Good Bones* kick into overdrive in the last fifth of the book, causing the narrative style to shift accordingly. The humor is largely missing during these final climactic scenes, replaced with enough gory detail to make any reader squirm. The final conflict is resolved too abruptly, especially given the long buildup in the first eighty percent of the novel. Ultimately the various plot threads are tied up a little too easily for my taste. Still, I greatly enjoyed the journey.

Notwithstanding its shortcomings in the final part of the book, *A House with Good Bones* is a charming and highly entertaining read. Although I was underwhelmed by its rather predictable horror aspects, Kingfisher kept me smiling throughout most of the novel.

4/5

An Interview with David Dalglish

INTERVIEW BY JOHN C. MAURO AND BETH
TABLER

David Dalglish is a highly prolific author, with over fifteen self-published and twelve traditionally published epic fantasy novels to his name. Dalglish's fantasy series include *The Half-Orcs* (self-published), *Shadowdance* (Orbit Books), *The Paladins* (self-published), *The Breaking World* (47North), *The Seraphim Trilogy* (Orbit Books), and *The Keepers* (Orbit Books). His latest series is *The Vagrant Gods*, also published by Orbit. The first book of the series, *The Bladed Faith*, was released in 2022, and the next entry, *The Sapphire Altar*, drops on January 10, 2023.

[GdM] Your upcoming novel, *The Sapphire Altar*, is the second entry in your new series, *The Vagrant Gods*. Could you tell us more about *The Vagrant Gods*? What excites you most about this latest series and where we are in the story?

[DD] *The Vagrant Gods*, at its core, is about a group of found family rebels fighting against the overwhelming force of the Everlorn Empire. The prince of a conquered island, Cyrus, watches his parents slaughtered, his kingdom broken, and the two gods he's been taught to worship killed before his eyes. Believed dead, he's instead smuggled to the Ahlai family, who travel realm to realm, funneling wealth,

arms, and training in to foster rebellions against the Everlorn Empire. Their hope is to turn Cyrus into a folklore hero, a sort of Robin Hood if you will, for the people to rally around. And so Cyrus becomes the Vagrant in disguise, and trains with the Ahlai family to become a killer capable of defeating an army known for killing gods.

With *The Sapphire Altar*, we've reached the folk hero stage. The Vagrant's legacy has begun, and he's had some epic fights to lend credibility to his claims. But the task before him is immense, and the bloody burdens of being the Vagrant are starting to wear on him, especially the idea of where Cyrus ends and the Vagrant begins. Worse, many who love him are starting to doubt victory is possible, and have begun searching for other solutions...including turning to foreign gods, or bringing back slain gods in forms far more vicious and cruel.

[GdM] How did you conceive the protagonist of The Vagrant Gods, Cyrus?

[DD] Funnily enough, he wasn't the main protagonist originally. Much of the Vagrant Gods was salvaged from an initial rejected pitch titled *Garden of the Bone Gods*. One of the characters, the Vagrant, was originally introduced "fully formed" in a sense, to what Cyrus will eventually become in the Vagrant Gods. He was a mysterious assassin with an unknown past, and over time, you'd learn of how he was a prince of the conquered nation in disguise, seeking to avenge his slaughtered family and gods. So after the pitch was rejected, I went through *Garden* and yanked out a lot of the minor characters that I loved and reworked their backstories to fit them into this new idea. With Cyrus, I realized he could be the focal point, and instead of starting much later after the invasion, the book could

follow his entire journey, now with a much greater emphasis on his personal revenge.

[GdM] In *The Vagrant Gods*, Cyrus is helped and propelled forward by supporting characters that are in depth and rounded as he is. Anyone of them could move forward have their own series easily. For example, the characters Stasia and Mari are complicated, flawed and compelling. What was their creation like? Did their characters evolve through the writing process, or did you have a solid idea of who they were from the start?

[DD] With this new trilogy I did something I'd never done before. While the story was still just bouncing around in my head, I focused pretty heavily on who the main cast would be, as well as what signature moment I'd include to introduce them. I fell in love with Stasia and Mari in particular, so much so that while I was still writing the third Keepers book, *Voidbreaker*, I took a few days off to write one chapter for each character, because I was determined not to lose that feeling of who they were. With Mari Ahlai, it was the introduction of her as a god-whisperer, a person who can commune with dead gods and petition them for their power. For Stasia, I had a single scene in my head, that of her pounding her ax into the bloody corpse of an imperial soldier, and it is in that mad, almost feral state, she is found by her stunned lover. When I came back to VG months later, I started with those scenes and began fleshing out the story around them, and getting a real feel for who they were. Stasia would be brash, crude, and immensely cocky. Mari would be a sweetheart, empathetic, and loathe battle... but still accept the responsibility of her role as a god-whisperer, and tear into battle just as fearsome as her older sister.

[GdM] You take on some very heavy themes in this story, especially the idea of colonialism and imperialism. Did you do any research into the effects of this kind of conquering, and the systematic destruction of culture and religion in preparation for writing this series?

[DD] I looked at it from two angles. For the Everlorn Empire, well, I grew up in a very conservative, religious area, with a lot of people (due to literature like the Left Behind series) convinced the end times are approaching and a religious war will soon be fought across the Earth. Death will be everywhere, and there's a chilling excitement toward this believed eventuality of millions upon millions of people all across the globe dying in horrific ways to plagues, curses, and the like. It's not hard to take those sermons, that ideology, and rework it on an extravagant, fantasy scale. There is the God-Incarnate, and there are the heathen gods to be slaughtered and their people saved. There is a war to be fought, and it will be fought with prayer and blood sacrifice. I touched on this a little bit in Bladed Faith, but there's a lot more of it in Sapphire Altar, especially through the POV of a former imperial paragon-turned-heretic, Arn Bastell.

As for the methods of the conquest, that I did research, as well as have some lengthy chats on the phone with multiple sensitivity readers. Almost everything in the book is a near one-to-one example of something previously done by, say, the British Empire in India or the US government to Native Americans. Honestly, a lot of what is in VG is toned down compared to some of the truly horrifying examples out there.

[GdM] I would love to know more about Cyrus's religion, it is so creative. What was its inception? It is

very different than the religious pantheons presented in today's fantasy novels.

[DD] All of my novels have divine beings involved in some way. The Half-Orcs, for example, had jealous brother gods warring against each other, with humanity effectively serving as playing pieces on a board in their game to prove whose methods were superior in creating a lasting society. With VG, I wanted make these gods actively present in the day to day lives of those who worshiped them. And so it became more of a mutual trust, like children with a parent, for most of these gods... and at the same time, the beliefs of the people directly empower their gods, which means the gods are as much a reflection of the societies birthing them as they are shapers of those societies. Endarius the Winged Lion exemplifies strength, and gives that strength to those who love him. He attends feasts given in his name, and breathes upon the blind to restore their sight. He loves, and is loved, and is considered protector of his island, and effectively rules alongside the royal family he himself appointed.

And then comes the Everlorn Empire, who see these gods not as parents or guides but ruling monsters. Belief is literal power in VG, and if that belief is not given to the God-Incarnate, then it is dangerous, and must be captured at all costs.

[GdM] Your fight scenes are brutal. Many authors use different techniques when creating realistic and enthralling action sequences. How do you craft a believable fight scene? Do you storyboard, play it in your head, pants it, or another technique?

[DD] A good fight scene has an emotional flow to it, and I am extremely focused on that aspect above all else. A lot of the nitty gritty details are in service to what emotion I want to convey. Things going well? The hero

is nimbly parrying every thrust, slashing and carving through his enemies with a grim smile. Am I trying to really push how horrible battles can be? Then we're seeing the broken bones, we're hearing the gasps and pained cries as swords slash open flesh and the dying crawl along the floor. Am I trying to keep things tense in a character specific duel? That's when the heavy details come out. I'm describing the individual movements of every weapon, laying out their positions, what the POV character is hoping to do, what they see, the tells from a twist of an ankle or the pulling back of a parrying dagger. Details become clearer. The sound of steel hitting steel, the strain to hold back a brutal hit, the pain, the wrenching of muscles, all to slow down time and force you to stay in that moment as the battle commences until I'm ready to guide the emotional flow into the next release, be it victory or heartbreaking defeat.

[GdM] You have extensive experience as both a self-published and traditionally published author. What do you see as some of the pros and cons of these alternative routes to publication?

[DD] The best part of self-publishing is that you're going it alone, unlike trade publishing, where you work with a team.

The worst part of self-publishing is that you're going it alone, unlike trade publishing, where you work with a team.

If you are willing to be a marketer, a cover designer, to study trends, to set up Facebook ads, do book promos, do the formatting, and all the while also write the bloody book in the first place? Self-publishing can be amazing. It can also burn you out, and have you scrambling to wear a lot of different hats, some of which may simply not suit you no matter how hard you try.

[GdM] Over the course of your career, how have you seen indie publishing evolve? Do you see self-publication primarily as a pathway toward getting a traditional book deal, or do you think authors can establish and sustain a sizeable audience through self-publishing alone?

[DD] Well, when I first started, self-publishing was seen as something you did when you gave up ever having a trade deal. That, obviously, has now changed. But absolutely you can build a sizeable, sustainable income through self-publishing. People were doing that back when I started in 2010. There's a staggering amount of money going to indies, but because of that, the market is absolutely ruthless now, infinitely more difficult and cutthroat than when I started. I consider myself beyond fortunate I started when I did. If I tried to launch an indie career now, I honestly do not know I'd have achieved even a fraction of the success I've had.

[GdM] You earned a degree in mathematics from Missouri Southern State University. How have you balanced your love of math with your passion for writing? What advice do you have for students who wish to pursue a dual career in English and a STEM field such as mathematics?

[DD] Hahahahaha there is no balance, no jobs, I spent like five years working for Pizza Hut after graduating with that degree and escaped only because my writing took off. My advice would be to do ANYTHING ELSE.

[GdM] How did you initially fall in love with fantasy? When were you first inspired to become a writer?

[DD] I grew up in a small town with a small library with an even smaller fantasy section, so while growing up, I didn't read too much fantasy. I had the *Lord of the Rings*, the *Hobbit*, and a stack of comic books. What I did have, though, were games like Chrono Trigger, Final Fantasy VI, and Legend of Zelda. I adored their medieval aesthetics, and then one Christmas my parents bought a word processor. So began *The Crystals of Power*, my 60 page shameless FFIV rip-off, followed by a handwritten Chrono Trigger fanfic called *Second Death*. I had a folder I kept in my room full of story synopses, all planned to take place in a shared world. So I was already writing fantasy, and then a friend of mine loaned me the Dark Elf Trilogy by R. A. Salvatore. I read it once a year, every year, throughout high school. If I know how to write a fight scene, it's because of Drizzt. From there, I grabbed whatever D&D novels I could find. To cap that off, my senior year, I had a Creative Writing class where the teacher just booked the computer lab, brought us there five days a week, and gave us the singular instruction of 'write something'. Anything. Have a project, work on it, and she'd grade it depending on what it was (be it poems, short stories, or in my case, a 20k word novella). A lot of the early Half-Orcs world-building I did in that class, including the creation of multiple characters like the Paladin, Lathaar, or the Daughter of Balance, Mira.

[GdM] Could you tell us about your approach to writing? Do you develop a detailed outline before diving into the writing itself?

[DD] Everything starts with me daydreaming while I go on walks listening to music. I usually start very wide in terms of scope, pondering world-building aspects I think will allow me to do a lot of neat stuff. For *Soulkeeper*, as an example, I wanted a world where

magic and monsters all appeared in a singular instant. Spells and healing prayers and fantastical creatures, going from stories and rumors to very real in the blink of an eye. From there, I brainstorm basic questions and answers. What creatures appear? What magic? How does it work now? Why is it appearing now? Who are the gods, and how are they involved now? When I start to lock down those big picture things, I then start pondering characters. First would be how they are involved in the grander picture (in *Soulkeeper*, I made the main POV hero someone who would be responsible for defending humanity from the sudden arrival of the unknown).

All of this I do in my head, and generally while I'm busy writing a different book. Things change drastically over the course of a few months as I toss ideas I don't like and wonder how different things might work. A cast of three or four main characters bubbles up, and eventually, when it comes time to write, I have enough of a picture that I can write out a few initial chapters, establishing a narrative flow, some of the stakes, and the overall vibe of the story. After that? That's when I start writing out an extensive outline, building on the things I've already decided and the goals I want to accomplish and try to figure out how to accomplish it all.

[GdM] You are under 40 years old and have already published over twenty-seven novels. What is your advice for achieving such a high level of productivity?

[DD] Ok so start really young, like, in your early twenties. Then get to be a professional writer as your full-time career from the age of twenty-six. Finally, crank out two books or so a year for twelve years straight, and you'll hit that number. It's just that easy.

I'm only being mildly sarcastic, honestly. I've been stupidly blessed with how my career path has worked,

first through self-publishing, then traditional publishing with Orbit. I can hit this level of productivity because writing is my day job, and I try to do around 3k or so words a day, five days a week. Sometimes I hit it, plenty of times I don't, but just the sheer amount of time dedicated to putting my butt in a chair and writing means twice a year, on average, I'll have myself a finished novel that is hopefully something someone will want to read.

[GdM] You have created highly complex fantasy worlds. How do you keep everything straight and make sure there are no inconsistencies in your worldbuilding?

[DD] Well, first you launch your career writing nearly twenty novels set in the exact same world where you absolutely screw up and have inconsistencies in your world-building and even forget you killed off a character at one point... and THEN you start keeping an actual notebook like a smart person, full of character descriptions, family trees, timelines, and other things that can be hard to remember or impossible to find when you actually need it. For the Keepers Trilogy, for example, I have this tiny leather notebook just full of scribbles, lists showing what magical creature was created by which dragon, what the power structure for the Keeping Church is, etc. All things I desperately wish I had for the Half-Orcs, as I come back to it after several years to try to write its ninth book...

[GdM] Do you have a favorite book or series among your published works, or one that you feel especially proud of?

[DD] I think, without question, *The Sapphire Altar* is the best book I've even written. In terms of favorite, I still

cherish the fourth Paladins novel, *The Broken Pieces*, just because the final few chapters are about the most emotionally impactful writing I've ever done and years later I still get the occasional email from readers heartbroken and devastated and wanting to either thank me or yell angrily at me. Or both.

[GdM] Your series, *The Breaking World*, is coauthored with Robert J. Duperre. What is the experience like working together with a coauthor vs writing solo?

[DD] Rob deserves so much credit for that whole trilogy. It wasn't a true co-authorship like some friends I know, in which each of us wrote equal amounts in the original draft. With *Breaking World*, I kinda let Rob go nuts in my own world. He'd been with me from the very beginning of my career, and was who I went to with phone calls whenever I got stuck on a story idea. So he wrote the vast majority of the rough draft. After every chapter, I'd immediately tear into it that day or the next, rewriting portions, melding the voice to something more of a mixture of mine, and overall making sure it matched my earlier books in *Dezrel*. And then we'd have more phone calls, arguments about the fates of various characters, or sometimes I'd just ax an entire chapter because I hated where it was going. I was an awful tyrant, sometimes. How he's still my friend, I don't know.

[GdM] What are some of your biggest inspirations? Any influences that would surprise your readers?

[DD] Plenty of them people can guess, I'd say. *Trigun* massively influenced how I write heroes. JRPGs in general have me creating little found family groups for almost every novel of mine. You can hear the rolling of dice from D&D in the *Half-Orcs* and the *Keepers Trilogy*. Probably the most random influence would be

a phase I went through in college where I read nearly every single Stephen King novel and short story collection I could find. I'd say it, combined with R.A. Salvatore's influence, have made my writing pretty accessible.

[GdM] Which book or series do you recommend as the best entry point for readers new to David Dalglish?

[DD] This has actually become a difficult question to answer because what I tried to do with each major series varies over the course of these last twelve years. In the end, I usually try to guide people to the type of fantasy they like. If you want assassins and breakneck pacing in a relatively low fantasy setting, start with *A Dance of Cloaks*. Are magical creatures, unique world-building, and kind-hearted heroes your thing? *Soulkeeper*. Just want the best written book, with the strongest, most diverse cast of characters? *The Bladed Faith*.

That said, each series of mine is meant to stand alone, so you can also dive into *The Half-Orcs* or *The Paladins*, but I'm always a little hesitant to lead people to those first since they're some of my oldest writing and, well, it can be a little rough and weird over there.

[GdM] What are your upcoming plans after finishing *The Vagrant Gods* series?

[DD] Well, as I mentioned earlier, I'm usually plotting out the basics of the next story while finishing out the old, and I did the same with book three of *Vagrant Gods*. Not only am I about halfway done with the rough draft of the ninth Half-Orc novel, *Legacy of the Watcher*, but I've got about four chapters done on a pitch for a brand new world, one that hews a bit closer to the mysterious world building of *Soulkeeper*, but with

a more low fantasy setting and overall darker vibe.
We'll see if it goes anywhere!

David Dalglish graduated from Missouri Southern State University in 2006 with a degree in Mathematics. He's self-published over fifteen novels, as well as had twelve books traditionally published through Orbit Books and 47North.

He also has a lovely wife and three beautiful daughters, with all four being far better than he deserves.

The Toxic Side of Fandom

AARON S. JONES

Being a fan of fantasy is awesome. Dragons, magic, epic battles: I love all of it and have done for as long as I can remember. Growing up, enjoying fantasy and sci-fi felt like I was part of a subculture and I was overjoyed when I found fellow fantasy fans geeking out over the books, films, or TV series I devoured. Trips to comic book shops, Warhammer shops, or conventions opened my eyes to the sheer amount of people who were passionate about fantasy and it was always fun to discuss ideas and theories of what might happen next in a book or who should play certain characters in the latest film adaptation. Some people would mock us but if anything, I felt that brought the community I was in together. There was a sense of belonging. A team spirit. Over the years, being a geek has become cooler and more mainstream. The growth of all things geeky and the changes in how we communicate have led to certain pockets of fans sprouting up full of negativity and the loud toxic nature of these vocal groups is off-putting to both newcomers and older fans, sometimes tainting experiences that would otherwise be enjoyable.

Now, I love discussions and debate. The world would be a boring place if we all liked the same things. A bit of variety is needed. But it is the way in which some fans (and I will stress that it is a small number) seem to get personal with their insults when they don't like something that is worrying. It's fine to not like

something but surely there is a better use of time and energy than to sit on a computer and insult cast members, writers, directors and other fans when disagreeing with a decision that will have minimal impact on your life? *The Rings of Power* and *House of the Dragon* both had successful first seasons released this year. As a huge fan of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones*, I was, like millions of others, very excited to step back into these amazing worlds. The negativity to *The Rings of Power* was loud. Complaints about the increase in diversity were similar to complaints *Star Wars* fans made around the same time they forced an actress to quit social media due to their harassment. The arguments against people of colour and non-binary cast members were upsetting to read and I am well aware as a white male that if I was starting to feel sickened and upset by these horrible comments then other people would be feeling a lot worse. Fans of fantasy who may not have had many opportunities to see people like themselves in such shows would now be feeling hated and marginalized by these vocal 'fans' who for some reason felt it their right to argue about what people should look like in a made-up world filled with dragons, elves, and other such fantastical beings. I loved *House of the Dragon* and I found *The Rings of Power* enjoyable and comforting. It wasn't exactly what I had in mind but I will always have *Lord of the Rings* to fall back on. When posting mostly positive reviews, it was always interesting to see comments pop up about how much people hated the shows. I'm fine with people disagreeing with me about a series, not everyone is going to love the things I do but I was unnerved by how passionately people hated the show and how they felt the need to get across their hate as much as they could. Reviews should lead to a debate and I love to read about what people have liked and disliked but it confuses me to see so called fans spend their time and

energy writing about how much they hate something and then getting personal with their insults. I'm not an Ed Sheeran fan but I'm not going to comment under posts of his fans saying how much I dislike his music. There are better things to do.

Fans are passionate. Channeling that passion in the right way is important. If you have read George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* or Patrick Rothfuss's *The Kingkiller Chronicles* then you are probably, like me, eagerly awaiting the next book in those series. We have waited many years for the next instalments and although I would love to have them in my hands right now, I know that it is something I am not in control of. The abuse some fans have levelled at both authors is, for want of a better word, disgusting. Death threats and foul language fill up any thread I see about *The Winds of Winter* and *The Door of Stone* and it pushes me away from communities that I would have once loved being a part of. The negativity can be all consuming. Both authors have commented on the abuse they receive and it is something that is just not necessary. The wait for both books may take many more years. In the meantime, there are thousands of amazing books that could be read and amazing, positive communities capable of signposting readers to comparable books. TBR piles grow and grow so the wait for one or two books shouldn't become an obsession. Fan complaints have led to a much needed improvement in the design of Sonic and a director's cut of the *Justice League* movie that for me was miles better than the disappointing first attempt. Fans should speak about what they would like and discuss what can be improved but at the end of it all, people will like what they like and that's that. It's time to just let people enjoy things as they are instead of arguing and wasting time in a futile attempt to force them to feel the same way.

For me, grimdark is at its best when dealing with morally grey characters. I love it when a writer can

show the shades of humanity and that everyone makes mistakes but it is how you learn from them that makes you who you are. I hope those fans of fantasy and sci-fi, who spend their time feeling so much hate, have a chance to reflect and think before they post. Our time on Earth is limited and if we don't want to live in a grimdark world like the ones we read about, then surely we should spend that time promoting positivity.

Born in the area of Birmingham that helped inspire Tolkien's Middle Earth, **Aaron S. Jones** grew up with a love of fantasy. Inspired by his father's interest in Lord of the Rings, Jones caught the fantasy bug and read anything he could get his hands on. Moving to the Middle-East and beginning a teaching career, Jones experienced a different world away from the green of the UK and has been able to mix in his experiences around the world with the time he spends in other worlds to write his debut fantasy trilogy—The Broken Gods which includes: *Flames Of Rebellion*, *Paths Of Chaos*, and *End Of Days*.

For fans of Joe Abercrombie, Samantha Shannon, G. R. Matthews and John Gwynne, The Broken Gods is for fans of epic fantasy.

The Last Radio God

YAROSLAV BARSUKOV

When the radio god moved in, it left a trail of dead cattle: the usual morbid harvest. There were smaller carcasses, of course—mice, raccoons, and the like—but nobody cared about the raccoons; it was the cows' remains that silenced the loudmouths and turned teenagers back into frightened children.

These things always happened during the relocation.

Peter had been waiting for two years. Once the Vatican announced the decision to take down their radio tower, it became clear the god would move into the only remaining one—the one in New Mexico, a hundred-and-fifty-foot latticed monster overlooking a town by a dusty road.

Within forty-eight hours, Peter had driven west. His family's trust fund had all but run out by that point and he sold the car to rent a room in the town. He thought he was getting ahead of the cultists who would inevitably swarm the place, but he underestimated the effects of the Vatican bureaucracy. Their deconstruction efforts stretched over two years. He didn't complain, though; he lived for one thing. It made him get out of bed in the morning, brush his teeth in the evening. Prevented him from slitting his wrists.

He would kill the last radio god.

The bishops had never acknowledged its existence—as if it'd never cut into their broadcasts with a crackling of static and an occasional medley of *antique* Sinatra tunes. This particular radio god had a soft spot for Ole' Blue Eyes.

Same as Andrew.

Same as Emily.

...which was how Peter knew he'd gotten his target right.

The neighborhood kids found the dead cows. Three boys and a girl returned to town pale and empty-eyed, November breath pouring out in little clouds. That had happened at noon and at sundown when Peter stepped out on the porch for a smoke, he saw, over the roofs, lights lick across the radio tower's skeleton.

"Shit." He crumpled the cigarette pack in his fist.

A maintenance van kept vigil at the tower's base; one door stayed ajar, leaking yellow and clean, orderly chords of AI-generated music (*AI-authored*, Peter reminded himself). Two men—nothing more than shadow cutouts at this hour—groped around the huge lattice structure with their flashlights, discussing something in the voices of career drinkers. The steel tubes, black against deep blue, could've been branches of a fantastical tree if not for the spotlights that pulled reality back piecemeal.

"...the ladder," Peter heard. "The ladder's gone to shit."

"Hey!" He waved at the two shadows.

One turned, shining the flashlight in his face.

He squinted and raised his hand. "Turn that off, please."

"Peter!"

"Is that you, Michael? I can't see a thing, turn off the fucking light! What are you doing here?"

Gravel shuffled under boots, footsteps approaching; the sounds came to a halt a few feet away and only then did the flashlight go out. "You shouldn't be here, Peter. We've been ordered to perform maintenance on the tower."

"What, at nine p.m.?" Peter asked. "And hello to you too, Michael."

The man he called Michael wore a sweater that looked like it had grown its own hair to compensate for the lack of its owner's.

"Boss is worried. There'll be people all over the place tomorrow. Cultists, too."

Your boss is spot on, Peter thought. "I've been paying you handsomely, have I not? To leave the tower alone."

"This is different. Boss is mighty worried—and there'll be a real lot of folks here."

In the distance, the second guy whistled a bit of the AI-*authored* melody, managing to butcher half of the notes in the simple progression. That's how Peter perceived the AI music: simplistic. Some called it 'refined,' but for him, there was no point—it didn't go anywhere, never spread its wings. Sure, the harmonies were pleasing, but listening to them was like sitting motionless in the sun.

"Okay. How much do you want?" Peter asked.

A hefty pause followed, then Michael drawled, "It's as if you want something to happen to the tower."

"How much?"

The balding worker turned to look at his colleague who may or may not have nodded—hard to tell in the dark.

"Yeah, I mean..." Michael pursed his lips. "Something fishy's going on here, ain't it? And the boss is worried. There'll be a lot of folks here tomorrow."

"Fuck it." Peter reached into his breast pocket, pulled out his debit card, and thrust it into the man's hand. "Nothing fishy has been going on for the last two years, right? And now, suddenly, you're concerned?"

Michael twirled the plastic in his fingers as if he was seeing it for the first time.

"For crying out loud! How much do you want?"

The man named the amount, double the regular 'price,' but Peter didn't feel he was in a position to negotiate. He nodded.

Michael held his watch to the card; nothing happened. "The thing's invalid."

"It's not. Go again."

This time, two short beeps rang. "Yeah, it works." Michael studied the dial intently. "Pack up the gear, Greg!"

"What, we're leaving?" the second guy called with the tone of someone who'd spent the whole day at the end of a tourist group.

"We're done here."

"But—"

"I said we're *done*."

After a moment's hesitation, Greg sauntered to the van. Michael glanced up, perhaps at the stars, perhaps at the antenna dishes that looked like apparitions of the moon. "It's up there, isn't it?"

"Mostly in the antennae, yes. Radio gods don't usually manifest until a few days later," Peter said. "Sometimes they stay silent for a week. But it's there."

The worker chewed on his lip and, having nothing to add, spat on the ground.

Peter woke and the town woke with him. It was probably the first time it had done that in a half-century, and like anything returning from such lethargy, it emerged an idiot. The town muttered, scurried about, and exploded in bursts of raspy frivolity.

From behind the window came, "Bring the radios! Bring the radios! Where are the radios?" Peter's heart raced. He rolled off the bed, stood on all fours, and giggled. For a minute, he couldn't locate his shirt.

The radio god had manifested.

The euphoria subsided as he dressed, yet that new feeling allowed him to see his room the way one sees something familiar in a photograph taken from an unusual angle. A tiny space with the bed wedged in the middle, a stained cupboard, a poster on the wall—why had he kept the poster? He owned no individual

pictures of Emily or Andrew, so a snapshot of their heyday, with all three of them, was the only alternative—or so he'd always told himself; but now he wondered if he was prone to lingering masochism, whether it was his subconscious attempt to anchor himself in a future that never was.

In the poster, Emily wore her signature white dress, hands cradling a ukulele—she'd been the driving force behind their trio, delicate, ingenious in every performance. A concert with a radio god had been *her* dream; Andrew's and Peter's, too, but mainly hers. The picture had been taken at Carnegie Hall. Peter remembered the lights on the balconies dimming, leaving only the warm glow on stage; if anyone asked him to describe happiness, it would be that glow.

Carnegie Hall no longer existed. They'd demolished it after the music moved on from live performers to algorithms and the profits dwindled. Didn't matter, Peter told himself. There was only this space now, the bed, the cupboard, plus what he needed to do.

The living room stayed silent except for one change: no AI-authored tunes this morning, and the house's owner, Miss Flannery, aged fifty-three, stood at the window. A frying pan purred the way cats can purr even when the world is flipped upside down.

"Miss Flannery?"

"Tss." She moved her head from side to side without turning it, like those actors in third-rate thrillers. "Look at them. Just look. Heretics strutting around with their *radios*."

Peter clasped his hands behind his back to hide his own small receiver. He cursed when his fingertips squeaked against the plastic, but Miss Flannery took no notice. "And what do they want to hear, anyway? Some *written* music?"

"An answer to their life's questions, perhaps."

It occurred to Peter he'd said that out of spite. He knew too much to believe the radio god could provide answers to anything. "I need to go. See you later."

I used to perform that written music, *Miss Flannery*, he thought. The frying pan purred, blissfully clueless.

The town consisted of a single long main street ending in a market square, plus a smattering of alleys branching between squat, baked houses. A dozen potted juniper trees on the pavement, a couple of billboards which could've only had been erected here by accident: one blank, one advertising a shampoo none of the residents used. Everything—the billboards, the trees, the market stands—gave off the smell of wood drying in the sun.

The town stood deserted now, save for an occasional dog and the decrepit beggar called Jonesy whom Peter had never seen leave the McDonald's parking lot. The morning sounds had turned into a human murmur coming from behind the wall of houses: an exodus to the desert, a pilgrimage to Babel. Had it been this cold in Babel? Peter took a back alley, squeezing through it into the field where the radio tower stood.

Here it is, his heart drummed.

In daylight, the tower lost some of its magic, looking more like a blueprint for an oversized traffic cone. But the antenna dishes slowly rotated: the radio god was ready to talk.

The giant shadow's gridwork erased any individuality from the crowd, leaving only pieces of bunting raised to the sky: the radios, blue, green, gray, red. The colors of hopes and dreams. Peter spotted the bandmaster. She was a tall woman, and she stood on something he couldn't see and could only hope wasn't someone's back. He didn't know her, but she was empty-handed: a professional cultist, then. Cultists always presumed a relationship with the subject of their obsession. They used radios, too, but later, in

private, so that nobody could thwart their little chance of enlightenment.

Approaching the crowd, Peter spotted a couple of other unfamiliar faces, nomad worshippers from gosh knows where.

The woman held out her arms. "It's here. It's here, and it wants to communicate with us! Tune in to 1400 AM."

The dials scratched. 1400 AM, the frequency the tower broadcasted on. She'd done her homework, only it was the wrong kind of homework. Yes, most radio gods used the frequencies of their transient homes, but this one, this god was different. Peter felt lightheaded, the sensation creating an illusion of emptiness. Was he in a stupor he wasn't able to recognize? The sky was empty, too, the colorless sun at its melting point and not a cloud in sight. He made his way to the crowd's rearguard, stumbling twice while around him, static screeched.

Peter wiped his palms on his trousers and thumbed the dial on his radio. He didn't select 1400, though.

He heard nothing at first, just the static and the collective breathing of the crowd. Then came, "I see. See you again."

A few people turned their heads to look at him.

"What has been is over, over," the speaker crooned in Sinatra's voice.

"It's not over, and I'm not forgetting... anything, you fucker," Peter whispered. His voice broke on 'forgetting,' and he had to draw breath. "Remember Andrew?"

More people turned toward him. If he wanted an answer, he had to be quick.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his palm, slowly, deliberately. "Remember Emily? I need to know that you remember her, you bastard."

Somebody touched him on the shoulder. "Hey man, who are you talking to?"

"Remember her? Remember Andrew?"

"A friend and then a friend, yet single broken heart," sang Ole' Blue Eyes.

A single broken heart—such a matter-of-fact statement. Peter swayed, feeling a stupid smile curl his lips: the radio god remembered. Of course it did, with its unlimited capacity. Those years spent worrying the god wouldn't recognize him were all a fool's misery.

"You! You, back there!" The tall woman pointed at him over the crowd's heads. "You got a response! What's your frequency?"

It didn't matter anymore. Let them listen, let them drown out each other's communiqués. He'd gotten his answer. He sensed the smile—something foreign, something that wasn't his—widen.

"Thirteen hundred," Peter said.

The pieces of bunting were in the air again. Dials spun and Sinatra's voice became a chorus, but Peter paid no attention. He raised his head, watching the sun scoop out the antenna bowls.

The radio god will know who's killing it. Will it call for help? Even if it does, people only heard what they wanted to hear.

The gathering didn't last long: in five minutes or so, the antennae stopped spinning; the audience was over, and people wandered off like stray animals, big and small, leaving only Peter and the woman who'd led the crowd.

She walked up to him. "Excuse me. Have we met?"

Peter said, "I don't think so."

"Name's Anna, by the way. Sorry I yelled at you... But I definitely saw you somewhere... Wait. It can't be."

"Maybe it can."

"You aren't, by any chance, one of the Sinatra Siblings?"

Peter looked at her: a neat haircut; strong chin; sharp, almond eyes. Not a trace of the regular glassy cultist stare. "Bingo," he said.

Anna was younger than him, but how much younger, Peter wasn't sure. Maybe five years, maybe more, maybe less. He didn't ask. He wasn't sure about her intent either, and that was another thing he didn't want to know. Nothing romantic, he hoped; he shuddered at the thought of bringing her into the room he rented from Miss Flannery. The cupboard, the poster on the wall. They went to the town's only bar, basically a barn with the top half shaven off. Inside, it gave the impression of having been recently repurposed—one expected to find hay in the corner.

Peter spotted a few newcomers among the two dozen usual suspects.

"I can't vouch for the wine here," he said after they'd taken seats on the opposite sides of a checkered tablecloth. "I only drink rum."

"That's fine, I know what to order in such places." When the server appeared, Anna nodded at him. "Whiskey, please."

Peter said, "Rum for me." *Such places.* "And do you do this often, Anna?"

"Do what?"

"Drink in bars like this one... Forget it, just a poor attempt at a joke."

She pondered his question for a moment. "I only drink in the right company. And then the location doesn't matter, does it?"

He chuckled. "It does if you want to wake up without your head waiting to burst."

"So you're an expert on hangovers?" Anna furrowed her brow in mock seriousness.

"Do ten brushes with death make you an expert? I'm exaggerating, of course. I think 'twas eight, at most."

Now she chuckled, too. "Maybe I should've ordered rum."

"I wish it would make a difference, but I'm afraid they brew it all in the basement next door anyway."

"Haha." She looked at the bar counter, the walls, the ceiling. "Still can't believe you're a Sinatra Sibling."

Don't go there, please. Instead of answering, Peter drew her attention back to the room. "Where are the, uhm, your?..."

"The others who arrived with me? Come on, nobody needs a drink today. Talking to a radio god is intoxicating enough."

"And yet you...?"

She put her index fingers together, pointing at him. "I'm interested in *you*. You're part of the story, aren't you? I was trying to understand how you knew the god's frequency. Then I remembered that concert in Madrid. Torrespaña."

All the witty remarks about him being the right company evaporated. *Emily. Andrew.* Peter exhaled, leaning back, and closed his eyes. Under the table, he clenched his fist and pressed it against his leg; the physical pain helped, but not much.

"I'm sorry." Anna's chair let out a creak—she must've leaned forward, mirroring his movement. "I understand it's a terrible memory. But it's the same radio god, isn't it?"

He opened his eyes. "Yes. This one's really into Sinatra. Hardly communicates using anything else."

"Wow." She whistled, then looked at him, and now her gaze was different. There was something new in it—warmth? "That concert... I attended it, y'know? I'm not big on phrases like 'formative experience,' but..." She bit her lip. "I remember it as if it was yesterday. You've got a beautiful voice if it's anything like your siblings'. Honestly, didn't expect to meet you here."

The AI-authored music stopped and in the nascent silence, Peter said, "It's great to know that ten years down the road, the most compelling thing about you is the way your brother and sister died."

Anna lowered her head and he saw that she was actually sorry. He hadn't expected that: he always believed people skimped on sincerity when meeting someone for the first time. Peter waited.

"Listen," she said, "you're an interesting guy. There's that. I wish we were at a better starting point, but then again, I wish this room was nicer, or this town. Or life, for that matter."

"Yeah, I was going to say 'life,' too." Despite himself, he smiled. "Damn, don't I wish that."

"See? Now we're two alcoholics looking to drown our sorrows."

Peter jerked, because, at that moment, Sinatra's voice sang, "Oh valentine, my lovely valentine..."

His first impulse was to check the radio in his pocket before he realized the music came from the speaker next to the counter. Real, *written* music this time.

"I love Sinatra," he said.

"I love him, too," said the woman opposite.

A silver-haired lady stood and started dancing and just like that, he was transported to Carnegie Hall, a gala dinner a lifetime ago. The glow of the stage still warm in his memory, Andrew and Emily clinking glasses, him, talking to a girl in a black dress he used to know. A feeling that used to be a twinge of pain turned into wistful longing because time makes a mockery of everything.

Somebody danced between the tables. Looking at Anna, his plan suddenly lost its luster: the radio gods were gone. Sooner or later, this last specimen would die, too, and isn't one supposed to be merciful toward the soon-to-be-dead? Perhaps he shouldn't bother, shouldn't let whatever was left of life slip away.

She said something, he answered. The silhouette in the background continued to dance.

Perhaps.

Perhaps he shouldn't.

"Don't go, my lovely valentine," Blue Eyes crooned, fading to an echo; the room managed a breath before AI chords poured into the space in a perfect, clinical procession.

"I love Sinatra. Love his voice," Anna said. "And... it's such a shame, y'know."

The illusion came crashing down, shards of the distant evening's memory forming a kaleidoscope that no longer made sense. "About what?" Peter asked automatically, although he could very well predict the answer.

"That we didn't get a chance to sample him for the algorithm. The quality of those old recordings is too sub-par for authored music, did you know that? I hear they destroyed a lot of records due to that, just bulldozed them into trash pits. That's why I find this radio god so fascinating. It's like touching a world that's almost gone." Anna paused. "Amazing how much we've accomplished in one decade. What a leap."

He exhaled, slowly. A thought struck him that perhaps this new music was better. Perhaps, for her generation, whatever the AI produced was beautiful. And for a second, he saw himself the way she must've seen him: an old thing, needlessly ornate, something to marvel at only to clear it off the table at the end of the meal.

They talked more, but it didn't matter.

At least a hundred feet separated the two tents in the tower's shadow, as though their inhabitants wanted to show they had nothing to do with each other. Either folk who had no money to rent a room or some off-the-rails cultists who'd chosen not to leave their god's side, even at night. He was lucky it wasn't summer, Peter thought. In summer, makeshift habitats would've sprouted here like mushrooms.

"Hey!" He cupped his hands around his mouth. "They picked up a transmission from the radio god at the town hall. They're listening to it right now!"

The tents stirred, turned into glowing Christmas lanterns, and five figures crawled out.

"A transmission from the radio god," Peter repeated.

The figures started moving, speeding past him like ghosts. He watched them disappear behind the houses, then walked up to each tent: empty. Ten or fifteen minutes before those folks would return; plenty of time. In the darkness, with a thin flashlight clenched between his teeth, Peter planted explosives under the tower's legs that weren't facing the town: the structure was to topple into the fields.

A foolproof plan backed by the lack of maintenance for two years. When everything was ready, he stood and switched on the radio.

"Come on, talk to me. You must realize by now what's going on."

There was only static.

"Come on! Beg me! Beg me, you motherfucker."

He waved the receiver, raising and lowering it. At the curve's highest point, he thought he caught something; when he tried jumping with his hand outstretched, the radio stuttered out a few syllables.

"You want me to climb up there? To get closer to you, to the antennae. Is that what you want?" Peter glanced at the detonator on his belt. *Don't do this, you don't need to talk to it.* But at the same time he saw, with perfect clarity, that if he simply blew up the tower, part of him would always remain yearning for closure.

He paced, checked his watch: four minutes since the cultists left, about ten remaining.

"Fuck it."

He strode to the ladder, took the flashlight between his teeth, and began climbing.

To his right, the sunset's afterglow traced the hills, their contours broken in places by the jagged silhouettes of trees. Behind him, the town lay quietly in its slumber under the stars. A lone dog barked, somebody cursed, a bottle shattered on the sidewalk. The flashlight scared away the moon's glow, drawing a line between reality and dream. *A little higher*, he told himself, *just a little higher, to hear it beg.*

Something cracked under his boots a second later when Peter was about to step onto the platform, and he found himself clinging to a railing, dangling above the sleeping world. His palms began to sweat, and he cursed himself for not wearing gloves.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck."

The ladder had given out. As though taking on a life of their own, his feet scrambled for support and found none. He remembered the maintenance workers discussing the ladder, and fear took hold, tensing his muscles. Somehow he managed to pull himself onto the platform. He lay there, squeezing the air from his lungs when the radio came to life.

"Killing me with a gentle hand," Sinatra sang.

Peter rolled onto his side and looked down. His flashlight was gone; he had to give his eyes time to adjust to the dark. The ladder was missing its middle section, the bottom half sticking out like snapped bones. His wonderful, foolproof plan had backfired, and he was trapped. If he cried for help, he would lose the chance to destroy the tower: the people rushing to his aid would most likely stumble upon the explosives. He could toss down the detonator and try to concoct a wild story about why he was hanging out up there, but who would believe him? He certainly wouldn't have.

"Killing me with a gentle hand."

"Yes, yes, I came here to kill you, you bastard. You knew that the Spanish tower—Torre Ispaña or whatever the hell it was called—was ready to collapse." Peter got to his feet. "You'd lived in it for

years. You still let them—us—go through with the concert."

The sun is so bright that tears line his cheeks, but he can't take his eyes off the fat disk of the Madrid tower's control center and the circular platforms above it, antenna dishes wedged between them like coins.

He should've brought sunglasses. Most people in the crowd are wearing sunglasses. Voices twitter in a language he doesn't understand, and it has a soothing effect on him, making him almost forget about his tonsillitis. Almost. The Sinatra Siblings will make history, but not him. Tomorrow, the newspapers will only write about Andrew and Emily.

Then a white dash of Emily's dress appears, and Peter forgets about his suffering, physical and otherwise, as the gravity of the moment sweeps him along. The first ever acapella with a radio god—and a Great Push to keep written music relevant. "Radios! Radios! Turn on the radios!" the crowd chants.

"Fly me to the clouds," Sinatra croons all around. Andrew joins in, and Emily harmonizes above the melody.

Peter's tears no longer come from the sun burning his sclera. The music carries him and he starts singing, too, not giving a damn about his throat, which at this point has all the elasticity of a lump of meat.

He sings while people turn to look at him.

Then, someone points to the sky: the sky leans to the side and weeps like a dying whale. Wait, wait, it's not the sky that's tilting... Someone screams.

At the top of the moonlit tower, Peter drove his fist into an antenna. "You fucker! You fled—to the Vatican, no less—while they plunged to their deaths! You knew, and you. said. nothing."

Emily's dress fluttering in the wind. He slapped himself to drive away the memory.

"Didn't know what time it was," Sinatra sang. "Didn't know what day, you touched my cheek."

"Don't! Don't you dare feed me this bullshit that you didn't realize what year or month or day it was."

Peter slid down, hands clutching the antenna pole, dry sobs tugging at his body.

"I... didn't... know," the radio said. It wasn't Sinatra anymore. "I... didn't know time."

He stared at the receiver. The voice was that of a desaturated male tenor straight out of the World War Two recordings. He'd never heard of a radio god communicating in anything but pre-recorded verses. Was he hallucinating? Had he fallen? Was this a near-death experience? "Is it *you*? How the hell are you talking to me?"

"Can only... in the end. I'm sorry... I... didn't know time... But I know... now."

On the horizon, a big city blinked with garlands of light: bars, late-night conversations, city insomniacs letting cigarette smoke float on AI-authored chords. Not the harmonies Andrew or Emily or Peter himself would sing to, not the melodies of their childhood, nothing they could relate to or tie to warm memories.

Ghost lights, ignes fatui. "And you know it now? Time?"

"It's time... to go... For me... For you... For the music."

Yes, Peter thought. Yes, he understood it. No Carnegie Hall, no room anymore for anything that wasn't produced, chopped up and cobbled together from bits and pieces. Algorithms had unlimited patience for permutations, people didn't. No place for the radio god or for him, either. He didn't want to look at the antenna dish anymore; he had a hunch he would see a hint of his own reflection.

"So you *want* to die. That's why you didn't say anything to the cultists, never called for help." Peter sat with his back to the pole, stretched out one leg, felt for the detonator. Was it his imagination, or had the distant city's glow dimmed? "Why did you want me up here?"

"Felt alone... Didn't wish to... die alone."

Nobody does. "We never got the chance to sing together."

After a pause, Sinatra's voice began, "Fly me to the clouds..."

Peter leaned his head against the pole. "And let me play there, let me feel how autumn feels."

Their voices intertwined, separated, met again at the end of a verse. Maybe he wouldn't perish. Maybe he would survive the tower's fall, somehow. The tent people would be back in a few minutes, they would find him under the wreckage, call the ambulance. He wasn't sure he wanted them to.

A mockingbird landed on the platform's edge; it tilted its head, the moon Sinatra could've sung about reflecting in its eye.

"And let me sing again, again." Peter held out his hand. *Tell me, little bird. Tell me what I should do.*

The bird opened its mouth. The city lights on the horizon blinked.

Somewhere, a star kissed the treetops.

The story contains verses that may remind you of certain songs. I'm not telling you whether the similarities were intentional, though!

Yaroslav Barsukov

Nebula Award Finalist.

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Left one former empire only to settle in another.

Speaks German by day, Russian by night.

Writes in English.

The Crane Husband by Kelly Barnhill

REVIEW BY JOHN MAURO

The Crane Husband is an unsettling folk horror by World Fantasy Award-winning author Kelly Barnhill. This expertly written novella provides a frank depiction of domestic violence within a contemporary reimagining of the traditional Japanese folktale, Tsuru Nyōbō, or the Crane Wife.

There are many variations on the Crane Wife tale within Japanese folklore. A common version of the story involves a poor man who rescues an injured crane, nursing it to health before releasing it back into the wild. Soon afterwards, a beautiful woman appears at his doorstep. They fall in love and get married, but the couple are desperately poor. The wife is a talented weaver, and they build a business selling her handwoven clothing at the market. The weavings bring the couple prosperity, but the wife insists that her husband never watch her weave. The husband soon becomes greedy, forcing his wife to weave more and more, unsympathetic to her declining health. Unsatisfied with her progress, he spies on his wife and discovers that she is actually a crane plucking out her own feathers to weave into the loom. The crane wife sees him and feels betrayed by his broken promise. She flies away, never to return, and leaves her husband behind unable to earn a living on his own. The Japanese folktale has inspired a number of modern authors and artists, including a popular musical version by Portland-based indie rock band, the Decemberists.

Kelly Barnhill's novella is narrated by a fifteen-year-old girl living in an old farmhouse in the American Midwest. Her father passed away when she was a young girl, leaving her widowed mother to care for her and her younger brother.

The Crane Husband takes place in a near future when the farmers' jobs have been displaced by drones that work the cornfields. The family survives on income from the mother's artistic weavings. However, the responsibility of caring for her children proves too much to bear, leaving the teenaged narrator to manage household finances and serve as primary caregiver for her younger brother.

Then one day the mother brings home a menacing six-foot-tall crane, with whom she has fallen in love. The bespectacled crane soon becomes violent toward the mother, who is constantly covered with cuts and bruises. Despite this abuse, the mother is unwaveringly devoted to her crane husband. She neglects her family and the world around her to focus on weaving her masterpiece, as demanded by the crane. Meanwhile, local social workers have become seriously concerned regarding the welfare of both children.

Although at first glance *The Crane Husband* may seem like a simple gender-swapped version of the traditional Japanese folktale, Kelly Barnhill's story plunges deeper into violence and horror. *The Crane Husband* takes an unflinching look at the horrors of domestic violence, including both physical and emotional abuse. The cycle of cruelty extends to the children, who live in fear of the crane husband but are also afraid of being taken away to foster care.

The Crane Husband is the darkest work by Kelly Barnhill to date, her prose burning with increasing intensity as she immerses us in an all too realistic world of domestic violence and artistic obsession.

4.5/5

Crimson Shows the Way of Joy

ERIC LARocca

“Tell me, pet,” he hisses through a row of broken front teeth—a tombstone grin that only a child might be proud of. “Why do you wish to volunteer your life when we already have a suitable offering selected for this year’s festivities?”

He appears so much smaller than I remember.

Granted, the last time I had seen him he was kneeling over my poor father’s skull with an axe, blade neatly polished and handle thatched with the number of blows it had taken to cleanly remove the head: three. It’s peculiar how I can so distinctly recall the number of notches in the axe’s wooden handle now, when I am standing before my father’s murderer, especially since it’s been three years to the day. There are moments in life when we recognize the flow of things—how the past and present seem to work in tandem, how despair often smothers the promise of joy.

As I gaze at the executioner across the small table that separates us in the windowless room where they’ve arranged for us to meet, I can’t help but recognize how he resembles a small trout: the black bead-like eyes, the slender nose, his complexion as rough and coarse as if he were covered in scales. To me, he looks like something that crawled from a riverbed when the planet was uninhabited; when our people and our strange customs were but distant omens forming gradually in the lacework of the infinite cosmos. That’s what my father had told me—“Only the

universe knows what will be and that which will be done.” In my unworldliness, I never understood what he had meant. It saddens me to now know that he was referring to his demise—how he knew his name would be selected as an annual offering, how he knew he would abandon this world and leave his wife and child close to penniless and without a respectable name.

“Sometimes surviving is the greater burden,” he once told me. It wasn’t until he was gone and mother and I were left to fend for ourselves that I truly understood what he had meant.

Contrary to popular belief, there’s no great honor in being selected as the village’s annual offering. In fact, there’s a certain level of ruin and humiliation that accompanies the title and the grisly event when it finally takes place on the last day of autumn. Things were especially humiliating for my father as when he scaled the platform and greeted the man that was to be his slaughterer, he slipped and fell. The executioner—the very man I’m sitting across—had told him to stay there and not bother getting up. That’s where he was killed—on the ground like a wild animal that deserved no mercy or even the decency of a proper burial.

“Not that we’re complaining about you volunteering,” the executioner tells me. “We can’t help but wonder why you might be interested in undertaking the ordeal when your name hasn’t been called.”

I think to plug my nose at his noxious scent filling the small room, so strong it nearly appears as a third guest. The rusted coppery scent of blood has been woven, laced, and threaded into the very brawn of his skin.

I collect myself and regard him with earnest, vulnerable eyes—eyes that mean to tell him of my sincerity, not my deceit, my conspiracy, my desire to end him.

“Because crimson shows the way of joy, does it not?” I ask.

After all, that’s what we were taught in school from a very early age. Before we were able to read or write or solve basic arithmetic, the idea of offering oneself up for the good of the community was instilled in us. The very notion of accepting notice of our impending sacrifice was supposed to fill us with joy, delight, and pleasure.

But it never did for me.

I never found myself gleefully considering the possibility that one day I might be called upon. I never subscribed to the idea that my suffering, my sacrifice would, in some way, serve the community. Perhaps once I had. But that changed the moment I watched my father’s execution in front of hundreds of friends, family, and neighbors—people whom I had known since I could first crawl. They merely watched with vacant expressions as my father’s head was severed from his body.

Yes, perhaps once I might have pledged myself to the notion that I was serving the community, that I was an earthly vessel for the greater good. But not anymore. Not after what I had seen that day three years ago, when the executioner seemed to especially delight in my father’s death as he poked and prodded the headless body like it was meat from slaughtered livestock.

There’s a certain level of respect and civility a body is afforded during the ritual. Once the head is severed, the executioner is to examine the blood and the way it pools on the platform. Executioners are trained by elder members of the village to understand certain signs and interpret their messages from the way the blood collects. For instance, if the blood pools to one side of the platform and drips from the edge, the village can expect a harsh, unforgiving winter. A slower, more

obedient trickle—the village can expect promising crops in spring.

There are thousands of different outcomes depending on the blood flow and how the executioner interprets the carnage. But, for some reason, the executioner did not follow protocol as conscientiously. He was far more enamored with the idea of humiliating my father's corpse, brandishing the severed head as if it was a spoil from battle. The degradation and humiliation did not end there. My father's execution proved fruitless for the village. The executioner—so infatuated with my father's suffering—ruined the ritual and the village elders had to hold another drawing to select another village offering.

"You pledge to that belief, pet?" the executioner asks me, his breath whistling. "More and more of our young people are growing defiant. Less than eager to cooperate."

I knew exactly to what he was referring—how one of the teenagers from our village was selected for the offering last year and they fiercely objected. Naturally, in the end, their head was severed, their blood was spilled, and their suffering foretold a mild, comfortable winter.

"Of course. I pledge my being to that belief, sir," I tell him. "I don't know why anyone would object to the ordeal. It's the honorable thing to do."

"Yes, obviously," the executioner says, rising from his seat and pacing the small space in front of the room's only exit. "Your father knew of the honor awaiting him when he was called."

My stomach curls when I hear him mention my father. I feel myself coiling inward. I think I might heave, might retch violently if I hear him mention his name.

My eyes wander to the corner of the room where the walls meet and I can't help but notice a small axe with a polished silver handle—this year's weapon of choice. Although axes are always used, the instrument

changes from year to year. I find it remarkable that the very weapon that will end some poor person's life is casually leaning against a wall in the executioner's private chambers.

"Yes. My father," I say quietly. "Perhaps that's why I'm volunteering. Because he told me how much of an honor it was for him to be chosen. I thought that maybe I could pay tribute to him."

"You could've come forward any of the past three years to volunteer," the executioner says. "Why now?"

I can't help but wonder if he's caught me. If he knows why I've sought an audience with him, why I've volunteered myself to the elder committee.

"I wasn't ready before," I tell him. "But I am now."

He resumes his seat, lighting a cigarette. "You know, there's little to no respect in being the one responsible for someone else's demise. The village executioners never have the opportunity to truly give themselves to the town. To serve the community, I mean."

His confession surprises me.

"That's something you think about?" I ask him.

"How could I not?" he says. "Something happens to the people who scale that platform and rest their heads on the chopping block. They transcend. They become something truly remarkable. Do you understand?"

He takes a heavy drag from his cigarette, blowing a wreath of smoke in my face.

I wonder if perhaps this will be easier than I had anticipated.

"You wish you could be like them?" I ask.

He rolls his eyes at me as if insulted I had asked. "You think I don't? It would turn me into something grand. A martyr. Truly worthy of all of God's goodness and grace."

"Surely, you could volunteer," I say. "You could renounce your title and accept the role as the village's new offering."

“It’s not as simple as that, I’m afraid,” he says. “I’ve already been taught certain things. Things that must be initiated by me and me alone.”

I wonder if perhaps this is the moment I will tell him who I am and who my father was. If I should tell him, for that matter.

I’m surprised by his vulnerability, especially after watching the way he had desecrated my father’s body at his execution—the vulgar way he had unzipped and urinated inside the crater he had opened in my poor father’s severed vertebrae.

“I could do that for you,” I say to him.

He looks at me queerly and yet almost as if he had expected me to say something that might cause him to pause.

“Do what?”

“I could take that small axe you have leaning against the wall and split your head open until this table is painted red,” I tell him.

He laughs a little, but it sounds more like something’s caught in the pit of his throat.

“They’d carve you up like cattle,” he says. “You’d never be able to volunteer for the annual offering. They’d execute you before that.”

“Maybe that’s what I want,” I tell him. “Maybe that’s why I came here.”

The executioner gazes at me for a beat too long. I squirm, a little discomfited by his staring. For the first time, it feels as if we’re really seeing each other.

“You never came here to volunteer yourself,” he says. “You came here to kill me.”

I swallow hard. It feels as though my throat has been filled with wet cement.

“I just... never expected it was something you yearned for,” I tell him. “I never thought it was something you wanted.”

The executioner rises from his chair again, meandering over to the corner of the room where he

grabs the small axe. He throws it on the table, sliding the handle toward me.

“Take it, pet,” he says.

Then, without any fanfare or the flamboyant elaboration customary for the public executions in our village, the executioner sits and presses his head against the wood of the table, pinning both of his arms behind his back as if he were bound there.

For a moment, I stare at him with my mouth hanging open as if desperately trying to comprehend the sight before me. It feels strange to see him so unguarded, so prepared and willing to be my victim. Whether he was always inclined to become an offering or whether this was a newfound form of confidence, I could not be certain.

Regardless, there he is. In front of me. Head stretched against the table; neck exposed from beneath his collar. Ready to be dispatched. Prepared to transcend and become something truly marvelous, truly extraordinary.

I take the axe in my hands and feel the weight of it for a moment. The silver handle feels smooth and clean. Never used. The blade is sharp, glinting.

I circle the table and regard him, wondering what he must be thinking. He doesn't wince or shrink when I tap the edge of the blade against the table in an effort to frighten him, in an effort to undo some of the toughness and resilience I see in him. Instead, he accepts everything with quiet dignity.

For some reason, that hurts.

I wanted him to suffer. I wanted to see him weep, to watch him fall to his knees. I wanted to hear him beg, to listen to him plead with me to spare him before I brought down the axe upon him. I had hoped it wouldn't be a clean break, in fact. I had hoped he would suffer, choking on blood and trembling so much with fear that he might soil himself. I had hoped it would take just as

many times—perhaps even more—to remove his head from his pathetic body than it had for my father.

I had imagined the river of his blood time and time again—how it would flow from him when his head is finally severed, when that last thread of sinew snaps and the crimson wellspring inside him bursts like a geyser. His blood—his crimson spring—would show me my way to joy—the very joy he had robbed from me three years ago. I had imagined being swept away on a tide of his blood, being carried far from everything—from thoughts of my father and how he had been humiliated and the torment my mother and I entertained day in and day out as survivors of my father’s poor luck.

And that’s when it finally occurs to me. I think of what my father had said: “Sometimes surviving is the greater burden.” He was right. He was always right. The far more agonizing sentence, the more unbearable condemnation is to endure sometimes. Very often the far more excruciating ruling is to merely survive.

I decided that’s what I would do to him.

Just as I’m about to bring the axe down, I catch him wincing, preparing for the edge of the blade. I drop the axe and let it clatter on the ground with a vulgar thud.

The executioner straightens, eyeing me with a soundless question.

“No,” I tell him.

“No?” he says.

Perhaps it’s the first time someone has said that to him. Regardless, I’m delighted to have the honor.

“Why not?” he asks.

“Because you want it,” I tell him. “I want to give you something you don’t want. Life.”

He looks at me. If he could smother me in my sleep, he would. If he could wrap his hands around my throat and squeeze, he would.

I don’t look at him again. I gather my things and make my way toward the door, knowing full well he’s

watching my every movement with disdain and undiminished hatred.

Let him hate me.

In fact, I want him to hate me. I want him to curse me every time he wakes. I want him to know. I want him to remember that I let him live.

That's good enough for me.

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Lan Thena—Tales from the Bronze Age

CHRISTIAN CAMERON

They were probably all dead. Her brothers, her father...

Her dogs.

All dead, out in the darkness.

She waited by the low hut's single door and listened to the creature outside ravage her family's flock. She hadn't known that goats could scream when they were in pain, and she knew a great deal about goats.

She was afraid. Deeply afraid.

The thing had come in the night. The first she'd known was her father waking her brothers with his shouts; they'd grabbed their spears and pushed out the door...

And her father had stopped her from joining them, a hand on her chest.

'Men's work, honey,' he said with his damnable smile.

The last words he'd ever speak to her, she guessed. So she stood there, pinning her chiton as if her nakedness might offend the monster, and she hesitated, and they were gone.

Gone.

She didn't even know what in all the hells was out there; a gidiamu, perhaps, some undead thing that hated life, slipped from its bonds, or a monster...

Or a hungry lion. Or Dry Ones. Or Jekers.

Oh, Goddess protect, not Jekers.

Here at the desert's edge, all the horrors were close.

There was a terrible thrashing followed by a low gurgling noise that she feared was someone she loved. The thrashing was terrible, fierce and feral, and reminded her of the sound of her cat killing a bird, and the bird's final agonies...

She was deeply afraid, but mostly what she felt, under the fear and over it and woven through it like a weft thread of twisted yarn, was anger. Anger that her father had denied her ability to wield that spear alongside her brothers. Anger that some twisted thing was stealing their lives. Anger that the goats she'd spent her youth protecting were being massacred by something.

'Fuck it,' she said. She had a spear. It was Pater's second-best spear, with a good bronze head, long and sharp, but a slightly bent shaft so it didn't throw for shit. She could outrun her brothers, and match them in wrestling, and yet she always got the worst spear.

And none of them could weave.

And she loved them all, damn it.

Her father's big fleece cape was lying over his bed and she picked it up and flung it over her left arm. She didn't have a shield. None of them owned a helmet or armour; that was for warriors. They were shepherds on the edge of the frontier.

She shook her head to clear it. She wasn't expecting to defeat whatever had killed her father and brothers.

She went to die with them.

She put out the oil lamp her eldest brother had lit and let her eyes adjust. The gurgling noise had stopped. The thrashing stopped and then started again. She assumed the monster was snapping a goat's neck by whipping his head from side to side like a dog with a rat. And the noise was right against the hut, along the

south wall farthest from the door. Their hut had no windows; that was life at the edge of the desert. So, really, there was no escape for her anyway, except through the door.

She put her hand atop her head and pressed down, her father's trick for improving night vision.

Took two deep breaths.

And opened the door. She turned immediately to the right, towards the sound.

Her foot dragged through something wet and squelchy. She ignored it; goat, dog, kin, it made no difference now.

The thing, whatever in Kur it was, towered over the edge of the byre. It had ripped the roof off the shed where the goats and sheep spent dangerous nights.

It was huge, and she still didn't know what it was. She threw her spear anyway, right for the center of the darkness. Then she moved to her left in a skittering run, something she did when she fought with her brothers because she was fast.

It had more than one head.

By starlight and the light of two waning moons, she saw it as it turned; fangs, a lion's head...

Another head. Something bestial. And a spear, a deep black line against the blue-dark sky, moving as the thing moved, ripping away at its hide. Someone had scored a hit before her.

The tail went for where she'd been. It was longer than an ox cart and it had its own fangs.

She kept moving. She now had no weapon but she was out of the cursed hut. She got her back against the high byre wall and rolled, kicking her legs for momentum; up and over, the wall hard against her back; her bare feet firm on her landing.

She pulled up her peplos skirt, wrapped it around her waist, and tucked the end through the wrap so she was free to run. On the flat, she was faster than any

man she'd raced. A lion might be very fast indeed. And this thing...

I can outrun it. The snake tail won't help it run.

Do I want to outrun it? Everything I ever had is here.

'Pater!' she called. She moved cautiously along the byre wall. 'Alkaios!' she called out to her oldest brother.

Was that a gurgle?

By the Gods... was Alkaios still alive? Her eldest brother, and her favourite.

That decided her. She wasn't running. And if she had no spear...

There were always rocks. Rocks were deadly.

She was a very strong young woman. She moved along the byre wall, all laid-up dry stone, until her searching hand found the rock she wanted, the size of a small melon.

The thing roared. She'd been unwise and allowed it to see her.

She didn't think. She just threw the rock. She was accurate, but she couldn't throw as hard as Alkaios. It took the blow to one of its heads and kept coming.

It hit her, hard, and she was down. It raged above her, raking her chest with its claws.

Instead of letting it kill her, something unleashed her anger, and she grappled with one heavy clawed foot, her two hands against its one, and moved it.

A head snapped at her face, and she took most of the blow on her forehead, as she'd learned fighting her brothers, but gods it hurt. By then, she'd pulled one of the pins that held her peplos at the shoulders. By the immemorial custom of her people, free women wore pins to hold their garments closed. They were heavy and long enough to be used in a fight.

She slammed one into the thing's face and got lucky, piercing an eye.

The head and neck snapped back and screamed.

It leapt back and away, flinging her free, and her face impacted the stone wall of the byre, cracking teeth.

The monster crouched like a wolf or a hyaena, perhaps five paces away. One bound, and it would be on her.

She could see its outline against the stars. One neck drooped.

She couldn't see much of her own body, which was good, because of the agony in her chest and the blood. The peculiar mix of pain and sticky she felt when she moved indicated that the creature had opened her chest. And her face was on fire.

Dead, and didn't know it yet. That's what she was.

She'd left one of her long pins in the thing, and she wriggled to get at the other.

'I guess I'm hurt pretty bad,' she said out loud.

Her vision tunneled, her mouth filled with the taste of salt as if she was going to retch, and then her head cleared and she was alert again.

Why wasn't she dead?

She raised her head, and the world spun.

Was it lighter?

She called their names. All three brothers. Alkaios; Megakles, little Diodi. Even the three dogs. Pleops, Lessa, Hekkate. Loving playmates, all.

Nothing.

She wished she had some water. Some wine.

She wished she'd had a little more life. Gone somewhere. Done something.

The thing looked a little smaller in light. It was bigger and heavier than she was, but not by much. And it was watching her with one head, while it occasionally licked the other head and made a terrible sound, like a woman keening.

She had time to work out that she'd killed one of its heads, and like any animal who'd lost its mate, it was puzzled. Sad, even.

Gods. She loved animals. She was very close to feeling sorry for it when it rose on its haunches, its blood-matted fur was brown and black in the new light. Cautiously, it began to move along the byre wall.

Towards her.

It kept its dead head against the wall, the other head sniffing at her: the head of a lion.

Her anger was gone. She had a long pin in her hand, but she wasn't going to use it. She was going to lie there and hope the damned beast was quick.

It was difficult to care. She was so tired...

It was so cautious.

'Get on with it, Kur-beast!' she spat and gave it the curse-sign.

It stopped and regarded her. The lion head went up, down, up... sniffed...

A spear hurtled into her line of vision like a dark thunderbolt, catching it in the side of the neck. It had been thrown with enormous force. It went in the neck and came out the top of the skull.

The monster fell, all its limbs suddenly unbound, ungainly in death.

She tried to turn her head, and that was a mistake. Everything spun.

'Huh,' said a very deep voice. 'You alive?'

A filthy foot prodded her. It wasn't just filthy; it was enormous.

She looked up.

Above her stood the ugliest man she'd ever seen. He had a beard, which probably hid further horrors. His forehead looked like a mountain crag; his eyes were deeply sunk in sockets like caves; his nose was gigantic.

Most of him was gigantic.

Even at the gate of death, she thought that he stank.

'You a Jeker?' she asked. Curious that this far down, she didn't really give a goat's piss whether he

ate her or not. Jekers ate their kills. That was something everyone knew.

His huge nose wrinkled in distaste. 'Nope,' he said. 'You're hurt bad.'

'Dyin" she said.

He nodded. 'Ah, well,' he said. He walked over to the body of the monster and pulled his spear out of the dead thing's neck and head with a single slick, sticky pull.

'Anything I can do?' he asked. His voice was so low that she had to work to understand.

'Mouthful of wine?' she asked. 'There's plenty inside.'

'That's good,' he said cheerfully and moved off.

She lay there, waiting to die. The sunrise was glorious, which made her strangely happy. The pain was there, but she rode it, watching the fiery explosion at the edge of the horizon; a line like a hot sword blade, and then the red disk.

She hadn't expected a sunrise.

It occurred to her after a bit that he wasn't coming back; he was going to loot her family's few belongings and be on his way.

Fair. That was life at the edge of the desert.

She wished she'd gotten to travel.

She was surprised that dying was so boring, especially as it hurt so much.

But the sunrise was nice. It was going to be terrible later, of course; the sun would fry her. She hoped she'd passed before that.

Then he was back. She smelled him coming, but he had a full wineskin and a clay cup.

'You lived here,' he said heavily.

'Yep,' she admitted.

'Four dead men,' he said. 'Three dead men an' a boy.'

'Yep, she said, again. 'My father. An' brothers. Probably three dogs.'

He looked away. He was so tall he was looking over the wall.

'Yep,' he said. 'If'n you raise your head, I'll give you some wine. If I spill it on yer neck, it's goin' hurt like all the demons in Kur.'

'That bad?' she asked.

He shrugged. 'You ought to be dead,' he said.

She tasted the wine. It paired well with the sunrise.

'Thanks,' she said. 'You're a good man.'

He grinned, quite spontaneously. 'Never heard that before,' he said slowly. 'Good means pretty, an' I ain't pretty.'

'No,' she agreed. 'You ain't.'

They sat in companionable silence.

'I'm goin' to move on,' he said. 'I filled my water gourd. I left you the wine. It makes me crazy.'

She got the feeling these were long sentences for him.

She nodded.

He hesitated. 'You want I should kill you?' he asked. 'I can make it real quick.'

'Sit with me a minute while I think that over. I take it kindly that you offered.' She coughed and sat up a little and didn't die. So she drank a little more wine.

'Damn,' he said suddenly. 'I ought to have gone on.'

'What?' she asked.

'Visitors,' he said. He had his spear in his hand and her father's fleece over his arm.

'I don't want no trouble,' he called out.

She wriggled and there was a mighty tide of pain in her chest.

But when it passed, she still wasn't dead. She thought, for a moment, that she was dreaming.

She saw them so clearly in the early morning light. She'd seen them before, terrifying even at a distance, but never a dozen of them; almost an army. And never so close.

So close.

Bright People. The Dry Ones. Both descriptions were accurate; they had bright blue bodies, wings, and long, back-hinged legs like grasshoppers, some a particular scarlet colour, others orange; one with beautifully striped legs. All of them had long heads like mantes, and all of them had golden antennae.

They smelled like spices from across the Ocean; expensive spices. Spices her mother had cooked with before she died.

I'm dying, she thought. I wonder if I'll find Mum. Probably not. No one will bury me or pay my fee into Kur.

She coughed. There was blood.

The big, ugly man was still there, spear up in a position he'd clearly practiced, left arm outstretched with the fleece covering his side.

The Dry One with the striped legs crouched beside her.

She was out of terror. She couldn't be bothered.

'Hello,' she said.

Its eyes were enormous; multi-faceted, brilliant as if a light burned inside a complex lantern.

She couldn't read anything on its face. Utterly alien.

It reached out a taloned hand. It looked like a skeletal human hand tipped with razor-sharp nails. This one had talons that were gold, whereas the others had black talons. She noticed that right away.

Do it, she thought. She could imagine how quickly that talon could open her throat.

It reached out with one claw, and the golden talon, like an enormous thorn, pricked her shoulder.

<Hello> said her own mouth, without her volition.

Shit, just when you think it can't get worse.

<It is time for you to leave> she said. Apparently, they were speaking through her.

Ugly Man stepped back. 'Happy to,' he said.

<We are taking the water> she said.

She found she could speak herself, as long as she didn't interrupt. 'It's our farm!' she said.

<It was never yours, woman.>

She locked her eyes on the thing. 'I worked my whole life...'

<It was stolen>

She took a painful breath and nodded. 'I'm dying anyway,' she said. 'So I guess you can have it back now.'

<Agreed> her mouth said. <You will leave?>

'She'll be dead,' Ugly Man said. 'She can't leave.' He took a shaky breath. 'She won't last two more hours. Ribs broken and stabbing her lung. Her breast has been ripped off. Blood loss. By Druku's thirst, bug! She ain't goin' nowhere.'

<You wish to live?> She asked herself.

She thought about that. 'Yes,' she answered.

<You will leave?> it asked her through her voice.

She blinked. 'I want to bury my people,' she said.

<You will leave!> she answered herself.

She shrugged.

<Open your mouth> it said.

She obeyed.

What happened next put her previous terrors in perspective. The Dry One's face split in four, and a tongue with teeth and some sort of...sting? Injector? Came out of its 'mouth' and plunged between her lips and...

...And this time, she went under.

When she came to, she was lying by a smouldering fire. The firewood smelled like cedar. Someone had set up a cloak, a chlamys of good wool, as a shelter. It was dull red, her brother's.

He was dead. Alkaios was dead.

So were Pater, and Megakles, and Diodi. And Pleops the hunting dog, and the two sheep dogs; Lessa and Hekkate.

All dead.

But she was alive.

She could breathe, too. Much better than...

She shuddered in revulsion as she remembered the feeling of that thing's proboscis going down into her gut.

Gods.

Her face hurt. Her chest hurt.

But the terrible sticky breathing-feeling was gone.

She took a deep breath, waiting for the pain, and then another. Ran her tongue over her broken tooth.

It was whole.

By the time Ugly Man came back, she'd worked out that her right breast was gone, replaced with smooth skin and some scarring, and an odd purple scar like a spiral tattoo. And her right shoulder was... better. Better than it had been since she'd fallen off the roof as a child and broken it.

Ugly Man looked at her and grunted. He had a pair of rabbits, skinned.

'Feeling better?' he asked.

She thought about it. 'Yep,' she admitted.

He nodded. 'Never seen anything like that,' he said.

'I buried your kin,' he added.

'I owe you,' she said.

'Huh,' he said.

'Why are you... keeping me alive?' she asked.

He nodded as though thinking. 'No reason,' he said.

'I won't sell you as a slave, if that's what you're thinkin'.'

'Thanks,' she said.

'I been a slave,' he admitted. 'Sucks.'

'I guess,' she said.

They were silent for a while. 'Only,' she said, 'Now that I'm not about to die, I don't... know... what to do.'

'Uh-huh,' he said.

'The farm...' she took a shuddering breath and it was suddenly all real, as if medicine had worn off. She burst into tears and sobbed and sobbed.

Ugly Man spitted the rabbits, played with the fire, and nodded as if still talking to her. 'I'll go for a walk,' he said.

She woke again to find him sitting by the fire, his back against a small tree. His snores shook the spear holding up the cloak.

She went back to sleep anyway.

In the morning, he made up two packs.

'We need to walk,' he said.

She obeyed. Her pack was lighter by far. She lifted it with shocking ease.

He grunted and got his pack. It was mostly made up of her family possessions, including their one bronze oil lamp and all of their spearheads.

She was ready to be angry, but nothing came because she was alive.

'Where are we going?' she asked.

He shrugged. He was so strong that even carrying a huge pack he could still shrug. Easily.

'I'm going to a war,' he said.

'What war?' she asked.

He waved. 'The great war,' he said. 'Out beyond Dendrowna, there're people getting' ready to fight the Gods.'

She looked at him as if he was mad. 'Fight the gods?' she asked. 'Why would anyone...'

'They're all pricks,' Ugly Man said.

She nodded. They were plodding east, now, into the rising sun. The coast was supposedly two days walk away. She'd never been.

'And the Bright People?' she asked.

'They're going to fight the Gods, too.' He nodded.

'No, I mean... what happened?'

He looked at her. 'No fewkin' idea.'

They walked in silence.

'I mean,' he took a deep breath and moved the web of ropes that kept the massive bundle on his back. 'The

one did that thing to you, and I almost lost my guts. And then...' he looked at her. 'And then they moved off. So I carried you away and went back and took...' he looked at her. 'Well, damn near anything worth takin'. Which, beggin' yer pardon, wasn' much.'

She nodded. 'Nope,' she agreed. 'So they healed me.'

'Looks like,' he admitted.

They walked a bit, without talking, their footsteps making no sound in the grass. They were both good at silence. She'd grown up tending sheep and goats out on the plains of Sala, south of the mighty Danu river that she'd never seen; just her and a dog, and a hundred head of sheep, all day, under the sky.

It made her want to weep, again.

'Why go to this war, then,' she said as they started up a long ridge. She'd never been this far from home.

Halfway up they stopped. He had water, in her father's chipped and ancient Salas military canteen; fired clay, with a black slip. It had once been quite elegant, with an embroidered strap.

He offered it to her and she drank a few mouthfuls.

'Have all you want,' he said and produced a bulging wineskin. 'Wine and water,' he said. 'Yours.'

She nodded. 'I'd like to carry one of the spears,' she said.

He raised an eyebrow; a gesture that transformed his face from one of stunning, boneheaded stupidity to one of mature wisdom; a great deal for one eyebrow twitch. He fetched a spear out of the bundle of four.

It was Akailos' spear. A beautiful spearhead long and well-worked, and a straight ash shaft from north by the river. The head had been polished until it looked like red gold.

'This was my brother's,' she said.

He looked away and grunted.

They walked on.

'Why this war?' she asked again.

‘I like war,’ he said after a while. ‘No one cares how ugly you are.’

Unconsciously, she rubbed the smooth skin where her right breast had been. Her peplos was filthy, still full of old blood and crusted dirt. She needed to get rid of it. She noticed that both pins were in it.

He was observant and courteous. He’d found her pins. Among her people, they symbolized that she was a free woman.

But the spear was a better symbol.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked.

They walked.

‘Drakon,’ he said. ‘It’s not really my name. But my name is...gone now.’ He smiled. ‘I chose it.’ He grinned. ‘Because I saw a dragon.’

She nodded. ‘I’m Lan,’ she said. ‘You saw a dragon?’

He looked at her. Sometimes, in the right light, he looked much more intelligent than he had at first.

‘I guess we’re going to this war, then,’ she said. ‘How far is Dendrowna?’

He shrugged. ‘Far,’ he said, after some thought. ‘Lan, my throat hurts from all this talking.’

She nodded, and they plodded on in silence; a giant of a man, and a tall woman, each carrying spears, going to the Great War.

Lan and Drakon are minor characters. They first appear (but not by name) in ‘Against All Gods,’ and they take on new roles in ‘Storming Heaven.’ (Age of Bronze Book 2, already completed)

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The God of Endings by Jacqueline Holland

JOHN MAURO

The God of Endings is the masterful debut novel by Jacqueline Holland, a literary dark fantasy that explores the purpose of life through the eyes of a reluctant immortal.

The novel opens in the 1830s with four-year-old Anna growing up in rural Stratton, New York. Her mother passed away during childbirth, leaving Anna behind with her father and newborn baby brother. Anna idolizes her artisan father, who carves tombstones for a living. Anna finds grim solace in the cemetery, despite rumors of the restless dead who may be brought back to life and bring affliction to the living. Anna is soon left alone after her father and brother succumb to illness. She experiences the same fate but then is unwillingly raised from the dead by her step-grandfather, endowed with the immortality of her newfound vampiric state.

The God of Endings jumps ahead to 1984, when Anna works as a teacher at an elite French-language preschool in upstate New York. Despite her reluctance to build any lasting connections, Anna gets involved with the family of one of her gifted but criminally neglected young pupils, whose parents are consumed by infidelity and addiction. Jacqueline Holland is a master at capturing the Northern Gothic aesthetic of rural upstate New York in both the 1830s and 1984 time periods.

The God of Endings skips across time and space, covering Anna's early days as she crosses the Atlantic to build a new life in eastern Europe, where she learns the practical aspects of vampirism. The European scenes all have a fever dream-like quality to them, as if Anna is immersed in one of Grimms' fairy tales. Indeed, Holland's novel is steeped in Slavic folklore, especially the titular god of endings, Czernobog, who haunts Anna from the shadows. Czernobog casts a devil-like figure and also functions as the god of darkness, evil, chaos, death, and night.

As an adult during World War II, Anna becomes a teacher in a small French village and assumes an alternate persona known as the *Nachte Bestie* (night beast), an inhuman phantom who hunts Nazis under the shroud of night. While a passive character in much of *The God of Endings*, these scenes convey Anna at her most outwardly assertive, while she simultaneously wages an inner war to control her thirst for blood.

The basic premise of *The God of Endings*, i.e., following the lonesome life of a protagonist who defies human mortality, parallels the classic 1820 Gothic fantasy, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, by Irish novelist Charles Maturin. The idea was explored more recently by V.E. Schwab in her popular romantic fantasy, *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*. Although their initial setups are similar, *The God of Endings* explores much darker territory than *Addie LaRue*. Jacqueline Holland wisely forgoes romance in *The God of Endings*, focusing on weightier themes such as the search for meaning and permanence in a life where everything is transient. Whereas Schwab skips over most of Addie's life between childhood and the present-day, Holland thoroughly explores the possibilities of what her main character encounters across continents and centuries.

Holland's writing is beautiful and accessible, with the caveat of having an appreciable amount of untranslated dialogue in French and German. The

French and German usage is all very elementary, so I didn't have a problem understanding these sections. But it could be an issue for readers with no prior exposure to either of these languages.

Although at times it felt like the story had too many disparate plot threads, Jacqueline Holland proves herself to be the god of endings as she ties everything together and delivers a multi-layered emotional punch at the end of the novel that both questions and affirms the nature of life and human existence.

Altogether, *The God of Endings* is a hauntingly beautiful dark fantasy that serves as a meditation on the arrogance and love associated with bringing new life into the world. Let's hope that *The God of Endings* is just the beginning for Jacqueline Holland.

4.5/5

Save, Salve, Shelter

ESSA HANSEN

Pasha kneels beside a charred elm to examine the remains of a squirrel. Or a fox kit, perhaps, head too large, tail too short, storm fur between matted black scaling and the reddish veins of fungal mycelium.

She wiggles the sampler device off her belt beneath all she carries: water cans, a basket, bottles, padded sacks. Her body rattles and clinks with the music of burdens.

The sampler chirps upon detecting viable DNA, and with the probe stuck in the carcass neck, it calculates, screen blooming with numbers that fray across half-shattered glass.

Vulpes lagopus, it confirms. *Corrupt. Do Not Sample.* Pasha sighs. *Vulpes lagopus has already been sampled for the collection.*

One million species recorded, several million extinct. The collectors would never sample them all before Exodus, but Pasha keeps trekking, covering new ground.

A chitter comes from the back of the tree. She creeps around to a split in the blackened trunk, where a den scratched in the dirt is stuffed with the fox family's corpses. Among them, a tiny kit squeaks. Pasha gently scruffs it.

"Hi there"—she coos, and checks—"little boy."

She inspects for scales and spores: clean. Shifting the laborious cargo mounding over her body, she fetches a syringe of milk and feeds the frail but voracious kit. He wiggles his tail, and Pasha smiles. Dusk glow soaks his downy fur. She risks being

waylaid: her sampler's countdown to the Montreal launch ticks to four hours, three minutes.

Pasha wipes the sleepy kit's chin and nestles it in the front of her blouse next to three tiny aardwolf pups, their dark muzzles poking above the hem. Good thing she's flat-chested, there's room for all four.

Two black-footed African kittens cuddle in a sling against her ribs. In a basket of pine needles between her shoulder blades lie three goshawk eyasses—of everyone, they were growing fastest. Days ago, they'd been all pink skin and enormous eyes, and now: cotton balls of fluff.

A baby redbelly snake coils in a plastic pill canister velcroid to her hip. Mouse pinkies cram in the cotton nest of a shorn bourbon bottle. A canvas tactical bag's many pockets organize leverets rescued from a family of dead hares, one sickly boarlet, bottles of fish and frogs, and tubes of insects.

Scan. Sample. Search.

There is no "save" in these orders. Humanity has run out of salvation.

Salvage DNA from as many species as possible. As six Exodus shuttle crews had already tried to convince her, salvage didn't mean save. "Save yourself," they'd said, "come alone." But Pasha had kept on walking.

Cracks stripe her glasses, black bangs brush her eyelashes now, and her long hair doesn't stay in its tie. Her nose and throat throb with the stench of cinders and decay. Sweaty grime abrades her skin as she rises with a groan, calves taut, feet sore. The tight straps of her gear saw long wounds into her body—but mercifully, the young things are safe.

Even those she's not sure how to care for, what to feed, how to carry, she tries. Of all she'd learned on the vaccine research team, caring for immune species from across the ruined world, her father's maxim rang most true: *"All creatures understand kindness, solnyshko. Kindness heals most of all."*

“Let’s go.” She gingerly adjusts her burdens and hikes, gaze combing the decayed landscape for animals—dead or alive. Extinction kicked off by habitat loss and climate change broke links in the ecological chain. When the genetic corruption bloomed—something born from all the death, plant and phantom hybridizing to defile flesh—humans didn’t immunize fast enough. The vaccine saved a small percent, and the United Nations decided the data of Earth’s fauna took up less space than warm bodies on the shuttles.

Scan. Sample. Search.

Fungus dots the blackened boreal forest like crimson stars. A pale, branching shroom gnaws the bark of trees. The falling sun casts lengthening shadows, and in a clearing, Pasha spots the Exodus shuttle jutting from a distant hill like a seedpod ready to flower. Already vertical, its wide, triangular shape hugs twin rocket boosters. Through a silver crack streaking Pasha’s lenses, the craft appears shorn in half.

“Bit farther, little ones.”

She treks for an hour, pausing to sample mostly unrecognizable remains: a lizard, twelve birds, one rabbit, and thirty species too mutated to scan. The carcass of a rare Eastern cougar gains her a tick in her database. Rigid with awe and guilt, she samples its DNA, filing it away for future resurrection. She admires one gold-blue eye not yet veined by fungal corruption, and samples the feel of its fur and the musty scent of its bones before moving on.

Sunset limns the distant shuttle red. Valleys of desiccated forest and deep ravines stretch between her and it, but she spares precious time to feed and check each of her thirty-two saved.

Most injured. Many dead.

Pasha fights tears as she digs small graves, burying broken promises to the Earth. She pets the soft, soft aardwolves and forces herself back on task.

Some of the dead can feed the living, a necessary rhythm of nature. The mammals and birds, the predators, are faring much better than the prey. Meat is more frequently found, milk rare, plants periodic—all her rescues will adapt or die. The Earth is one ecosystem, now.

She gushes relief upon discovering dead insects stuffing a rotted stump, a rare cache of native diet for the aardwolves. She mashes the waxy bodies and feeds the insectivore pups, buying a couple weeks of better hope.

Night arrives with acidic rain. Pasha dons a poncho, but the babies squirm in her blouse. She sings a children's tune, *warabe uta*, to calm them.

“Tōryanse, tōryanse. Koko wa doko no hosomichi ja?”

The decades had corroded more than those two lines, so she mumbles repetition and hums the melody—a traffic signal jingle from home. She recalls rainy garden walks and green streetlights, a clear umbrella and her mother's warm hand in hers.

Pass through. Pass through.

What narrow path is this?

Sleep calms all but the nocturnal aardwolves. Pasha's hamstrings are stiff as iron, back bent and striped with aches. But the rain begins to break.

Even though you're scared...

She whisper-sings a remembered line as the hill crests ahead. *“Kowai nagara mo, tōryanse, tōryanse...”*

Security fencing veils the looming shuttle. Soldiers bristle around the gate as Pasha lumbers near: hunched, weak, over-bulked like some mutated beast.

“Collector... five... nine-nine... eight...” They can't hear her. Rifles snap to attention as Pasha rummages for her ID. She raises it like a white flag and treads past razor chain link.

The guards approach. One jams a rifle muzzle at Pasha's chest and she flinches, caving her shoulders to protect the hidden pups.

"Take it!" She shakes her ID while shifting slings and containers protectively back in place. "Who else would be out here except collectors? The animals are dead. You don't need guns."

A different guard raises a placating hand, then swipes Pasha's ID. He beams a flashlight on the laminate. "Praskov'ya Ayukawa?"

"Pasha." She swallows. Her gut prickles with nerves.

"Present your database for sync."

This trick again. At the end of the Great Rift Valley, she'd given up her impressive collection at the gate, finally prolific enough to qualify for passage. They took her creatures, too, and groomed her to board, before she'd realized she wasn't getting them back.

"I need to speak to your UN director."

Several soldiers' fingers itch on their rifles. The kind one says, "Step into the quarantine area, Collector Ayukawa."

The kittens stir in Pasha's sling. Mind digging through worry and pain, she unearths a name. "I'll only answer to Director Alaire of the Southern Quebec Division."

The guards fidget. Backlit by floodlights, shadows drench their expressions as they lean and mutter. Several leave, and one beams a blinding light on Pasha.

This is nothing new. She exhales shakily while her fingers find fur and muzzle, bottle stoppers and satchel contours, confirming everyone's all right. Needles of fear stick in her as she touches unmoving forms, but they might be asleep, it's night—she prays death didn't visit her during the hike. She meditates with deep breaths until Director Alaire arrives.

He says, "This way, Ayukawa."

Something in his tone plummets her chances of this seventh shuttle being salvation. But she's rescued tens of species with just as slim a chance, and they are still with her. She follows him to a tent crowded with cargo boxes and medical supplies.

Irish, bearded, and stern, Director Alaire sits her down at a desk. She lowers delicately, shuffling her burdens. To her surprise, he sets in front of her a steaming bowl of stew, oily with spice. Thyme. Bay. Garlic. She tackles it, cooling a spoonful with frantic breaths.

Alaire leans on the chair opposite. "You're not scheduled at this shuttle. The Salluit Exodus departed some time ago. So did Cape Town." He glances over his laptop screen. "And Bangui."

And Dar es Salaam, and Mecca, and Athens.

Pasha pulls up the appropriate half-lie. "I waived boarding and took the boat from Cape Town to help with the uncharted in northern Quebec. I got waylaid, and the Salluit shuttle left."

Exodus launches wait for no one.

"Very few people choose to waive boarding," he says.

Pasha's gaze darts away from his scrutiny. She shovels stew into her mouth. Food now will let her save rations for the babies, once boarded. She'd calculated crew ration composition—she could survive most of the way starved if she moved very little, and all of them would survive the trip to Mars.

Pass through. Pass through.

"I have DNA of two hundred seventy-five species to relinquish." The words spill from her, rehearsed.

"Sampler."

She digs it out carefully, hiding her baggage under the dewy poncho, and rests the device in the sync cradle.

Alaire watches his side of the display, then nods a few too many times. “Impressive number. Report to boarding after inspection.”

She doesn’t miss his pale gaze bouncing across her overladen figure. “I’m so tired, can I just report to the boarding department?”

Anything to skip protocol and actually *spea*k with people. It had almost worked in Bangui. But there she’d paid and paid—in the end, in return for nothing.

The man pauses. Too long.

Pasha’s blinks are slow, her tiredness no lie, but fear whittles her sharp. At inspection, she would unbuckle her burdens, unsling, and release all her precious charges, easily confiscated. They’d incinerate the little ones and boot her beyond the razor lines or freeze her and pack her in the shuttle. Either way would be a death to her: robbed, stripped, assaulted, purpose pointless, future formless.

Kowai nagara mo...

“Report to inspect—”

“Please,” she hisses.

“I don’t know what this”—he makes a sweeping gesture toward her—“is, but... I’m sorry, Ayukawa. To inspection, like everyone else.”

“I’ll... I’ll do anything.” She’s not confident she has anything to sell. Her eyes mist as she swallows a lump of shame. “Any—Please. I’ve come a long way.”

Various old stitches twinge as she stands. She’d already done so many things.

Alaire, face pinched with frustration, points firmly out the door. “Inspection.”

Pasha stands frozen, tears sparkling in her vision. Her pleas never sink in, her dark price isn’t taken up. Alaire turns his back, and Pasha limps out, cradling the pups at her chest and the kittens, the reptiles, the fish slung at her waist and hips and any limb capable of carrying life.

She shuffles through floodlit darkness to the inspection tents. Then awaits the dreaded word.

“Strip.”

Pasha shudders an exhale. She tips between trust and caution, and with effort, straightens her wobbling spine. “I have animals. Twenty of them.”

The white-robed technicians hesitate. “Their DNA has been sampled?”

“No,” Pasha lies. “Some are rare.”

A stupid lie. Anything alive could be sampled. Then squashed. But she buys time.

“W-we need to counsel with the director. I’ll fetch him.”

“You do that.” Pasha eyes the exits and digs her boots into the dirt.

One technician is a small, slim, curly-haired brunette. The other a tall, tense, blonde undercut.

Pasha is weary, wild, and dark. Her claws haven’t been cut in weeks. She has something to protect, and what do they have? United Nations badges. Will they fight for it tooth and nail?

Before she can bare her teeth, Alaire enters: red-headed, robust, and annoyed even more than before.

The brunette clears her throat. “She claims to have animals.”

The pups stir in Pasha’s blouse, woken by her trembling, their tiny nails scratching her chest. “I’ve calculated the impact on resources. Let me aboard, Director. Compassion costs you nothing.”

Compassion had died with most of the world’s species. Was life precious enough to document, but not enough to care for? The shuttles uttered prayers, but none would be an ark.

Alaire stares as if stunned. Then his brows droop, wrinkles gather over the bridge of his nose, and he rubs them vigorously. “Are you—Are you daft, woman?”

“No, I—”

He hooks an elbow through the strap of a supply bin and snatches Pasha's arm, hustling her out. Cape Town, all over again.

She yells, "You can't swipe my samples then shove me out! I'm under contract, you have to take me!"

"*You*," he snarls. "We're only contracted for you."

Fighting back would risk crushing the little ones.

The guards bristle as Alaire ushers Pasha out the gates. He throws her and tosses the heavy supply bin at her feet.

Pasha's voice breaks. "I'll take responsibility! I won't bother the crew." She straightens on weak knees and kicks the bin. "It'll cost less than this *for the entire trip*."

"That's enough for a week. Get rid of your organic materials within the next hour or come to your senses in time for the Exodus in New York."

Organic materials.

They're awake and mewling now, responding to Pasha's shivers, thrumming heart, impotent fury. Aardwolf noses snuffle against her collarbones. Is the snake hissing, or just the wind? It should be too small for such sound. A large thing shifts against her lower back.

Pasha fumbles with her sampler, resetting shuttle location. A few weeks until launch. Possible. There is uncharted territory in the Adirondacks, to rebuild her collection.

"I'm sorry." Alaire shakes his head, face heavy and shoulders sagging. He turns and ebbs away. Soldiers flow back in his wake.

Pasha glares at them but sits herself down, resolving to take advantage of the lights. She cries silently as she feeds and waters everyone, deals with the dead, redresses wounds, checks bedding and temperature. The joy of the living balms one's grief over the deceased: a childhood lesson she'd learned from lost pets. The spotted kittens play around her outstretched knees—full grown, they'll be less than a

foot high, able to walk on their own with the hyena-like aardwolves and the Arctic fox. Pasha has no leashes but love.

Eventually, the soldiers leave for auxiliary boarding, final checks. The service structure rotates. Even at a distance, the rumbling fills her chest. The rocket boosters ignite and a searing tail lights up the night, with great plumes curdling on either side. Like a fleeing sun, the Exodus leaves Pasha in darkness.

She sets off beneath a cold, indifferent moon.

A few hours before dawn, the sampler indicates the edge of uncharted territory. She shelters in a rock outcrop and lets herself sleep.

The fox kit wakes her, rooting in her hair.

Pasha rations one smile. Then, somber, she buries the night's casualties and stares up at the last of the stars. She's given up all she has to say of sorrow, those words buried with the bodies.

Scan. Sample. Search.

Leafless maples scabble at blackened hillsides while fungus chews what's left. She'd thought the white lace of it gorgeous, once, like a weeping Spanish moss overgrown.

The strongest of the aardwolves scurries at her heels, chasing a bead on the left lace of her boot. His thick, striped coat is soft, huge ears pert, energy tireless in the way of infants. The three are a little larger and wider than they should be at this age, but Pasha has trouble keeping time. The goshawks clamber on her shoulders, wobbly but now birdlike instead of alien. Raptors grow full size in a month, has it been that long? Sheathed feathers poke through fluff. Their beaks are knobby or jagged when they should be smooth. Malnutrition? That's all right—they're still beautiful to her.

Days in, they find a moose in a ravine, half-eaten by fungus. Pasha samples lungs and harvests kidneys.

The aardwolves and snake will have to learn to eat red meat.

Other corpses are too corrupt. A coyote, ossified in scales. A featherless owl, dropped dead from its nest. She climbs up and finds a healthy owlet, perfect for the basket nest the grown goshawks left. They're gliding awkwardly now, instincts afire, attacking everything Pasha finds, and she can't tell them not to eat corrupted meat. A bittersweet terror takes root: the more capable her little ones get, the less she's able to protect them.

Scan. Sample. Search.

She saves an emaciated cougar cub, samples a skeletal marten, and buries her boarlet who died. The rhythm of death and rescue corrodes her. One burden replaced with another. Pasha moves the chafing straps to fresh skin, cinching until her weary spine pulls straight.

Stretches of wilderness, broken road, and brambly farmland wear her soles raw. When she reaches the New York launch pad, her database has one hundred ninety unique species, and there's no way to hide that she's carrying or accompanied by a pack, flock, herd.

The shuttle looms like a monolith, sunlight glistening across every metal scar.

"Bring your director." Pasha's voice cracks from lack of use. She hasn't sung in a while.

The gate soldiers train their rifles on her while one retreats into the compound, returning with three scientists in tow.

The aardwolves press against Pasha's knees. The hawks screech and take off for higher perches.

"Jesus," one woman exclaims. "What are those?"

Pasha's burdens clatter as she fetches her ID, which is tucked near the tiny jaws of the cougar in her blouse. Its canines—sharp as shark teeth and oddly almost as numerous—slice her thumb, and she hisses.

“Pasha Ayukawa, Collector five-nine-nine-eight.” She tosses the bloodied ID at the director’s feet and yanks the storage sliver from her sampler. “I have almost two hundred species on here and I’ll crush it now if you deny me and my rescues rightful passage.” Her heroic volume dwindles as her voice grows hoarse, rationed words expelled.

Her collection rank, diligence, and perseverance would make her an asset beyond Earth—she’d long since earned her passage on merit.

“You must be very tired, Pasha,” the director says in a tone careful enough for a mad person or a child. Pasha is hardly over five feet tall, but well past childhood, and madness is unmeasurable from the inside.

“You must be a keen observer of the obvious,” she counters. One of the aardwolves growls, the striped hackles down its spine raising stiff.

“Then tell me what’s not obvious.” A breeze tickles white hair from the woman’s loose bun, casting shadows like more wrinkles. “How did you come by this many animals? Surely they are corrupted?”

“Corrupted babies wouldn’t have survived this long.” Pasha shifts her trembling shoulders and tucks restless leverets back in their pouches. “Not everything out there is dead. And what isn’t ruined deserves our care. The cause of the outbreak was us. Our fault.”

“Are they tame?” That placating tone, still.

Pasha snorts. “Nothing that’s been out here is tame anymore, Director.”

“They don’t look natural.”

Obviously. Half are from Africa. They’ll seem unusual to this woman.

The director signals her soldiers to stand down and Pasha to follow, but fingers still curl about triggers. She can read their aggressive postures, twitches, shifts of eyes: the language of beasts.

She follows at a safe distance, her creatures padding at her heels or observing from high perches. It's both heartening that some of them are able to bite or flee on their own now, and unnerving that she can't simply clutch everyone and run. They're growing faster than she expected or she's worse at time than she thought, but either way, corrupted creatures wouldn't thrive like this.

In an open warehouse, she's led to a large canvas tent that reeks of astringent. The director gestures to an aide and whispers something before motioning Pasha in. "Let's talk. My name is Miranda."

"Th-thank you." Pasha enters, wary of four walls and a ceiling. There's a bench and a bathtub infiltrated with pipes in both ends, circulating treated water: a preliminary hygiene center before inspection and detox.

Miranda has kind words and a grandmotherly smile, but kindness can sometimes be sleight. Pasha keeps the little ones behind her and lowers her stance, ready to spring.

The aide wheels in a mesh kevlar box.

Miranda says, "For everyone's safety, we need them contained. Meanwhile, have a bath, won't you? Are you hungry? You are thin as a rail, my dear."

Dear? Pasha picks up the fox and stares until the aides creep away and Miranda takes a seat.

"Please," the woman says. "We are not your enemies. I want to hear where you've been. Can I see the collection sliver?"

"After we have an agreement," Pasha says, not used to the taste of honey.

The box is large and den-like enough to be nonthreatening. She slips off her various containers and slings and sets them inside with her blouse for scent. The smaller creatures she bundles in a corner, and the cats, aardwolves, raptors, and fox she coaxes

in with a dish of raw meat. She coos to them and zips the mesh flap.

“Dear God, how long have you been traveling?” Miranda levers to her feet in horror. Her gaze sticks on Pasha’s wounded form while she rifles in a medical cabinet.

“Since Africa.” Since Greece, but the last real bath had been in Bangui. Pasha hugs herself, feeling too lightweight and thin, as if bones had slipped out of her flesh like swords from sheaths. She wafts over to the gurgling tub.

Miranda hesitates with a sprayer and a tin of salve, and finally sets them on the rim.

Even to Pasha’s own nose, she reeks, mottled in sweaty grime and blood. Lines of raw skin stripe her body where the straps dug in for miles.

Miranda sighs and sits again. “Well, bathe and rest, child.”

Child?

Pasha strips off pants and underclothes, removes her glasses, and steps into the minty, chemical bath. The slick flowing water—unnaturally softened—blackens as it carries off dirt. She lowers herself on shaky arms. Adrift and unweighted, she might wash away, too. There is very little left of her other than the muscle needed to carry her to salvation. If not this one, then the next.

But this one seems promising, and she’s so tired of walking. She moans as the heat soaks in. Dirt floats off her hair as if the black strands are melting.

“You know, Pasha, that these creatures will not survive the hazard scan or detox radiation. Even if they do, the cryostasis is designed for humans.”

“The shuttle crew stays awake and has cabins fit for occupancy, I’ll join them.” She had thought this through.

“The trip to the colony is... long. There is no infrastructure or resources for animals. This cannot happen.”

She'd heard these same objections when her father had argued for the lives of the immune specimens after the vaccine's success. He had failed to convince.

“We won't take up much space or rations. I can make it work.” She'd studied her father's notes, she had figured out how.

“Listen, I'm a mother, too. What you have accomplished is generous and kindhearted, but—”

“I don't need compliments. Just talk to someone. Try. Please.” Pasha stares at the woman.

Miranda winces. Her wrinkles settle into unreadable grooves. “I will do what I can. Stay here, enjoy, I'll fetch you food.”

Enjoy.

Pasha submerges, rubs her face, and surfaces to a quiet room. In the den-like cage, her creatures sleep. Without glasses, Pasha's farsightedness deceives. Their shapes appear strange and too large, cuddled close enough to look conjoined, the jaws of one beast on the head of another, spotted fur sharpening to quills, paws scaling into fins. Are they growing so fast as to be strangers to her? No matter—they are safe, and they thrive.

There are more dying animals in the world, passed over by collectors, and few shuttles will launch after this. She would seek out them all, but her body is whittled, mind whetted to a keen focus, and hope is a dwindling ration.

She curls against the wall of the tub while hot water buoys her limbs. Every muscle fiber screams, broken from the hunched, taut formation that had allowed her to plod along with the weight.

The current pulls her into sleep or a similar dark softness. The rush of liquid has a rhythm that doesn't end. In Pasha's mind, she's still walking.

Pass through. Pass through.

Her ears are tuned to the sounds of her animals. A snore. A whimper. Wheels rumble. Concrete grit snaps.

She jerks upright with a splash. The tent is dim. A soldier pulls the cage. Pasha's shriek ratchets as she leaps, springs off the rim of the tub, and slams into the man's upper body, her hands on his face carrying his skull to the ground with all her weight. Bone cracks and he slumps beneath her.

She hunches there, panting, while water dribbles away. A whimper catches in her throat as his eyes stare back, dead as the animals she'd sampled.

Swiveling around, she sees her clothes and supplies are gone. Her glasses. The sampler.

She unzips the kevlar cage in one yank. Sniffing and growling, the jumble of beasts unfurls.

"Let's go, let's go," Pasha mutters between clipped breaths. She dons her thigh-length blouse stuffed in the back of the den and steals the soldier's long coat and rifle. As she fumbles with his boot laces, activity and voices ricochet outside. She abandons the shoes and shrugs on her bottles, satchels, slings, and gathers up her creatures wherever they'll fit. Screaming, the hawks and owl perch on her shoulders and head. Her body is a monument of pain, but she feels better reburdened. The black-footed cats weave around her legs in unusual posture, paws splayed, appearing to have too many toes. She's seeing wrong now, farsightedness painting the world in suggestion and blur.

The tent canvas bursts aside. Someone strides in and Pasha darts forward. She plugs the rifle into their collarbone—they raise their hands and backstep.

"Stay," she hisses, gaze seeking the warehouse exit in a watercolor landscape. The aardwolves growl and snap, their teeth flashes of white in the dusk. They

shouldn't have so many teeth. But the gathering soldiers and scientists shouldn't have so many guns.

Pasha's never handled a rifle. She cradles the hunk of steel beside the cub at her chest. The redbelly has left its bottle and slithers around her shoulder, thick as a finger now—full grown?

"*Pasha!*" Miranda shouts breathlessly as she jogs over. "Easy. We just—"

"Were going to dispose of them so I'd have to comply? That trick didn't work in Africa." Either the snake is hissing by her cheek, or anger's leaking from her lips. "You stole my collection sliver."

She maneuvers sideways. Her pack follows: erect hackles and tails double the height of the pups, and the cats are a mass of spots and muscle. Blurry as they are, she can feel their thrum of power, the rigid tension in the air.

Miranda raises her hands like a saintly figure. "We cannot risk contaminated organics on board. There is no way around that. These creatures are progeny of corruption."

"There's nothing wrong with them, they're just babies!" And there had been nothing wrong with the thirty species she carried to Dar es Salaam. Had they deserved fire? "Fear of corruption is just your excuse not to take them aboard. But we *made* this climate. We warred for the shuttles. This whole situation is born of corrupt practices, and we're responsible for Earth's children now."

"They are sampled, Pasha. We can recreate them."

"And that makes *these* lives worthless to you? We can't recreate Earth. And if we don't take compassion with us, how much better will we be on Mars?"

The soldiers itch. Hands sweat on gunstocks. The kit smells fear and chitters while the three pups huff.

"What are they doing?" one of the soldiers quavers. "Is that—"

Another readies his rifle. “The fuck are those teeth?”

“Just stay away from us!” Pasha shouts.

An aardwolf’s murderous screech cleaves the tension.

The nearest soldier fires, bullet exploding through the little one’s shoulder.

Pasha screams. She crumples around her rifle and squeezes the trigger, spraying bullets across the crowd. Kickback savages her shoulder, and panicked hawk talons dig in. The staccato is punctuated by concrete showers and ricochets. People curse and scream, racing to cover. Pasha exhausts the magazine and scoops up the injured pup. Some of her creatures scatter, the others cling to her heels as she runs, lumbering, into the yard through the gate and onward until her lungs burn. On a hill two miles away, her pack regroups, but between dusk and her poor vision, she can’t see well enough to count. She cradles the dead pup in her arms and, trembling, pets the living. Fur and feather, talon, scale, some soft and others bristling. Patterns she doesn’t remember. Perhaps she misidentified some species? They’re growing up so fast.

She buries the aardwolf beneath stones. The remaining two pace, dig, and whine. Exhausted, Pasha and the other mammals get as comfortable as they can on frigid ground. The snake is much, much larger than expected for a Northern redbelly or fire snake, but is docile, curling around her wet middle. The mice and leverets find nooks of warmth.

Pasha trails her fingers along the cold rifle while watching the facility swarm with lights. No plan to sneak aboard seems feasible. She’d never fight so many.

Without her sampler, she can’t check when the next Exodus is due. Florida hasn’t launched yet but is weeks away for no guarantee.

“I’m sorry, little ones,” she whispers.

Once night cements the world in quiet, New York’s shuttle erupts in fire and arcs to the stars. Pasha cries silently, warm in the snuggles of her beasts.

In the morning, she hikes back to the launch pad where not a soul remains. Six casualties of crazed gunfire are lined up on the ground. No one spared time to bury the dead.

With the warehouses locked, she packs up what supplies she can find and freshens the rifle. It’s too heavy, but sweetness hasn’t prevailed for eight different shuttles—maybe bullets will work next time.

Navigating by sun and stars, she treks south.

The rhythm of deceased and discovered continues.

Two of the goshawks, so delicate, starve to death. The third seems to have taken up their missing volume, and Pasha squints at atypical orange eyes and crested head, wondering if she’d misjudged its species, too. Raptors are all the same puffballs in the nest.

One of the black-footed cats has a scabby nub on its skull, hardening almost horn-like, and she worries when salve does nothing. The cougar has lumps: just muscle where muscle shouldn’t be? A tumor? Abscess? All their signs of neglect—scabs, overgrown nails, quill-like mats of fur—she can do nothing about and tries not to overthink. They’re hungry and heavy, too large now to hide, so how will she convince the shuttle? Are bullets really sharper than words?

And if the sleeper ship has launched already, how will they survive together?

She follows instinct on empty roads. Scorched farmland and quaint homesteads peter out into comforting wilds. Her mental map suggests Shenandoah, the rivers, somewhat familiar.

One leveret stops eating. It dies and she makes a tiny grave. The other four hares leave their pouches to join the pack on their feet. Pasha can’t make them out clearly, but smiles anyway, petting callused and bristly

backs. She'd like to say their defects are from the strain of a new environment or just the way they're adapting to Earth, but her heart knows it's her failure of care. She shoulders guilt alongside their weight and tries not to predict when they'll die.

The wind is vicious and sun relentless through leafless beech and tulip trees as Pasha follows the Blue Ridge Mountains. The days blur together. It must be weeks since New York, for the young to have grown so swiftly.

As a road finally veins the wild, they find a body, half-corrupt. Crimson fungus gnaws its legs while black corruption scales the face. Pasha tries to convince herself it's not human, but she knows. The Vitruvian limbs.

Pasha nibbles the last of her rations.

Her creatures feed, most of them carnivores by necessity. The corruption doesn't seem to make them ill. The aardwolves have more teeth and should only be a foot and a half tall, but stand to her waist. Perhaps the new Earth causes swift adaptation, Nature whispering to their genes how they must change to survive.

Pasha's creatures emerge from the nests and dens slung on her body, but she keeps the weight even by saving more: a badger, an otter, a salamander, a thrush.

When the mountains end, she recognizes Atlanta, the skyscrapers as barren as the trees. Broken glass sparkles like diamond dust on ashen streets. In the shelter of gutted shops, Pasha unearths treasures. She finally combs every knot from her long black hair, while the cats try to battle the comb. She laughs and realizes she's stopped rationing smiles.

Soon the road signs show graffiti: Exodus in Tallahassee. Crooked arrows point the way.

"If it's already left... Her voice cracks. "Then Florida is the end of the world. A world too big to save."

Weariness has formed a callus of numb, and she feels aged beyond her years. The straps and weights have scarred her in bands, bulked muscles in strange places, crippled posture, and left bruises that seem permanent now.

Maybe death will feel like release. She'll strip off all her burdens and float away to the stars and the distant colony. Her mark will live on in the DNA she saved, the test tube creatures birthed on Mars.

"You look big enough to ride," Pasha jokes to the Arctic fox, squinting at his snowy fur, which should have been dark in summer. It's winter already. Could he tell, in Florida? "Why don't you carry me, for once?"

Her chuckle is a sickly wheeze.

In Tallahassee, the signs now say Panacea, south. Perhaps someone's idea of a lark. Far from a cure-all, the Exodus is a cowardly hope perpetuated by humans, progeny of the corrupt.

The trek takes them through forests of bare pine boles like grave markers in fleshy loam. Ancient cypress trunks taper from bulbous feet to wispy limbs, and in the foggy light, it's a strange kind of beautiful. Earth is silent except the slither, the pad, the rap of claws. The large cats and cougar play on the sand. Pasha smiles and wonders if the sun will set over the ocean.

Then, the beach curves.

The huge, horizontal Exodus shuttle juts above the trees. The town of Panacea was leveled to accommodate tents, trucks, and personnel.

Pasha crouches and swings her rifle, her steel ticket, into action. The remaining hawk's wings batter her cheek.

"Still here. Our last chance. What do we do?"

Would she have more luck going in alone, to negotiate or sneak the beasts by later? None of them is trained, she's sure they won't leave her side. But guns blazing sounds no better.

If the crew had even one compassionate heart in charge... But how would she know? Nine times the charm?

“Just *one* kind person.” Pasha curls up on the shore and watches pods load into the ship.

The fox whines and paces around driftwood. A feline head-butts Pasha’s thigh. They’re all a mass around her now, over-muscled by miles of journey, traits blurring one into the other.

“Even if we die together on the shuttle because it can’t sustain us, at least we would have been given the chance.”

A hare cuddles in her lap, huge but bony and matted, poor thing. Pasha picks absently at its sharp, dry paws. Must be encrusted with mud, since hares don’t have claws this wide or gnarled. Its cold nose nuzzles her palm as she rocks back and forth, brimming with anxiety.

Pink hues glaze the ocean as the sun sinks somewhere. For an hour, Pasha waits. How many rounds in one rifle magazine?

Citizens load into the shuttle in streams. She counts the soldiers and engineers. Their numbers dwindle, too.

Pasha strips herself of bottles, canisters, satchels, and slings. She’s so used to the weight, she hasn’t realized how much is empty. The beasts have grown and don’t need her arsenal of shelters or her body warmth or tireless feet.

“*Koko wa doko no hosomichi ja?*”

She sheds the dead soldier’s coat, leaving just her long, tattered blouse.

“*Kowai nagara mo, tōryanse...*”

Cloudy sunset veils the shuttle’s glossy shell. Floodlights switch on. Calls bounce across the open yard. Final checks? Initial launch protocol?

“Little ones, let’s go.” A deep calm overcomes her as she stands. Her muscles feel strange, malformed by

miles of burden. But straight-backed now, a hum of confidence and power clothes her as the breeze slips across her skin. She hefts the rifle in both hands and treads barefoot to the landing pad.

“Chitto tōshite kudashanse.”

Her voice falls to a whisper as sand yields to concrete.

Please allow me through.

The chain link gate is wide open. Pasha scans the dusk for any sign of a benevolent listener. Both bullets and words await in the dark.

Her creatures tread with her, but she can hardly make them all out, knowing only the sound of their passage. The last living pulse of nature walks with her.

“Goyō no nai mono tōshasenu.”

Those without good reason shall not pass.

Pasha flinches at a shout. One echoed by another. Soldiers stream out of buildings and form a vanguard, guns raised. They’re all yelling at once, she can’t make out the commands.

“Collector five-nine-nine-eight.” Pasha stops but keeps her rifle tight to her chest. “Ready to board with my final collection.”

Half her animals prowl, the others adopt low stances. The owl glides to her shoulder and pumps its wings. She hears the serpent but cannot see it.

“Jesus, what the fuck’s on its head!”

The line falters, fills with mutters and gasps. Shuffles on grit. Someone falls backward with a yelp, rifle shaking.

The eyes are on fire. Is that a tiger? Are those feathers or knives? Holy fuck, what’s wrong with its feet?

The accusations blur like Pasha’s visual of her creatures.

“How...” A man at the head of the vanguard steps back. “Those can’t be... *tame?*”

Nothing is tame anymore. All of humanity is both progeny and progenitor of corruption.

Behind the man, more soldiers and personnel cower, while crouched soldiers stream aside to flank. Yells pierce the distance as white-coated figures dash by the shuttle.

"I'm boarding," Pasha says, her words lightweight and easy. The knowledge feels so sure, she all but vibrates with conviction. "We're boarding."

She clenches her rifle, walks forward, and squeezes out a round. In a thunder crack, the vanguard leader's head crumples. The rifle kicks back against her chest. Just like that, the world breaks.

Screeching and howling, the beasts launch into chaos. Automatic rifle fire stripes the ground. Pasha shields her face and sprints aside, burying her gun in a chest as she fires and tackles at once. He breaks her fall and she scurries off him, clutching the gun to her chest.

The aardwolves rush by, their bushy tails and rigid hackles expanding their silhouettes, almost bear-sized: clearly, not right. Pasha blinks. Their hyena posture is exaggerated by muscular shoulders, the slender legs too robust and wide-stanced. Their tongues loll out of carnivorous maws. Were they all adapting this fast?

Heart drumming, she springs up and dashes to the shuttle's entrance.

A shot clips her shoulder with enough force to spin her, and she drops, knees mashing on rubble.

A soldier's rifle gleams as he takes aim, giving Pasha a target. She empties several rounds in his direction. Thundering paws and a flash of meat-tearing teeth drag the man into the dark. Crunching sounds end his screams. The cougar emerges: it, too, looks twice standard size, stance wild, coat too dark and rippling, snarl dripping with gore.

A mass of hard, muscular scales curls around Pasha's legs and lifts her up: the fire snake, but twelve feet instead of inches. Too large even if it were a python.

"Little ones," she mutters, running her hand over the glossy, ridged scales. "I didn't realize—"

"*Kill the crazy bitch!*" The screamer rushes. His first shot whizzes through hair at Pasha's neck.

She shoots. *Click*.

A grin stretches the man's cheeks. He aims. A bundle of talons smacks into his face so hard, he twirls in place. The hawk's unnatural wingspan dwarfs him, five-inch talons bladed and clamped firmly in his jaw, steadily crunching his scream into a gurgle.

Pasha drops the rifle and covers her mouth with her hands. Everywhere she looks, the floodlights illuminate a fearsome scene. Horns, claws, fangs, and talons. The mass of features untangles into creatures strange to her. This is no corruption, but the new visage of Earth.

Her little ones start a feast. The soldiers' bodies are soft, their meat cleaner than anything encountered for weeks. The snake coils around a juicy corpse. A *crackle* punches the air as serrated scales curl him to pieces.

One by one, the shouts die out as quick as they'd started.

A cat lopes over and nuzzles Pasha's hair, bathing her in purrs.

"Hi," she croaks, voice sticking in her dry throat. The metallic, tangy scent of fresh blood wafts on her darling's breath. "Is your belly full, for once?"

The cat gives a deep, guttural sound, then licks Pasha's wound and reminds her of it. She rips a sleeve off her blouse and binds the gash while her heart gains time to settle.

Feeding sounds hush. The immediate massacre is an impressionist painting in Pasha's farsighted view.

White-coated scientists lie as red as the serpent's belly. Soldiers sprawl in pieces as a rosy sunset drapes over like a pall.

Pasha ambles to the gigantic sleeper ship, horizontal and quiet.

Her beasts follow her inside. She finds a control panel that closes the door behind. The materials and design are futuristic compared to the disrepair of everything else in the world, all resources diverted to this sleek, dark blade meant to cleave the heavens.

"Oh." She cranes her neck up to footfalls and impacts on the floor above. "The crew..."

Lightweight, ethereal, she wanders up to a long corridor... past puddles and limbs. Scarlet drag-markings streak the floor—or else it's the trail of the snake.

Windows in doors on either side reveal row upon row of cryostasis pods efficiently packed like sardines. Plenty for a voyage.

Pasha strokes the horned head of the Arctic fox as he joins her and chitters. "I guess I should give you all names now. We'll be here a while."

She passes prim crew quarters. Some had been occupied. Pilot, mission specialist, technician, engineer—she can't tell from their uniforms. Her beasts settle in various rooms or the hall, licking wounds or bloody paws.

On the flight deck, the aardwolves turn at her entry. Three dead officers bleed out.

"Will it still fly?" Pasha walks to the control desk. The whole deck rumbles as the fire snake slithers between empty seats.

The aardwolves' huge black ears swivel erect as she nears. Their hackles slim down long necks and backs to thick, sweeping tails that look draconic beneath the fur. She blinks, trying to parse a mix of expected and unforeseen traits: their legs and paws are scaled and bony, their muzzles ridged and plated.

Pasha uses touch to explore, and kisses their snouts, loving even their change.

At the control desk, the launch sequence is pre-automated. Vertical orientation, service structure rollback, and final procedures. If she takes her time, it's doable. The "Execute" option gleams on the display.

Pasha plucks a slim visor of ultrathin glass off the dead pilot's face. "Do you think I'd look good in this?" She smiles and crowns herself. Holographic symbols dance in her peripheral view, and instantly her vision is crystal clear. She freezes, startled, and blinks at the crispness and colors, the many seams of the ceiling and walls.

She barks a laugh and spins around.

There sit all her creatures. Her eyes grow wide, breath a flood, as she takes in the little ones' details. Not so little anymore.

After a while of staring, heart hammering, her vision blurs again with tears.

She smiles and settles in the padded commander's seat: for once, something holds her weary frame. She punches "Execute" on pre-launch sequences. Screens fill with monitoring, distant machinery rumbles, and the Arctic fox hops into Pasha's lap. She chuckles—he's far too big for her now, but no burden, and she hugs him close, careful of horns and claws.

A peaceful silence settles, punctuated by small sounds of automation. Through the overhead window, stars button down an indigo nightfall.

Pasha leans back to pet the fox and closes her eyes.

"We have time now. How about a nap?"

Essa Hansen grew up in beautifully wild areas of California, from the coastal foothills to the Sierra Nevada mountains around Yosemite, before migrating north to the Canadian Rocky Mountains. She has ranched bison and sheep, trained horses, practiced Japanese swordsmanship and archery, and is a licensed falconer. She works for Skywalker Sound as a sound designer for science fiction and fantasy feature films such as Big Hero 6, Doctor Strange, Avengers: Endgame, and Pixar's Onward. Essa lives with her British Shorthair cat Soki in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The Calvary

JOÃO F. SILVA

“The admiral wants you in room L17F5,” Lau tells me.
“They say it’s urgent.”

As if the buzzer wasn’t enough of a reminder, I nod and finish putting on my medical blue and military-green scrubs before grabbing the most important item in my arsenal: the trusty brown rope I’ve been using since I started this.

Lau buries her face in the tablet in front of her. I’m the only one on my team with combat experience but the four of them are still treated like superstars—because of me.

A few years ago, I would have been modest about it, but now I’m older and I can say what everybody knows: I’m the best at what I do and that’s why they picked me to save lives here, where the war against the howlers feels pointless and soldiers die every day. Even old and tired, I’ve got great hands and strong arms. They can’t afford to let me go. Not when the howlers claim so many.

The anticipation consumes me, and I feel their gazes.

“What?” I ask as they finish putting their scrubs on.

“This is your thousandth patient, Dr Sellie,” Angie says, smiling.

“Funny, I could swear it was more.”

I have always been better at saving lives than taking them. After my son died, becoming a doctor was all I could do. I couldn’t save him so now I save other people’s sons instead. Every time the alarm sounds, I feel the adrenaline and prepare for a battle with death.

The five of us break into a jog, bursting through our improvised common room and through the hallway of the campaign hospital. I scan the hallway, and we are met with timid side eyes and whispers from the hospital staff and soldiers alike.

“It’s the cavalry,” one grunt who lost his legs to the howlers whispers. “They called the cavalry.”

“Must be a bad one,” the other grunt says.

I smile under my mask as I pass and give them a salute with my right hand. Startled, they salute me back. By now, they should know it’s *always* bad.

The hallway has standard faux marble flooring, the easiest to clean. The drab olive walls are a constant reminder from our dear military leaders that even the hospitals belong to them.

Or perhaps to tell us that doctors are a bit like soldiers too.

“Doctor Sellie! Here!” a nurse calls from about fifty metres ahead.

I quicken my pace as the rest of the crew hurries behind. The urge to jump to the patient is strong, but I resist. Instead, I tighten my grip on the rope to keep my emotions in check. There are things I need to figure out first. The nurse is young but she knows me and wastes no time with pointless chatter. I almost want to thank her for that.

We enter a five-by-five metre room with green wallpaper and faux marble floor. I focus on the patient.

“Brief me,” I command the medical crew.

They take their time to answer. They look pale with heavy bags under their eyes. The exhausted woman who must be the team leader looks at me, defeat in her eyes, but she knows better than to beat herself.

“Twenty-five-year-old male,” she says. Her voice drawls under her blue facemask. “Got bitten while on patrol. The wounds are impossible to close. We can’t stop the bleeding.”

“Bitten by what?” I already know the answer.

“A howler,” she says, assessing my reaction.

Shit.

“Thank you, Doctor. You and your team may leave now.”

She doesn’t need to be told twice and immediately exits the room with her crew, closing the door behind them, and I turn to assess the man. He’s young, strong, and well-built. But a howler bite...

“Mari, oxygen levels?”

Her hands move with precision as she inserts a tiny probe into the patient’s neck. Her sharp features are hidden behind the mask but her unblinking eyes stay locked on the patient. Every patient is the most important.

“Dropping quickly. We’re losing him,” she says.

Shit.

“We need to cauterize the wound and remove the infection,” I say. That would be hard to do when his blood has been infected with howler saliva.

Mari monitors the oxygen levels, trying to keep his failing heart pumping and his lungs working. I pick up a small slab of spare synthetic skin brought to me by Fren. I do my best to burn it onto the man and cover the bite while Quinn closes the wound.

If I burn too little, the howler infection will spread, and he will die. If I burn too much, I’m doing more damage than the howler and he dies anyway. This is no ordinary wound.

That’s why they called the cavalry.

I press the burner against the skin of his abdomen, adding a new scar to the collection. Judging by how many he already has, something tells me the young man must be a thrill-chaser. But that’s none of my business.

“Doctor, we’re losing him. Heart rate is still dropping,” Mari says, her voice calm. Like me, she expected this. And she’s good at her job. Anyone who

has been on the battlefield knows people don't survive with wounds like this. At least their bodies don't.

"We've done all we can," I say and swallow. Even after a thousand patients, I still have to stop my hands from shaking when I think of what's to come. "Lau, get the hololight ready."

"Yes, Doctor."

She takes off her gloves, pulls out a large metal spotlight, and sets it on the floor near the patient's feet, pointing it at him. The bright light makes his shine. The gruesome purple howler saliva that drenches his wounds makes me grimace. Relentless, Lau picks up the tatamic vessel: a long, narrow plastic tube. The lid is open at the top and she points it at the patient.

"I'm ready, Doctor," she says.

"Good."

"She's flatlining," Mari says.

I remove my gloves and grab the rope. I tie it into a lasso and hold it with both hands, ready to throw.

"Any moment now," Mari says, her voice faltering. She's as nervous as I am, as we all are in these circumstances.

I can sense a heaviness in the flickering hospital lights. A morbid scent fills the air.

Suddenly, a humanoid figure appears, glowing in the hololight, drifting from the injured soldier's body. I let my lasso fly before the figure can escape the hololight to be lost forever. My crew stands behind me; they know what to do next. I cannot afford to lose any jumpers. My lasso catches the figure and tightens.

The creature is strong and it takes effort to move him, even with four others behind me, helping. My thousandth jumper caught by my lasso, but I'm getting old and the man's soul is youthful and strong.

Soul. What a shitty word.

The jumper pulls and heaves, fighting to get free, and I grit my teeth. If a soul escapes, it will turn into a howler in less than twenty-four hours. I refuse to let this

one follow my son's fate. My perfect boy was barely a man when it happened to him, much like this one. He had dreams of winning the war and making something of his life. Maybe find someone and start a family. The howlers robbed him of that and I couldn't save him. I let him become a casualty. I think back to his childhood, his tiny hand holding mine. The way he'd look at me with that devilish smile. It gives me the strength to hold the rope and pull like his life depends on it.

At least I can save this one.

"Lau!" I shout.

She rushes to the figure with the open tubular tatamic vessel pointed at it. That's our cue to steer the jumper towards her. As always, my arms strain and the veins look like they're going to burst as I struggle to maintain my grip, pulling hard, my feet planted on the ground like tree trunks and the backs of my legs flexing as if I am pulling a tank. I put my back into it. My body is on the line. The same goes for the rest of the crew.

Little by little, the straining jumper gets closer to Lau's tatamic vessel. We keep pulling, but the soul takes his time deciding if he wants to seek refuge inside the tube. I keep the pulled rope taut until Lau positions the vessel opposite us. She gives us a count of three and we release the rope, causing the jumper to shoot into the tube. Lau closes the lid and locks it.

The figure contracts in an impossible flow of light, as if it was swimming inside the tube.

I take a deep breath and remove my mask. The smell of death greets me yet again, but so does relief. Another close call. In bed, the patient's body remains pale and motionless as Mari turns off the heart monitor and Lau turns off the hololight.

I open the door and step outside, only to be greeted by people wearing drab, olive vests and white gowns holding their hands over their hearts. Before them

stands an austere man with a shaved head. Emblems cover his uniform.

“Did you save his soul?” the man asks.

I look for the nurse but don't find her, so I have to face him. “You mean his *jumper*? Yes, I did.”

Relief floods the man's face. “Thank God.”

“No, Admiral. Thank *me*,” I say, making the military man stiffen. I shouldn't have said it, but I couldn't resist. I turn back to my crew. “Come on, Lau. We don't have much time.”

I walk towards the main hangar, tailed by my team, and the Admiral is following now, too. The veins in his neck are bursting and he furrows his brow but doesn't get in my way. At least not until my job is complete.

“You will be able to speak to your son again,” I say, trying to ease the man's nerves. My lieutenants exchange looks but say nothing. The admiral looks at me like a soldier caught sleeping on duty.

“How did you know he was my son?”

“Same ugly mug, sir,” I smile, catching the man by surprise. He isn't used to being talked to like that. He doesn't ease up as I had hoped.

When we reach the hangar, hundreds of soldiers run in the coordinated chaos typical of war zones. The ceiling is as tall as a four-storey building and wide enough to host three dozen planes and a few more tanks. Vehicles need fixing. Others need refuelling and ammunition must be replenished. The wounded must be carried to the hospital, and the dead must be incinerated. I follow Lau as she holds the tatamic vessel with the jumper inside. She knows how little time we have before the jumper gets contaminated, and I let her do her part.

“We need a body!” she shouts, paying no mind to military rank. We get away with it because, without us, the uniformed fools would have lost the war a long time ago.

Two sharp-looking bald youngsters come to lead us. We reach the left side of the complex and then I see the twelve-foot-tall titanium-built shell sitting motionless with two dozen cables tied to its back. It never ceases to amaze me.

Lau climbs up a four-step ladder and inserts the tatamic vessel into the robot's chest. It's a perfect fit.

She joins me as the admiral and a few other officials stand around us, waiting. The two grunts remove the ladder and punch the number of the room where the soldier's soul was captured into the holopad, as well as his military number and unit. The robot's cables remove themselves from the robot's back with bursts of steam hissing one by one.

The robot's eyes turn yellow and suddenly there's movement. His right hand twitches. His legs move. It's like waiting to see if a baby cries right after birth.

"Dad?" it asks in a metallic voice. "Dad, is that you?"

The admiral gasps and takes two steps forward. "Son," he says, his legs shaking. He drops to his knees, a relieved father. He sobs, his body trembling. "It's me. It's Dad. I thought I lost you. Thank God you're still with us. Can you hear me?"

"I... died," the robot says.

"Your body did. You're still you, soldier. It's just that your body is... different now," I say.

"Th-thank you," the admiral says.

I nod and bite my tongue, wondering how it's possible to be both happy and miserable at the same time. Why does an admiral get to see his son live while mine died? I am forced to watch the reunion now. To be reminded that I failed to protect the only one who mattered. It's a punishment I deserve. I just hope my son forgives me.

With my back turned to them, I hear their concerns dissipate into timid laughter as they joke as father and son. I taste the sourness of jealousy and walk away.

As Lau and I walk back to our common room, I see a propaganda clip of the glorious tatam robots fighting a dozen howlers each, their souls intact inside titanium bodies. They are the reason the war is still winnable. The admiral's son will soon be a war hero, leading hundreds on the front lines, and I...

I will be saving more souls like his.

João F. Silva was born in Portugal and studied Journalism and Communications before moving to the UK, where he now lives with his wife. ‘Seeds of War’ is his upcoming debut novel, but his short fiction can be found at Haven Speculative Magazine. His brand of science fiction and fantasy is influenced by Joe Abercrombie, Robin Hobb, Brandon Sanderson, Kameron Hurley, Peter McLean, John Gwynne, Evan Winter and Mark Lawrence. When he's not writing, he can be found playing video games, reading or cooking Portuguese food. He's a member of the BSFA and was also on the jury for “Best Newcomer” at the 2020 and 2022 British Fantasy Awards.

There's a Monster in the House (and it is us)

DEBORAH WOLF

It is often asserted that Mary Shelley gave life to modern speculative fiction with her masterpiece FRANKENSTEIN. If this is so, it can be further argued that grimdark swirls deep in the DNA of all modern speculative fiction.

And we love it. Time and again we fling ourselves into the pit with Frankenstein's monster, with Glokta and his knives, with monsters and mad scientists and imperfectly understood alien technology. We glut ourselves on horror and despair.

Why should this be so? Why, in a musty old bookstore filled with tales of derring-do True Kings and Good Witches, would we ever reach for stories that make us wince or weep? Why reach for the bitter cup instead of sweet?

It's almost as if we know that both cups have been poisoned, that the sweet wine is a lie.

Blake Snyder, known for his 'Save the Cat' beat sheet template for storytelling, describes a subgenre that he names 'Monster in the House'. In this story genre our hero is trapped in an inescapable venue (the house) and menaced by an implacable danger (the monster). In order to survive, the hero must: a) defeat the monster; and b) escape the house. Unfortunately, neither of these is possible until the hero has been wrecked and remade in a new, darker image of themselves.

Worse, the monster only exists at all because the hero has created it. Victor Frankenstein, in his hubris, challenged the throne of God in his attempts to bring forth life from cold clay. Glokta chooses to inflict upon others the same horror that unmade him. We choose to watch as tragically fallible human beings raise the dead, commit all manner of atrocities, plunge worlds into war, and suffer for it.

We suffer along with them, and find ourselves entertained.

Why? Why do this to ourselves? Why, when the torturer pulls a hot poker from the fire, do we not set aside that book in favor of bright elves and sweet Hobbitses? Why, when the brat king shoots a whore full of bolts, do we not hit the remote and watch Willow for the umpteenth time?

Why do we decide, time and again, to trap ourselves in the house with these monsters?

Perhaps, as it has been opined, we wish to expose our limbic systems to fear, horror, and grief so that we may build grit and resilience by surviving these harrowing experiences.

Perhaps we wish to distract ourselves from a sometimes terrible and terrifying reality. After all, what is end stage capitalism and climate change when compared to a planet-devouring protomolecule?

I suspect the reason is deeper.

And darker.

It can be argued that humans suffer mental anguish when our actions are not in harmony with our ideals. And we, perverse creatures that we are, consistently elect sin over sainthood. We tyrannize and destroy our neighbors, our planet, ourselves. We rape, plunder, and pillage our way to a throne, crown ourselves in stolen gold, and then eat, drink and whore ourselves into an early grave. We drink stolen water from plastic bottles which choke the life from our oceans, drive ridiculous vehicles that steal the oxygen from our own

lungs. Every generation sews together bits and pieces of the Nazi dream and tries to breathe new life into a dead nightmare.

We could embrace life, love, and light. We could bottle the light of the stars, plant trees of silver and gold, unfurl our wings and soar into a land of peace and prosperity.

But we won't. We will always create the monster and then lock ourselves in the house with it. Because, as Agent Kay tells us, "People are dumb, panicky, dangerous animals and you know it."

Mary Shelley knew it, too.

Out loud, we tell ourselves that we want True Kings and Bold Heroes and Virtuous Rulers, but down deep in the muck of our DNA, we know that we neither deserve nor truly desire that glittering castle in the sky.

So lock yourself within the house of pain and bring forth the monster from your tortured, dissonant, too-human soul.

It's not your fault, poor creature—you were made this way.

Deborah A. Wolf was born in a barn and raised on wildlife refuges, which explains rather a lot. As a child, whether she was wandering down the beach of an otherwise deserted island or exploring the hidden secrets of Alaska with her faithful dog Sitka, she always had a book at hand. She opened the forbidden door, and set foot upon the tangled path, and never looked back.

Deborah attended any college that couldn't outrun her and has accumulated a handful of degrees. She has worked as an underwater photographer, Arabic linguist, and grumbling wage slave. Throughout it all, she has held onto one true and passionate love: the love of storytelling.

Deborah currently lives in northern Michigan with her kids (some of whom are grown and all of whom are exceptional), an assortment of dogs and horses, and a pair of demons masquerading as cats.

Deborah A. Wolf writes books that double as melee weapons.

Untethered Sky by Fonda Lee

JOHN MAURO

Untethered Sky is Fonda Lee's delicate coming-of-age novella inspired by Persian and Arabian folklore, featuring two beasts from Middle Eastern mythology: manticores and rocs. The manticore, which derives its name from the Persian word for "man-eater," is a fearsome beast with a human-like head, the body of a lion, and a scorpion-like tail. It delights in feeding on humans, with the screams of its victims only fueling its thirst for carnage. In *Untethered Sky*, the manticore has only one natural predator: the giant bird known as the roc. The roc, which appears in both Arabian and Persian mythology, is essentially a supersized falcon that can be trained to hunt a variety of beasts, including the manticore.

Untethered Sky is told from the first-person perspective of Ester, a girl who lost both her mother and brother to a rampaging manticore. With the manticore's sinister, heterochromic eyes emblazoned in her memory, Ester makes it her life's mission to hunt and kill manticores by training as a ruhker, i.e., a professional roc trainer. The job of a ruhker is highly dangerous, since any miscommunication with the roc could lead it to attack its handler. Only about one in five apprentices are able to complete their training and become a successful ruhker.

The first part of *Untethered Sky* focuses on Ester's apprenticeship. The most important aspect of her training is to build a trusting relationship with her

adolescent roc, Zahra. I was especially touched by the respect and thoughtful care exhibited by Ester in all her interactions with Zahra.

As in her *Green Bone Saga*, Fonda Lee excels at nuanced characterization of complex interpersonal relationships. In *Untethered Sky*, these relationships include those between ruhkers and rocs and amongst the ruhkers themselves. All these relationships are built on mutual respect and collegiality but with an unspoken barrier preventing deeper connections. The cautiously affectionate interactions between Ester and her fellow ruhker Darius are especially poignant.

Another major theme in *Untethered Sky* is the relationship between humankind and the natural world. The ruhkers cultivate a respectful, personal relationship with their rocs, never considering themselves to have any ownership over the giant birds. This attitude contrasts with that of the local government officials who seek to leverage the rocs in a more organized, militaristic fashion to exterminate the manticores. Whereas the ruhkers give all the credit for manticore-hunting to their beloved rocs, the officials are quick to attribute their success to human skill and ingenuity.

With *Untethered Sky*, Fonda Lee shows her maturity and versatility as an author. Her writing is precise and poetic, with every word skillfully chosen. Combined with its gentle didacticism, *Untethered Sky* has the feeling of a classic folktale. Whereas the *Green Bone Saga* showcased Fonda Lee's ability to write pulse-pounding action in the world of organized crime, in *Untethered Sky* she demonstrates quiet restraint. Her more minimalistic approach in this novella works every bit as effectively as the grander scale she employed in *Jade City* and its sequels.

Untethered Sky is a beautifully crafted gem of a novella, which reinforces Fonda Lee's standing as one of the most talented authors in fantasy today. The

Middle Eastern-inspired setting is an ideal backdrop for Lee's tale, which gently interweaves fantastical elements in this graceful story about the nature of humanity, our relationships with each other, and humankind's place in the natural world. Fonda Lee's understated approach is the perfect vehicle for this moving novella about rising from tragedy to find one's true calling.

5/5

An Interview with Fonda Lee

JOHN MAURO

Fonda Lee is the World Fantasy Award-winning author of the Green Bone Saga, beginning with *Jade City* and continuing with *Jade War* and *Jade Legacy*. Her latest work, *Untethered Sky*, is a coming-of-age novella inspired by Middle Eastern folklore. Fonda is also a black belt martial artist and a former corporate strategist.

We recently had the pleasure of discussing with Fonda Lee about the Green Bone Saga, *Untethered Sky*, and her future plans.

[GdM] Five years after its publication, *Jade City* has been named as one of *TIME* magazine's 100 Best Fantasy Books of All Time, a list that also includes such classics as *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. Congratulations! How does it feel to be included alongside such masterpieces? When you first wrote *Jade City*, did it feel like you had a future classic in your hands?

[FL] When I was writing *Jade City*, I had no idea if it would even be published, much less if it would be critically or commercially successful. It didn't fit neatly into any fantasy sub-genre, nor were there any comparable titles, but it was a story that excited me and that I wanted to read. I told myself that even if it didn't go anywhere, I would be proud to have written it. So

seeing these books resonate with readers and find their audience has been incredibly meaningful.

[GdM] When you wrote *Jade City*, did you already have a plan for the main plot points of the trilogy, or did you find that the characters took the story in unexpected directions during *Jade War* and *Jade Legacy*?

[FL] I had some sense of where I wanted to take the story if I was given the opportunity to write more books, but I didn't have any firm plans. Only when my publisher signed me for three volumes did I start to structure the arc of the trilogy. Some of the main plot points I knew very early on; others came to me unexpectedly while I was writing, because of the characters. From the start, however, I knew that at its heart, this was a family saga, and that overriding vision drove my narrative choices.

[GdM] Your background in martial arts has clearly helped you with writing convincing action scenes. But could you discuss how your experiences as a corporate strategist influenced your writing of the economic and political aspects of the Green Bone Saga, especially with respect to Shae's role as Weather Man of the No Peak clan?

[FL] My business background influences how I view worldbuilding, and that invariably affects the story. A fantasy world doesn't feel real to me if the economy isn't well thought through. If magic exists in a fictional world, I consider the way it affects how that world functions and how people live their daily lives by following the principle of, "It's the economy, stupid."

Writers always put something of themselves and their experiences into each story and each character, so it was enjoyable for me to write a character like Kaul

Shae, the Weather Man of No Peak, who isn't just a great fighter, but who can propose trade embargos, negotiate business alliances, and set in motion long-running marketing campaigns to give her clan the edge.

[GdM] You are especially adept at drawing the reader into a story. Reading the Green Bone Saga feels like being an extra on the set of a movie, up close and personal with all the action and drama. Could you describe your approach to writing in this engaging style?

[FL] I'm a spare and direct writer. To me, ideal prose is lean and sharp and immersive, occasionally hitting hard with the perfect phrase or description but rarely drawing attention to itself. A lot of my creative inspiration comes from cinema so that no doubt influences my style. I want the story to visually unfold in the mind as effortlessly as possible.

[GdM] What inspired you to pursue a new direction with your delicate coming-of-age novella, *Untethered Sky*?

[FL] After the behemoth of a project that was the Green Bone Saga, I wanted and needed to write something different and to stretch different creative muscles. I'd never written a novella before, but I was excited by the idea of writing something *short*. I'd written an epic trilogy with a large cast of characters; this new project would be close and contained. Janloon is gritty, urban, and modern; my next story took me into ancient, wide open countryside. The Green Bone Saga is steely, bloody, and glamorous; *Untethered Sky* is raw, delicate and contemplative.

I was (and still am, to be honest) nervous about writing something so different from the Green Bone

Saga, and worried that readers wouldn't come along with me. But I believe it's important, in the long run of an author's career, at least for me personally, to explore the range of stories that interest you and push one's storytelling craft in different directions.

[GdM] *Untethered Sky* incorporates mythical beasts from Persian and Arabian folklore. How did you first become interested in Middle Eastern mythology?

[FL] Actually, my interests started not with mythology but with falconry. When I was a child, I loved wildlife stories and animal companion stories like *My Side of the Mountain*, *Julie of the Wolves*, and *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Several years ago, I read a memoir called *H is For Hawk* by Helen Macdonald, about the author's experience of training a goshawk, and I watched a fascinating, stirring documentary called *The Eagle Huntress* about Mongolian hunters who train golden eagles to hunt wolves. After WorldCon 2019, I went on a hawk walk in Ireland with a professional falconer. Of course, being a fantasy author, I started picturing a version of this ancient tradition involving gigantic monsters. Instead of hawks and rabbits, or even eagles and wolves, I imagined a coming-of-age wildlife memoir with rocs and man-eating manticores.

As it turns out, both rocs and manticores originate from Persian mythology. Falconry itself was birthed in the Middle East and Central Asia. It was only natural that I honor that source and create a world around my story that reflected where rocs and manticores would be found in their "natural habitat" and where "ruhking" would first develop. That led me to deep dive into researching pre-Islamic ancient Persia during the Achaemenid Empire of Cyrus the Great. What I learned inspired the kingdom I created, Dartha, and the culture and people found in it.

[GdM] The relationship between the ruhkers and rocs is beautifully written in *Untethered Sky*, capturing the love and respect that the human trainers have for these enormous predatory birds, as well as the inherent danger in this relationship. Could you describe how you developed the concept of the ruhker profession and how the challenges of being a ruhker reflect the real-world challenges of your readers?

[FL] I was trying to capture not only the relationship between trainer and bird, but to delve into the personal meaningfulness of the practice for someone wholly dedicated to a difficult, all-demanding, unpredictable calling. I researched falconry in depth, but more importantly, I also had the good fortune of having master falconers beta read the manuscript and tell me it rang true.

Untethered Sky is about monster hunting, but for me, it's actually about writing. I put the obsessive drive, the emotional ups and downs of success and failure, the time and effort and sacrifice of a creative profession into Ester's personal journey with her roc, Zahra. I hope and believe that anyone who's ever felt a deep compulsion toward something they love to do—a hobby, an art, a sport—will find something emotionally authentic in Ester's story.

[GdM] The worldbuilding feels so natural in both the *Green Bone Saga* and *Untethered Sky*. What is your approach for introducing the elements of worldbuilding in such a natural fashion, without any awkward info dumps?

[FL] Worldbuilding is one of my favorite parts of being a fantasy and science fiction writer. There are so many things I could say about it, but I think the one crucial personal guideline I employ is to make the world feel as real and lived-in as possible. It all comes down to

the tangible details that surround the characters as they move about in their daily lives.

[GdM] How have you seen genres of science fiction and fantasy evolve over the course of your career as an author? What are thoughts on future direction of SFF?

[FL] My first novel released in 2015. Eight years isn't all that long when it comes to publishing timeframes, but it feels like a long time because the landscape has changed considerably, even since 2017, when *Jade City* came out. We're now well past the point where fantasy is synonymous with medieval European tropes and milieus. There's so much more variety in stories and voices, and also the lines between genres and subgenres are more porous. Authors are moving more easily than ever between traditional publishing and self-publishing, and speculative fiction as a whole has never been more culturally mainstream.

I believe all of that will continue, but we're also in a challenging time to be a creative professional because it's hard to stand out amid all the online noise and the sheer magnitude of entertainment available. It puts more pressure on writers be adaptable, connected, and savvy.

[GdM] You are an inspiration for many young writers. What advice do you have for young authors who are working on their first novel?

[FL] That's very kind of you to say. My advice for new writers is always to focus on the craft and to write for themselves first and foremost. Write the story you most want to read that hasn't been written yet. If it scratches your deepest itch, there are others out there who will want it, too.

[GdM] We are very excited about the announced TV adaptation of *Jade City*. Any news you can share about this new series?

[FL] *Jade City* was initially optioned by Peacock, but they decided last year not to go ahead with developing it. It's now currently in the process of being optioned elsewhere; I can't provide any further details until the ink is dry on the contract, but it's exciting and I'll share more once I can.

[GdM] What's next for Fonda Lee after *Untethered Sky*? Any new directions you are planning to explore?

[FL] I have a Green Bone Saga short story collection, *Jade Shards*, coming out this summer. That'll be my last foray into the Green Bone Saga world, at least for the foreseeable future. I just signed two new contracts to write four more books, so I'm going to be very busy for a while. One project is a collaboration with Shannon Lee, the daughter of Bruce Lee, on a young adult fantasy duology inspired by her father's scripts, his life, and his philosophy. The other project is an adult science fiction duology that I can't tell you about because it hasn't been officially announced yet, but I'm very excited to get working on it and to share more about it soon.

Fonda Lee is the World Fantasy Award-winning author of the Green Bone Saga, beginning with *Jade City* and continuing in *Jade War* and *Jade Legacy*. She is also the author of the acclaimed young adult science fiction novels *Zeroboxer*, *Exo* and *Cross Fire*, and has written comics for Marvel. Fonda is a three-time winner of the Aurora Award, and a multiple finalist for the Nebula and Locus Awards. Fonda is a recovering corporate strategist, black belt martial artist, Eggs Benedict enthusiast, and action movie aficionado. Born and raised in Canada, she now resides in Portland, Oregon. Follow Fonda online at www.fondalee.com and on Twitter @fondajlee.

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The cover art for *Grimdark Magazine issue #33* was created by Carlos Diaz based on *Bargaining* by Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan.

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