

JO CLAYTON

BORROWED LIGHT

1. The awakening

"you are not my first death," Tsoylan sang to she who lay on the sleeping platform, her breath barely stirring the air, a stranger odd and angular, paler even than the Great Mother. When the Name came into his head, evoking Her image and the Fear, he cupped his stubby hands over his eyes in the ritual see-me-not gesture, forgetting the dark spectacles and knocking them away.

When his heart flutters stopped, he groped about the tile floor until he found them and fumbled them back on. Even with the dark lenses, his eyes had hurt since the beginning of this vigil, the tear ducts suppurating from the stress of sunlight like yellow acid streaming into the room. The healers said that was what the alien needed. Like the sowy, they said, she drinks from the sun and darkness starves her.

"You are not my first death," he sang.

"Nor the first whose rushing breath Becomes a shout,

I won't. I will not go...."

Her eyes opened and Tsoylan stopped his song. "Kara Stavokal," he said, speaking slowly to make sure she understood. "Do not be afraid. It is fate that wounded you, not we."

He watched her head turn, her hands fumble about as if by touching the padded platform and the sheet pulled over her, she could call her soul from wherever it had fled. Her eyes gained focus, her groping stopped, and she began trying out her body much as a Talq would test a machine, moving part against part, evaluating the results. When she was satisfied, she swung her legs over the edge of the platform and stood up.

She swayed, steadied herself. Her breathing slowed.

The healers had dressed her in a white shift that came to her knees and left her arms bare. The hair on those arms was so fine he wouldn't have known it was there if he hadn't felt it on her when he was helping move her from the litter to the platform. The hair on her head was coatset, a color like that of unstained wood; it was cut close to her head, fitting like a brown cap.

She took a step and he tensed. It was like a tree trying to walk. He didn't say anything, just continued to watch her, amazed at her balance; it seemed to him that she teetered on the edge of a bruising fall over and over again. His own plump, malleable body with its low center of gravity and four legs to hold it

off the floor seemed so much more logical and stable.

She crossed to the sleeping room's barred window and stood there a while, staring out at the walled garden with its fountain and grass and a tall narrow naqon tree and two round beds of flowers. This was where the city mothers housed those who came from the Island to talk trade with them. Though she showed no sign that she recognized anything she saw, the healers told him she'd been here before.

She came back and sat on the platform. There was a light film of moisture over her face and her hands were trembling with weariness, but her eyes were hard as jewels and there were edges to her gaze.

He took a handkerchief from his sleeve, dabbed beneath the dark lenses at the matter gathering in the corners of his eyes. "What do you remember, Kara Stavokal?"

"Nothing. Confusion. Pain. Salt water slapping at my face, salt burning in my eyes, in my mouth. Holding onto something that tore at my hands..." She looked at them, rubbed her thumbs across her fingertips. "How long have I been here?"

"Four days," he said. "The healers kept you sleeping until they knew your injuries were not life-threatening." "What happened?"

"The island we gave you was volcanic in its nature and returned without warning to its origins. Its fate crossed with the fate of a storm that also turned without warning. These things happen as God wills them."

Her mouth compressed into a thin line and the bones of her face grew more prominent. If he could have felt her anger, it would have been fierce as the storm that blew her here. He sucked himself in to make a smaller target and his hands moved toward his eyes before he could stop them, the spectacles falling to the tiles once again.

He heard her sigh, heard the sounds she made as she shifted position on the platform. "Don't shrink," she said, "it wasn't your doing. You know my name. Will you tell me yours?"

He kept his palms pressed against his face, but he answered her as calmly as he could. "I am Tsoylan, a puman of the Talqoya. I am your guide."

"Guide or guard?"

"Perhaps both."

"Hm. I'll leave that for now. What about the others in the compound?"

"Wingah Island spat you forth. It swallowed the others."

"All dead?"

"So I was told."

He heard a faint gasp, but when she spoke, her voice was crisp and detached. "I appreciate what you and your healers have done, but I need to talk to my own people, to let them know that I'm alive. This city was given a Corn system by the Company that sent me here. If you could arrange for me to visit that Com, I would be most grateful."

Tsoylan forced his hands down from his eyes and blinked at her through thickening tears. "That is not possible, Kara Stavokal."

"Then bring someone here who can take me."

"You don't understand. You desecrated the Qawanya, the Holy Ground where the mothers lay their bones."

"Desecrated seems harsh for being stormtossed somewhere."

He shivered. "Intent is irrelevant, it is the act that matters. The pumans who carried you from there have already surrendered their lives to God. She requires yours also." He straightened, intoned, "So says the Great Mother." Then he collapsed in a shaking mass on the floor until the Fear evoked by the Name passed out of him.

When his knees would work again and he pushed himself up, he saw a pale hand holding out his spectacles. Taking them with gratitude, he eased them into place over his eyes, tugged out the handkerchief, wiped away the exudate from the ducts, then settled himself more comfortably in the cradle of his legs.

"Explain what you meant by guide," she said.

"I am to lead you to accept your fate," he said. "It is our custom that the dying guide the dying to a gentle death." "then you...."

"I am redundant," he said. "It is my duty to step aside and allow another to stand in my tracks."

"When? If it doesn't trouble you to talk about it."

"When Muya returns to the House of Homitis." He watched her intently to see if she understood.

"Homitis," she said after a moment. "That's the small digger which looks like a miniature Talq?"

"Yes. Our Past Readers have put together a theory that says when God created the Talqoya, She took Flesh that already was and gave it Soul."

"And Homitis is also one of the band of constellations that make your Year

Cycle. Your moon Muya passes through them."

"That is so."

She looked past him, her will turned inward for the moment. Her pink-brown mouth moved slightly and he thought, she's naming the signs. She knew Talq-speak well, even had the correct variant for addressing a puman. She knew more than he expected, but knew-not much that was common understanding. It would be another thing to talk about while they waited for her angers and her grief to pass off.

"Six months," she said. "Redundant. What is that?"

"My komat was drawn in this year's Terminal lottery. Do you understand what the pumans are?"

He waited with the patience he'd learned over the years while she considered her answer and he knew it when she decided on candor. This pleased him because it meant there was enough personhood between them to let him truly be her guide.

"Those who do not -- or cannot -- breed," she said.

"Cannot is the correct interpretation, Kara Stavokal. Fate speaks through the Creche lottery and puts the mark of puman on all but a few of the children there. Those with the mark eat different food, live different lives and the capacity to recreate ourselves withers within us. I do not wish to talk further about this. It will evoke images that are distressing to me."

"Then we'll talk about Pikaya Tsewa. Tell me about your city."

Laughter bubbled in him, surprising him. Even in such a short time and over such a gap of strangeness, he was coming to like her. "You can't escape, Kara Stavokal. And you won't be permitted to reach the Com."

"Tell me anyway. Talk to me about the things that please you. I need to understand you. That is my nature."

He was not deceived by her graceful acquiescence. She was determined to avoid her fate and did not yet understand the futility of her desire. He unlocked his knees and lowered his belly to the floor and closed his eyes. "There is a subtle beauty about the tunnels of Pikaya Tsewa...."

2. The struggle

When he woke the next morning, Kara Stavokal was gone. He sighed and went into the washing place, used the water brush to scour away the exuviae from his skin, pulling the folds taut and scrubbing the accumulations from the cracks and crannies of his being. Between death vigils he let himself go, sleeping too much and never bathing; it was a way of being angry, the only way he could afford.

During each vigil the Wardens of the Dead provided his clothing. He dressed

carefully, making sure every fold was in place. The worn uniform had been washed so many times it was nearly as soft as the fur on his pivan, the pet which he had to give away when his komat was drawn. His belly sagged and his hands stilled as he remembered the feel of Enang's gentle quivering against his palms when he lay on the resting frame and listened to the musicbox, relaxing after a long day at the creche.

He was in the kitchen, taking a tray of kwibread smallcakes from the oven when the Wardens brought Kara Stavokal back. He heard her scream with rage and curse in her angular homespeak, heard the boom that told him she must have kicked the slide that covered the door. He tumbled the small cakes from their shallow holes and was pleased because he'd got them the exact golden brown that brought the most flavor from the coarsely ground meal. He cut them open and left pats of kapir butter to melt on the halves while he sliced up fat tasty wakasha mushrooms to fry in more of the butter.

While the mushrooms were draining on the fiber pad, he took a pitcher of cold soshil juice into the parlor, set it on the table where he'd put a chair and a resting frame, went back into the kitchen and brought out the two plates.

She still hadn't appeared, but the long window was open. He sighed, pushed his spectacles closer to his eyes and went out.

Two gwussies were diving at the naqon tree, their flight skins closed when they darted downward, popping out to catch the air and pull them up again before they crashed into the tangle of branches. The larger one, the mother, screamed at Tsoylan as he edged closer. She stooped and struck with her talons, missing because he let his knees collapse and she sailed past where he had been. He crawled hastily away and she returned to her attacks on the tree.

He collected a handful of small stones from the nearest flower bed, retreated to the window. "Kara Stavokal, even if you could get over the wall, there's no place to go. You might as well come inside and eat your breakfast. Let the gwussies rest."

There was silence for a moment, then the tree rustled, the woman dropped to the grass and ran for the window as he threw the stones to keep the gwussies off. She stalked past him without a word.

He followed her in and found her standing beside the table pouring soshil juice into her glass. He too said nothing, established himself in the resting frame and began eating the food he'd cooked.

As the days passed, she kept turning and twisting, trying every way she could think of to run from her fate. When none of these came to anything, she went from rage to weeping spells with huge, shuddery sobs tearing through her body and back to rage again. Both were reactions to being helpless, caught in a trap from which there was no escape. He understood that and hovered round the edges of the house, letting her have her anger and her grief -- and her silences.

"You are not my first death," he sang to himself in whispers so she wouldn't hear.

"Nor the first whose rushing breath

Becomes a shout,

I won't. I will not go...."

She retreated into her sleeping room, locked the door and wouldn't come out even to eat. He worried about her, but left her alone though his keypac would open all locks in this house. At this stage, it was better for her to work things out herself. If she could.

On the third day she emerged and came in the kitchen to find him. She was thin and drawn, but quieter. "Thank you, Tsoylan," she said. "What are you making this morning? I hope it's as good as it was the last time. I'm rather hungry."

3. Talking

KARA STAVOKAL sat on the low sill of the open window, her head against the glass. The air from outside was cool and pleasant as the sun sank near the horizon. Shadows gathered like cobwebs inside the room. Tsoylan sat in the deepest of them, untroubled enough to take his dark spectacles off; they were on the floor beside him. His head was sunk into the hollows of his arm shoulders and his belly was comfortable on the tiles. She turned her head to look at him. "How old are you?"

He scratched at the whiskers on his chin and wondered why she wanted to know. "I have thirty-seven years."

"Hm. How long do Talqoya usually live?"

"You mean am I going sooner than I ought? What is there to say? Pumans die when their komats are drawn, some sooner, some later."

She was silent a while, her face drawn together in way he'd learned meant concentration rather than anger. He shrank himself smaller, anxiety surging through him because he thought she was going to ask things that would wake the Fear.

"If I were a puman, how old would you think me?"

His body fluids flowed back to his perimeters and his muscles softened with relief. After a moment's intense thought, he said, "Were I to assess energy levels, ease of movement, general assurance and ignore those physical elements that I cannot assess because I do not know your kind, I would see you as a high function puman of experience, a builder perhaps, or a breeder of luminaria. And you will have been doing your work long enough to have acquired the habit of authority, yet not long enough to have surrendered to the Lot. Considering all

this, if you were human I would say you had perhaps forty years."

She laughed then, a sound that rang happily in his ears and made his body expand yet more. "I like your way with words," she said. "Were you a poet or a maker of tales?"

"I was a teacher, Kara Stavokal. In a creche. An eminently replaceable object."

"Hm. I have difficulty thinking of you as replaceable, Tsoylan, but I see this drift bothers you, so I'll leave it. Your estimate amuses me, I'll tell you why in a moment. My people have a way of postponing age as you would an appointment with someone you don't want to meet, but in the end, of course, that annoying stranger is still there waiting for you. I wish I could say all that time made dying easier, but it doesn't. The longer our lives are, the more greedily we cling to them. I've had about three hundred years, Tsoylan. Ten years ago, I received my last treatment and knew that every day that passed was one gone from the total left to me. Now you Talqoya are going to steal the rest of them." She clicked her tongue. "Nu, that was mean-spirited of me. Forget I said it if you will. The reason I was amused-- my first treatment stabilized me at thirty. Add ten to that and you see how close you came."

"And what is it you've done all those many years?"

She brushed brown hair off a face softened by memory. When she spoke, her voice was barely louder than a whisper. He had to strain to hear her. "I was learning. You were a teacher, I'm a learner." It was several moments before she spoke again. "I remember a world called Haddalice. It was my first time in the field. I was a busy little..." she hesitated, searching for a Talq equivalent, "...a busy pivan gathering tidbits for my team leader. It was his last chance with the Company. He'd made too many mistakes, ruined the insert before this and cost them a market. And I could see him making more, but he was arrogant in his desperation and wouldn't listen to me. It got him killed. Hm. Odd how my working life is bracketed by death. I hadn't thought of that till now. The Haddalicii are...you don't have the word; they are born in water but leave it for the land. They create tapestries like dreams drawn from the mists in which they spend their lives and they make songs that are almost as intricate. They are a jealous folk and quick to take offense." She turned her head to smile at him. "With the Haddalicii too a man's intent has no weight because they believe no man can know another's heart and men do lie. My team leader gave offense again and again until he exhausted their patience. And one morning we found him face down in a muddy pool of water, drowned very dead."

"How many worlds have you seen, Kara Stavokal?"

"Fifty, sixty, something like that. I lost count after a while."

It was dark outside now. He could smell the pollen off the grass beyond the walls and the sticky, sweet perfume of the naqon tree as it opened out its nightpods. It was time to think of supper, but he didn't feel like moving. "I've never been anywhere but Pikaya Tsewa."

"Do you regret that?"

"I don't think so. I want life to be predictable. It's difficult for me to understand how you can relish such chaos and find pleasure in not knowing where to put your feet. I wonder if it's because you take such chances simply moving."

She laughed again and again he shivered with pleasure. "Four foot talking to two foot?"

"It could be so. You continually astonish me with your agility."

"Hm." She got to her feet, stepped over the sill and stood in the garden gazing up at the stars. "My children are out there somewhere looking at another sky. I wonder what they're thinking."

Tsoylan covered his smile with a hand though she couldn't see him from where she stood. She was strange and sometimes frightening, but at the same time so very much like the pumans he'd guided before he came to her. There was the same anger and grief and they too worked at him, hunting for the keys to his sympathy, his help, wanting him to make it not so. She was pushing a little too hard, but he thought it was because being separated from her people had left her off-balance. "Your children?" he said.

"Two girls and a boy. Nu, that was a long time ago." She returned to the window, stood leaning against the hinge side, still watching the stars with a hunger he could almost feel. "It is one of the better consequences of extended life that your children can become your friends. I miss them." She sighed and turned her back on the stars. "I haven't been here long enough to learn this, do you have rites to give dismissal to your dead?"

"The mothers do, I can't talk about those, the pumans and the fathers, no. There are the guides, but that's a private thing."

"Would it be forbidden?"

"I don't know. The dead are taken away and we don't talk about them after that." He found that he was troubled by this when he said it to her, though he'd never thought about it when it simply happened, even when he knew it would happen to him. He brushed his unease away and concentrated on her. This was part of her new attack, he was sure of that, but more subtle than her opening move. What was she aiming at?

"We have a Passvic when somebody dies," she said. "It's a celebration of the dead person. A remembrance. People who knew him come, his children come, his kin and connections. They sit together all night telling stories about him, what he was like, some of the things they did together, the happy times and sad times they shared with him. There's food and drink and music, though each Passvic is a little different because people are different."

"Why are you telling me this?"

She ran her fingers through her hair. Muya's light touched a single white strand and made it glow until she moved her head again. "Vengeance," she said, her voice quiet and a little sad. "I was thinking of lying to you, Tsoylan. I changed my mind. I don't like feeling dirty."

"Vengeance? I don't understand."

"The word or what I mean by it?"

"The word I know. Why did you use it?"

"You like the idea of the Passvic, don't you? Never mind answering. I see the anger that hides behind your calm eyes. You'd like to be recognized and remembered when your life ends, but I think such a rite would be forbidden if the mothers learned of it. It is the quietness of the end and the silence that comes afterward that lets the Terminal Lot keep happening. You vanish and your place closes over like a healing wound -and at the same time the other pumans are reminded subtly, silently, that they too are replaceable. Your word. Your truth. The idea of the Passvic would fall like a tiny drop into a still, deep pool. But even a drop makes ripples and the ripples spread. Time passes. Quite likely a lot of time. And one day the pumans refuse to be replaceable." She crossed the room and knelt beside him, touched one of his hands. "May I?" At his nod, she lifted it, bent her head over it. "Vengeance," she breathed against his palm, then straightened up and folded his fingers over the warm spot. "I give it to you. Do with it what you want."

4. Acceptance

When he was sure the time had come, when she seemed quiet and resigned, he fixed a last breakfast for her, though she didn't know it was the last -nothing special, but one she'd liked when he made it for her before. Kwibread smallcakes oozing with kapir butter, wakasha mushrooms and a cold pitcher of soshil juice. He brought in the plate of fried wakasha slices and as he leaned across her arm to set it down, he slipped the needle knife into the place at the back of her skull. The healers told him she'd be dead before she knew it, if he got it right. And he did.

He lifted her from the table and took her into the garden, laid her out on the grass, her face in the sunlight. While the gwussies circled overhead, screaming at him, he washed her body, dressed her in a clean white shift, folded her hands above her ribs. When he was done, he fetched a glass of soshil juice and crouched in the shade of the naqon tree. "I accept your poisoned gift, Kara Stavokal. Let this be the first Passvic in Pikaya Tsewa." He drank from the glass. In the beginning the soshil was bitter on his tongue, but it soon grew sweeter.

"You are not my last death," he sang.

"Nor the last whose rushing breath

Becomes a shout,

I won't. I will not go...."