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Sisterhood of the Stone
by Justin Stanchfield
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Clocktower Books
www.clocktowerbooks.com

Science Fiction

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No wind shook the wispy, crimson-hued trees that ringed the mud-brick town. Overhead, a blue-white sun rolled lazily toward the jagged skyline while thunderheads shadowed the summits, black against the pale sky. Sean Kells watched the shifting dance of lightning beneath their purple bellies. Bored, he took a sip from the brown-clay tumbler the arthritic barman had placed on the sun-faded table. Fire ripped down his throat. Across the table his drinking companion, an enormous man with a beard as red as the vines creeping up the tavern walls, laughed.

"I should have warned you," Diese Ammons said. "The local brew can be a bit potent."

"Potent? Gods, man. Is there anything on Alkas that doesn't have peppers in it?"

Ammons shrugged. "I thought peppers were the reason you came here?"

"They are," Kells said sullenly. He lifted the tumbler again, a little too fast, unused to the planet's light gravity. A few drops sloshed over the rim. He took another, more cautious sip of the peppered _voka_. "But I would trade a ship-load of them right now for a cold beer."

His gaze drifted down the crowded street that wound past the open-air cafe, drawn by a commotion outside a cloth vendor's stall. A line of women in robes so blindingly white they burned the eye, danced toward them. They seemed to flow, graceful as they accepted the coins and bits of tightly rolled paper people dropped in the simple brass bowls they carried. At the head of the dancers a girl, younger than the rest and robed in blue, her copper-colored hair loose around her slim shoulders, swirled in mad patterns. Her feet scarcely brushed the dusty street.

"Set your sights lower, my friend." Ammons took a long drink from his own tumbler and wiped the oily drops from his mustache with the back of his hand. "I've seen that look before."

"She's beautiful." Kells watched as the girl danced closer. "Who is she?"

"Cloud Walker. Part of the Sisterhood of the Stone. They are as close as this wretched world has to religion." The barman returned with a platter heaped high with fried peppers, their red and yellow skins gleaming. He set it in front of Ammons, then shuffled out to meet the dancers. He pressed his hand reverently against his chest as the girl in blue skipped past, then dropped a handful of coins wrapped in crude brown paper into one of the other dancer's bowls. Ammons lifted a pepper as long as his finger from the platter and bit it in half. He pointed with the stub toward the distant mountains. "They live

on top of that black butte, in the temple the Old Ones left. Every season, just before festival, they come to town to take our sins away." He nodded at the line of women. "Plus a few cartloads of donations."

"The Old Ones?" Kells snorted, eyes locked on the girl in blue as she whirled up the street. "You've been here too long. I think you've gone native."

"Maybe so." Ammons pushed away from the table and hopped over the low stone wall around the cafe. He dropped a few coins in the last dancer's bowl then returned. He grinned sheepishly. "I have a lot of sins to answer for this year. Now, about those peppers?"

Kells nodded absently. "I'll take six hundred kilos of the dried, and another six of the fresh, if you can stasis pack them." He paused. "It's the medicinal ones I'm most interested in."

"Ahh, the Death Tips." Ammons selected another pepper from the bowl. "For those, we're going to have to take a little trip. The Sisterhood are the only ones who grow them." He pointed again at the steep-sided butte. Streamers of silvery virga swept across its flat top. "Hope you don't mind riding slipper-back. It's a three day journey from Kenalla, and that's only if the trail isn't washed out."

The girl in blue was little more than a speck now. She flitted bird-like around the bend, the others trailing behind. Kells watched until they were lost from sight, then turned and looked at the towering black butte. Lightning forked against it, and for a moment he swore he saw a tower, needle-thin, backlit by the flash. Despite the afternoon's heat, he shivered.

"When would we leave?"

"Tonight, if you want. I'll arrange it at the stables."

"Fine." He looked again up the street, hoping to catch another glimpse of the girl in blue. "Why do they call them Cloud Walkers?"

"Why?" Ammons finished his drink. "That girl in the lead? Come Festival next week, she'll step to the edge of the cliff and jump. And if that isn't cloud walking, then I'll jump with her."

* * * *

No one traveled on Alkas by day, the heat and the predators too thick. Only by torchlight and the trio of swift moons did humans venture the tangled jungles or brave the spines and high wastelands. Sean Kells sat uncomfortably on his slipper, a pale gray hen, the saddle-pad small protection from the creature's narrow, bony back. As a boy he had ridden horses, but nothing could have prepared him for the slipper's winding gait, the rolling, six-legged stride liquid as they climbed into the foothills. The forest closed around them, a narrow swath of star-speckled blackness above. Something in the brush to his right hissed. The slipper hen shied, and stood flicking her long tongue nervously at the tangled undergrowth. Kelly's hands tightened around the thick, woven reigns.

"Don't worry," Ammons called over his shoulder. "Nothing moves on this planet by night that's big enough to eat you." He laughed and spurred his own slipper ahead. "At least not usually."

"What a comforting thought."

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Kells shifted on the slipper's back, desperate to relieve the cramps in his tired legs. The third moon, pale green Aulets, broke out from behind the clouds and bathed the tree tops in its wan glow. The forest scent was stronger now, the ripe aroma of decayed leaves and fallen fruit rotting on the dark, rich soil, overpowering. Kells wrinkled his nose as another scent intruded. The slipper noticed it too. She flicked her tongue, tasting the wind.

"Is that smoke?"

"Yes," Ammons said. "There's a travelers stop not far ahead. Take heart, my friend, we're almost done for the night."

"Thank fate." Kells clung tighter to the hen's back. The beast, sensing the end of the long night's journey, lurched faster along the narrow trail. A steep ravine opened ahead as the trail dipped down to a sluggish stream. They

crossed the shallow water and climbed out the other side. The trees opened onto a small, cleared field. Torches and cook fires cast shadows back and forth over the trampled ground. Kells's hopes of an inn were dashed as he surveyed the tents and simple awnings set in the center of the irregular square.

"Not bad for a first night." Ammons slid off his slipper. He arched his back, as he rubbed the stiffness from it with his meaty palm. "Sure you want to go all the way to the Temple?"

"I'm beginning to have my doubts." Kells crawled off his own mount, his legs so stiff he could barely stand. He glanced overhead. A bright star burned through the clouds, an incandescent trail left behind as the starship descended. He sighed. His own ship sat less than thirty kilometers behind him. It might as well have been a light-year. Aching from the long ride, Kells followed Ammons toward the cluster of tents. He stumbled in the flickering shadows, glad to leave his slipper to the wranglers hired in Kenalla to care for her. Other travelers glanced up from their mats, their expressions unreadable. A few spoke to Ammons, answering his jovial greetings. Kells tried to follow, but his grasp of the native dialect was too poor to make out more than a handful of phrases. Exhausted, he stopped beside a large fire pit. Pungent smoke rose from the glowing coals, the damp wood snapping and popping as it burned. He sank gratefully to a log beside it. Ammons sat down beside him and passed a heavy wineskin into his hand. To Kells's relief, the wine was sweet and fruity, blissfully strong without a trace of peppers.

"Another gift from the Temple." Ammons took the skin and held it at arm's length then squirted a long stream down his throat. "The Sisterhood keeps the largest vineyard on Alkas, though between you and me I prefer the grapes from the Targassa district...." He smacked his lips and took another drink.

"You keep talking about the Temple. A temple to who?"

"Ahh, now that is a question." Ammons wiped his beard with a sleeve. "It's little more than a tower and a few ruins around the cliff so grown in it would take a thousand lifetimes to clear the jungle back. As far as anyone knows, it might not be a temple at all. The Old Ones didn't leave anything but bare walls when they left."

"Tell me you don't believe in the ancient astronaut myth?"

"Someone left those ruins." Ammons shrugged. "Some say the sisterhood knows the truth. Some say they don't."

"And what do you say?"

"I say I'll have another drink, if you please." Ammon took a long swallow, then pointed across the clearing. A small, neat row of tents, their sides rolled up to let the breeze pass through, lined the outer perimeter of the ragtag camp. "If you're really interested, you could ask the Sisters, though fate know what they might tell you."

Kells squinted. White-robed figures sat cross-legged inside the pavilions. He was certain he recognized a few of them from the day before. In the last tent he saw the girl in blue, flanked by torches, her head bowed.

"What's her name?"

"Hmmm? You mean the Cloud Walker?" Ammons shrugged. "I have no idea. They're unnamed until they jump." He rose, and wandered out of the firelight. "I'm going to find a place to sleep before the morning rain comes. If you're smart, you'll do the same."

Kells nodded, his attention elsewhere. Cries and hoots echoed through the jungle as the first light of dawn swept the eastern sky. Thunder rumbled closer. He stared at the girl in blue, unable to look away. A flash of lightning lit the square. It threw the tents and tethered rows of slippers into stark relief. For one blinding moment, Kells saw the girl's eyes open, her gaze locked on his.

Then, darkness returned, night hiding all.

* * * *

The sky opened in torrents. Rain bled down in long, slanted shafts, the

thunderstorm brief but violent. Sean Kells shifted on his sodden mat as water dripped off the roof of the hastily built lean-to into his face. He scowled, unable to find a dry spot. Ammons and the pair of young wranglers snored on, oblivious to the rivulets streaming across the muddy square. Daylight broke as the storm waned. Unable to sleep, he pulled on his tall boots and slogged away from the cluster of tents toward the tree edge to relieve himself.

His head ached. Smoke, lack of sleep and the thousand strange pollens left his sinuses blocked and stuffy. His boots left long, skidding tracks in the fresh mud. Suddenly, he stopped, the hair on his neck stiff, the sensation of eyes on his back too strong to ignore. Slowly, he turned. Dark eyes set in a broad, triangular head, stared at him from the underbrush. The creature's tongue flicked nervously, revealing double rows of needle sharp teeth. The animal resembled the slippers but was smaller, leaner, built for speed. Kells stared at the strange predator, his heart thudding in his chest.

A stone flashed past his face and struck the creature square in the forehead. It hissed but skittered back into the shadows. Kells spun around. The girl in blue stood ten paces to his left, a hood and cape the same shimmering color as her robe pulled around her thin frame. Startled, he fumbled for words.

"_Tanis hiy, m'yada._"

"I speak Standard," the girl replied.

"Thank you," Kells said, grateful he didn't have to use the local dialect. "What was that thing?"

"Brush dog. They are bold around camps, but seldom dangerous. They prefer our garbage to ourselves." Her voice was soft and lilting, and her accent accentuated her fragile beauty. "You are an off-worlder, aren't you."

"Yes. I'm a merchant. A trader."

She nodded. "My father, I am told, was a trader from Kavas. He left Alkas before I was born."

"I'm sorry," Kells said, unsure what to say. The girl shrugged.

"It is the way among our order. No men may join our ranks."

"Oh." Kells stepped away from the tangled bushes, still wary of the brush dog. A trace of wood smoke drifted on the breeze, cook fires burning now that the storm had passed. The scent of peppered bacon mingled with the smoke. Emboldened by her straightforward manner, he edged closer and bowed, hand against his chest, trying to imitate the local custom. "Would you share breakfast with me? It seems the least I can do for saving me from marauding scavengers."

"Shhh!" She pressed her index finger against her lips for silence, but her deep brown eyes sparkled mischievously. "If anyone heard you say that you would no doubt be stoned to death. Cloud walkers are not permitted to eat the week before Festival."

"You haven't eaten in nine days?" Kells recalled the weeks on Alkas lasted twelve days from start to finish. "Aren't you starved?"

"I will have all the time in the world to get old and fat after my walk."

He glanced across the clearing at the rest of the dancers as they stirred around their neat tents. Not a single one of them approached what he considered to be average weight, let alone corpulence. "In that case, my lady, I promise to tempt you no more." He bowed with a flourish and grinned. "But I thank you none the less."

"You are welcome, Sean Kells."

Startled, he straightened, certain he hadn't given her his name. Puzzled, he tipped his head to the side. "Do you also have a name, my lady?"

"None that I dare give you, ser' Kells." She bowed gracefully then turned away. Her tiny feet scarcely left a mark in the soft mud.

* * * *

The day passed uneventfully. The people scattered around the clearing dozed or gambled, tossing handfuls of polished sticks across blankets and betting on the outcome. Kells tried to sleep, but the heat and the constant commotion was

distracting. Rotor-flies buzzed around the cook fires while the tethered slippers farted and munched bundles of sweet vines. By dusk he was anxious to move out, glad even for the hard perch on the slipper hen's back as long as it carried him away from the day's boredom.

Bone-white _Nas_ was already overhead as they entered the forest, the crescent moon lighting the path nearly as bright as day. Not far ahead the rocky trail converged with another. More travelers joined the loose caravan. The trail steepened as it wound between enormous boulders, their faces worn smooth by eons of rain and wind. The vegetation thinned as they climbed into the true mountains. Kells watched the stars, glad for open skies, the unfamiliar constellations more comforting than the constant overhang of branches they left behind. The air was sharper, the flavor of rain riding the stiff breeze. Ahead, motionless above the looming black butte, an enormous thundercloud rose. He watched the play of lightning over it, certain now he saw a spire at the edge of the precipice, backlit by the uneven flashes.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Ammons rode closer as they topped yet another narrow ridge. They paused a moment and let the beasts catch their breath.

"That's the temple? It must be enormous."

"Wait until you see it up close." Ammons spurred his slipper down the other side. Sean Kells waited a moment longer, eyes locked on the distant butte. Far below, the torches of the dancers flickered as they trudged forward. They seemed to sway back and forth along the meandering road. Now and then a flashlight beam would cut the darkness, nervous travelers wasting their expensive batteries to light the dangerous trail. He nudged the hen forward.

Around the next bend a flat terrace waited. An enormous stone stood in the middle of the small clearing. Kells stared up at, shocked to see a face carved in the worn boulder, lidded eyes staring placidly across the ages. He looked closer and the face vanished, a trick of moonlight and shadow. "What is that thing?"

"No one knows." Ammons shrugged. "You find them now and then. They call this one 'The Watcher.'"

"You make it sound as if it was put here deliberately."

"Do you have a better explanation?" Ammons kicked his slipper ahead. He reached out and patted the stone face as he passed. "For luck," he called over his shoulder.

Kells snorted, unbelieving. Still, he placed his hand against the rock, the granite rough under his palm. He let the hen set the pace as they turned westward. The rain scent grew stronger. Wind poured off from the distant summits, and by the time they reached the bottom of the ravine the first fat drops began to fall.

"Find shelter," Ammons shouted as he threw his riding cloak above his head. Hailstones bounced off the boulders lining the dry stream bed. Kells slid off his hen and huddled under the branches of a pillow tree. The feathery leaves did little to shed the downpour. The slippers hooted and bunched together, heads hung low as the hail gave way to rain so thick it seemed steal the air.

One after another, torches hissed, their flames doused, leaving the broken caravan in darkness except for the irregular flashes of lightning that bounced overhead. Drenched and shivering, Kells squatted under the tree. The next flash showed more people hurrying to shelter, driven toward the little copse of trees. The dancers from the Sisterhood ran across the narrow gulch, all dignity forgotten. The girl in blue brought up the rear. Miserable and wet, Kells pulled his cloak tighter.

A new sound filled the air, a rushing, liquid roar. Kells strained to hear. Suddenly, he realized it was water he heard, a flash flood bearing down the steep _wade_. His own safety forgotten, he dashed out from under the tree, hampered by the darkness. He screamed above the wind and rain.

"Get to higher ground!" His ankle tangled in an exposed root and he fell face first in the mud. Swearing, Kells rose and managed to reach the bank lining the sandy bottom. He held out his hand and pulled up one of the

dancers. "Hurry."

Others rushed to join him. They lined the little shelf, helping fellow travelers up the bank as water curled around the bend. Most of the stragglers climbed to safety before the wall of brown water broke past. Another flash of lightning blazed across the sky, and for one sickening moment Kells saw the girl in blue trapped in the flood. Without a second thought, Kells jumped into the icy water.

It wasn't deep, barely over his waist, but the force was impossible to stand against. The gravel underfoot became a slurry that carried his feet out from beneath him. He tumbled, immersed in the cold torrent. He broke surface. Gasping for air, he tried to keep his bearings. His hand brushed something solid beside him. Instinctively he clutched the body, his fingers wrapped in the wet silk, and pulled the girl to him. His feet briefly found the bottom and he managed to push both of them toward the bank. A tree root protruded from the undercut bank. He grabbed it, the woody handgrip all that kept them from being washed away.

"Help!" Water poured down his throat. He coughed. "Damn it, help us!"

Moonlight broke through the clouds and framed the faces gathered on the bank above. His grip weakened, and he tried again to stand, the girl wrapped around him. The water lessened, as the brief flood slowed, the worst of it past. Shaking and exhausted, he crawled up the slick bank, pushing the girl in front of him. The crowd drew back as they struggled out of the water and fell gasping on the sodden ground. Sapphire-blue light snapped out of nowhere as someone finally found a flashlight to replace the doused torches. Tired as he was, he couldn't mistake the expressions of shock and hatred on the faces around him. Ammons bulled through the crowd, grabbed Kells by the collar and hauled him away from the girl.

"What are you doing?"

"Saving her life," Kells said, angry at the rough handling. "What the hell is wrong?"

More flashlights were out now, blue and white and red. The crowd parted as the other dancers, their white robes brown with mud, hurried toward the girl curled on the ground. They wrapped her in blankets and quickly took her away. The crowd watched her go, then turned back toward Kells, their faces dark and muttered amongst themselves. Three of the sisters remained where the girl had lain, waiting. Ammons turned Kells toward them.

"Give them some money."

"What?"

"Damn it." Ammons lowered his voice. "Whatever you have in your pocket, just give it to them."

"Why?"

"For the love of god, man, just do it!"

Kells fumbled in his pocket and managed to pull out a Half-Standard gold piece. Unsure what to do next, he held it out to the waiting women. After a long, uncomfortable moment, the tallest of the trio took the coin, bowed tersely, then led her sisters away. Still muttering, the crowd thinned as people wandered off to retrieve their scattered pack animals.

"Mind telling me what that was all about?" Kells asked. His lips shook from the cold.

"No man is allowed to touch a Walker during her fast. You broke the strongest taboo on the planet."

"Would it have been better if I let her drown?"

"In their minds," Ammons nodded at the departing crowd, "yes. By touching her, you've soiled her in front of the Old Ones."

"Superstitious bastards." He spit out a wad of mud. "I suppose that means their crops will fail and their roofs will leak."

"It means," Ammons said more gently than before, "that when she makes her jump she is going to die."

* * * *

More paths converged until the trail became a true road as they neared the

temple. Hundreds of pilgrims lined the way, a surge of bright cloth and humanity wending toward Festival. Battered and exhausted, Kells crawled off his slipper as they reached camp, the sun already overhead. He stumbled toward a quiet spot near the edge of the broad field, rolled out his mat and was immediately asleep.

Dreams played through his mind, discordant images of angry faces and rushing water, the flavor of mud and ice cold rain. He bolted awake, sunlight warm on his back. His clothes were caked with mud, his boots, once so finely polished, scuffed and dull. Kells pushed himself up on an elbow and surveyed the camp. Children laughed and chased each other while their mothers cooked and gossiped. Men gambled as usual, or threw long knives at circles drawn in the soft ground. Venders and musicians wandered between fires. Only around him was there any open space, the area conspicuously absent of people. Kells shook his head, disgusted with their attitude. Even Ammons and the wranglers sat apart and pretended not to notice he was awake.

A warm wind rolled across the meadow. Smoke swirled vigorously, thick with the rich scent of peppers and the ever-present rotor-flies. Kells pulled himself to his feet and looked westward. The black butte dominated the horizon now, only a few hours distant. The tower rose like a spike into the azure sky. Something about it bothered him, a gathering sense of dread. At his shoulder, someone coughed.

Kells spun around. He hadn't heard the white-robed woman approach. She stood quietly and starred at the ground between her feet, her hands clasped in front of her thin body. Her slim, childlike fingers twined around each other, betraying her nervousness, though her voice was surprisingly calm.

"Ser' Kells? Would you accompany me?"

Too surprised to do anything else, he nodded, and followed her toward a large, peak-roofed pavilion in the very center of the square. The rank of dancers had swollen also. Dozens of women in white silk stood quietly outside the tent, brass bowls in hand to accept what offerings passersby left. Wordlessly, he was ushered through the curtained door. More of the sisterhood waited within, their faces lined, the first touch of gray in their hair. Scrolls and leather bound books covered a low table placed beside the nearest tent pole. One of the women, tall and starkly thin, her green eyes stern, bowed.

"You are the merchant Sean Kells?"

"Yes."

"I am told this is yours." She opened her hand palm up. A single gold coin gleamed within. "After much discourse, we have determined your indiscretion was not meant with malice. I would give back your offering, if you wish."

"Keep it." Kells stared at the women, his anger returned. She nodded and handed the coin to an acolyte.

"In that case, ser' Kells, we thank you for your generosity and pray your sins are cast out with the wind." She dismissed the acolyte, and, as one, the other sisters moved away, graceful in their silence. Taking it as a dismissal, Kells turned toward the door, but the woman spoke again. "There is one here who would speak with you."

The woman gestured toward an inner chamber. Reluctantly, Kells followed her inside. Cloth walls billowed as a gust shook the tent. Half a dozen young women, all dressed in the same shimmering blue silk, sat cross-legged on the floor. They rose and filed out. The scent of their skin mingled with the reek of hot canvas. One remained, her copper colored hair newly washed. Scratches marred her face and the backs of her delicate hands. Kells waited until they were alone, then sat down in front of her.

"I'm told I did something terribly wrong last night." He tried to control his frustration. "If so, I'm sorry."

"You did nothing wrong," the girl said. "You were brave and I thank you. Any shame is mine to bear."

"Shame? What shame? You were caught in flood. It could happen to

anyone."

"I am not anyone, ser' Kells." A shudder passed through her. "The Old Ones chose my fate ages before I was born. If they decide I am to perish, I accept their choice. I hope you will too."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

She met his stare, her eyes glassy. "You are a stranger. Our customs, I am sure, seem barbarous and quaint. But we believe in them." The hard set to her jaw softened. "In a few days I will make my walk. I ask that you do not blame yourself when I fail."

"You're right." His voice rose. He hoped the women outside the chamber heard him. "I do think this is insane." He stood and shoved the curtains aside and stormed out.

* * * *

The pilgrims, emboldened by their numbers, broke camp early and made the last leg of the trip in daylight. Kells waited until the last of the ragged caravan had moved before he hoisted himself once more aboard the slipper hen's spiny back. Far ahead, leading the procession, the white-robed sisters marched silently. The dancers in blue whirled and twisted at the very front of the line. He could just make out the girl he had saved, her movements leaden compared to the others. Her feet, once so fleet, moved methodically through the steps. He scowled, and kicked his slipper in the ribs. The six-legged beast grunted and lurched forward.

The road steepened, hard-packed by thousands of feet. Trees swayed, bent by the constant wind. Details resolved on the black butte as they neared, fluted columns of basalt rising perpendicular to the jungle, a volcanic core long ago stripped of the matrix around it. Caves and balconies were cut into the stone, the facades ornate. More of the Sisters waved white streamers from the high ledges. Terraced gardens ringed the massif, low bushes burdened with tiny green peppers, their skin waxy in the sharp blue sunlight. Kells breathed in their earthy scent. It seemed a different lifetime ago that he had set off to find the crop.

"I suppose," he said sourly, "I would be wasting my time if I asked to buy any of those now."

Ammons, riding ahead, shrugged his broad shoulders. "You never know. The Sisterhood likes silver as much as anyone. I think I would wait until after Festival before I approached any of them, though."

The wind, strong all morning, howled now. A rank, ammonia-laced odor rode with it as they approached a rock walled pen. Hundreds of slippers milled and hooted inside. Kells reigned his slipper in and slid to the ground. The wranglers took the beast while he followed Ammons toward a waiting throng of pilgrims near the base of the pillar-like butte. A narrow doorway, black against the dark stone, barely wide enough for a single person to fit through, led into the mountain. Torches were lit as night fell, the smell of burning pitch strong above the scent of food and sweating bodies. Lightning flashed overhead, the nightly thunderstorms early. A few drops, driven sideways by the wind, fell by the time he finally reached the doorway.

A sense of foreboding gripped him. The stone around the opening was polished smooth by countless hands, the lava gray in the flickering light. He took a deep breath and started up the narrow stairway.

The tunnel was low and dark, no light but a dim glow far ahead. The heat and lack of fresh air stole his strength. Kells felt his way, palms against the stone, desperate not to stumble lest the steady march behind him crush him. Sweat poured down his face, stung his eyes, pooled around his shoulders. After what seemed hours, he stepped out of the tunnel. The wind felt frigid compared to the sweltering heat inside the long chute.

A flash of lightning lit the cloud overhead, the swirling belly orange before fading once more to black. The wind pushed so hard he had to lean into it to stay erect. _Nas_ broke from behind the clouds. Ahead, the sides bathed in pale moonlight, stood the tower. It rose, tooth-like from the edge of the butte, a sentinel against the black-jawed mountains to the south. Sean Kells

stared at it, the sense of dread stronger than before. Ammons clapped him on the shoulder, his grin luminescent in the wan light.

"Still doubt the Old Ones were here?"

"Right now," Kells said, eyes locked on the tower, "I'm willing to believe almost anything."

* * * *

Wind moaned.

It howled. It shrieked as it swirled around the tower and bent the neat rows of tents erected for the gathered throng. Ropes snapped as dawn exploded across the eastern sky. Kells forced himself to the edge of the butte and looked down. The sight left him dizzy. Crimson forest blended into the hazy distance, streaked with long patches of arid highlands, beige against the unending sea of red. A temporary city lay below, the pilgrims and their tents little more than specks. It was hypnotic, the sensation that he was moving so vivid he grabbed at the air around him and fell back from the edge, driven by the wind. Somewhere, muffled by the rising gusts, trumpets sounded, low and mournful, as the first rays of sunlight swept the butte.

"Come on." Ammons grabbed his sleeve and led him toward the spire.

"Now, you'll see what everyone is here for."

Blue sunlight bathed the slender shaft of black stone. Like the Watcher, the Temple, so sharp in the night, softened as light played across the broken surface. Hundreds of cracks and narrow gouges marred the weathered stone. If the tower was an artifact and not simply another lava tube left from the mountain's fiery birth, it was magnificent. At its foot lay a single, narrow doorway, no different from the tunnel leading from the base of the mountain. At the summit, silhouetted by the wispy mare's tails streaming in the jet stream, stood a single figure wrapped in shimmering blue silk.

"No." Kells's stomach lurched into his throat. At first he thought it was the copper-haired girl he had pulled from the flood, but a closer look showed white hair, pale as autumn wheat, whipping behind her. She stepped to the far edge of the tower, lost from sight as the trumpets sounded once more.

"What's she doing?"

"Wait." Ammons stared upwards. Kells followed his gaze. The girl returned to view and stood on the very lip of the tower. She raised her arms. Her sleeves billowed as they caught the wind, the edges sewn weblike to the sides of her gown. From the base of the Temple a gray-haired woman in white, a blue silk belt around her narrow waist, raised her arms and shouted.

"For your sins."

"For our sins!" the crowd rejoined.

"Gods, no!" Kells tried to push through the crowd, sickened by what he saw. As another gust blew across the mesa, the girl leaned forward, hair streaming out behind, and leapt. In an instant she was gone. The crowd gaped, every face tense. Kells shut his eyes. Around him, cheers erupted. Instinctively, he opened his eyes.

At the edge of the precipice, surrounded by hundreds of cheering pilgrims, stood the straw-haired Walker. She smiled placidly, unharmed. Her blue robe whipped around her lithe body as she was led toward the woman with the blue sash. She whispered something in the old woman's ear, then knelt down on the hard stone.

"How?" Kells fumbled for words. "This is impossible."

"Shh..." Ammons grinned. "She's about to reveal her name."

The older woman waved the crowd to silence.

"She is reborn. Her name, she tells us, is Phai'ya!" A smile creased the woman's gaunt features. "The Old Ones welcome her."

Kells stared at her until she was lost from view among the cheering mob. He couldn't believe what he had seen, convinced it was trickery or mass delusion. Slowly he turned. From the doorway of the white silk tent he saw the girl with copper colored hair. She watched him, her eyes empty as the sky above, then turned away.

* * * *

The crowd atop the butte continued to grow as a steady stream of pilgrims marched out the narrow stairwell. The air was warm, but already the clouds darkened as the sun rolled westward. Wineskins were passed about, as well as pungent bundles of narcotic leaves the revelers smoked in simple clay pipes. Ammons accepted one of the long-stemmed vessels, the bowl cheery red as he inhaled. He offered it to Kells, but he shook his head and wandered away, his mood sour. Against his every instinct, he pushed through the crowd until he once again stood at the edge of the precipice.

The view terrified him. He had logged thousands of hours at the controls of various ships and never considered himself afraid of heights, but now, standing alone on the rocky perch, the sheer drop repulsed him. Tiny raindrops pelted his cheeks. Kells stepped back, surprised. The rain rose from below, the wind so strong it pushed the mist-like virga up the cliff face. Behind him, the trumpets sounded again. Pilgrims gathered once more near the temple's base as another Walker, dark brown skin highlighted by the blue silk, stepped into the narrow tunnel that led to the spire's summit.

"Not again." Kells's stomach roiled as he hurried away from the edge. He ignored the angry stares as he rushed toward the white tent. Wind whipped the fabric until it seemed ready to shred. Acolytes tried to bar his passage, but he shoved their hands away. The girl with the copper hair met him at the door.

"You shouldn't be here."

"Neither should you." Kells said, startled by the strength in her voice. "This is madness. What are you trying to prove?"

"Prove?" The girl laughed, the sound as hollow as her cheeks. She looked as if she hadn't slept in days, her skin drawn tight over her bones. "Do you think this is some kind of stunt? A show for the crowd?"

"What would call it?" Kells demanded angrily.

"Communion." The girl turned away. More women in white arrived, faces stern, and stepped between them.

"You must leave," one of them, a raw-boned woman with a broken nose said, her Standard heavily accented. Trumpets sounded, harmonizing with the wind. As much as he hated it, Kells watched the dark-skinned Walker. A gasp ran through the crowd as she jumped, only to reappear seconds later at the edge of the butte. She hovered a handbreadth from the ledge, balanced on the wind. Her toes strained to reach the solid rock. For one heart-lurching moment she drifted backwards, unable to find purchase. Another gust of wind drove her forward and she fell to her knees. A strange fire burned in her eyes as the crowd screamed out its approval.

"Her name," the same old woman with the blue sash cried out, "Shall be Kierar!"

Disgusted with himself, Kells slunk away. Ammons found him near the crowded stairway.

"Where are you going?"

"Anywhere but here." Kells tried to reach the narrow tunnel, but the crowd's push was too strong. "How do we get off this miserable cliff?"

"Now?" Ammon's thick eyebrows bunched together. "We don't.... unless you'd care to take the short cut." He pointed at the edge of the butte and grinned, but Kells was in no mood for the joke.

"How long does this go on?"

"Festival? Three days. You might as well relax and enjoy yourself. You can't act like a madman all of the time, you know."

"Me? What about these _Walkers?_" He nearly spat the word. "Do you know she expects to die, but is going to jump anyhow."

"That is the tradition."

"And you approve?"

"When I first landed here, I might not have. Now...." Ammons shrugged. "You want some advice from an old friend? Don't try to change what you don't understand." Another flourish sounded. Kells shook with rage and frustration as yet another Walker climbed to the top and spread her arms against the setting sun. Azure sky burned to pink as she launched her frail body over the

edge, only to rise a few seconds later. Immediately, she was surrounded by the cheering, surging crowd, and led away. Shadows lengthened across the crowded tabletop. The last of the Walkers, their blue robes fluttering around them, bowed gracefully then vanished inside the white tent. Kells's heart sank as he realized only three of them remained, the girl with the copper colored hair the next in line come the dawn.

* * * *

He wanted to drink himself into oblivion, but the wine only left him blurred and ill at ease. Huge fires burned across the tabletop butte. Pilgrims danced and sang around them, or snuck off in pairs to the more secluded shadows. Even the sullen rain couldn't hold back the wild revelries. Kells tipped the wine skin once more to his lips and wrung the last swallow from the leather bag, then flung it aside. He scanned the crowd for Ammons, but the burly man had obviously found more pleasurable company and wandered off to rut. Annoyed, Kells blundered away from the flickering light, his footsteps unsure in the dark.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. He couldn't stop thinking about the girl. He scowled, fists bunched at his sides. How she could throw her life away for nothing sickened him, the futility of the gesture beyond him. Worse, he knew if she fell, he would be to blame, at least in the eyes of the pilgrims and Sisters. And, in his own.

"Stupid bastards."

He stumbled again, drunker than he realized, the laughter and light behind him. Wind blew cold as another storm rolled overhead. Kells pulled his collar tight and picked up his pace. A flash of lightning cut the sky, the edge of the butte a jagged line directly in front of him. He screamed as his left foot found nothing but air beneath it.

"No!"

Thunder broke around him as he flailed on the edge of the cliff, his balance lost. He cried for help, but his voice was drowned under the wind. Helplessly, he fell forward. Without warning, a gust caught him and pushed him back. He dropped to the rocky lip and scrambled backwards. His heart pounded, the narrowness of his escape miraculous. Unable to rise, he rolled to his hands and knees and vomited. Rain fell harder as he lay on the cold stone, drenched but alive.

After a while he struggled to his feet. Sober again, Kells blundered toward the nearest shelter, the tiny doorway cut into the tower's base. A single torch flickered within the narrow stairwell, jumping madly in the wind. Dank smoke poured out, the stench of rancid oil strong inside the passage. He didn't care. It was warm and dry, and he sank gratefully to the stone steps.

"Do you still refuse to believe?"

Kells twisted around. He hadn't noticed the girl seated only a few steps above him, a sad smile on her thin face. Her blue robe glowed in the torchlight, her hair the same color as the dancing flames.

"I saw you step over the cliff," she said.

"It was an accident."

"But still, you made your walk. Now, do you understand?"

"Understand what? That you intend to kill yourself tomorrow?"

"If that is my fate." Her voice trailed off. Kells detected a note of hesitation. "I can't change what is meant to be."

"You're wrong." He leaned toward her, her body so close he felt her warmth. "Nothing will happen if you refuse to jump. The sun will still shine. This god-forsaken wind will still blow. And you will be alive."

"You don't understand. Maybe you can't." A shudder ran through her. "They say the Old Ones sing to you when you make your walk, that they open the box of the universe and let you look inside."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I used to."

"You don't need to stay here." Kells pressed his advantage. "There's a whole universe out there that has never heard of Alkas. Come with me. Leave

this damned planet and no one will ever know the difference."

"I would." The girl sighed as she rose to her feet and walked past him. Blue silk whispered around her legs as she descended the narrow stairs. She paused beside the door, put a hand against the rough walls, and turned around. "I would ask a favor?"

Kells nodded, unable to find his voice. The girl continued.

"As a Walker, I have kept my name hidden. I don't want to die nameless." A tear on her cheek gleamed in the torchlight. "What I tell you now, I would ask you to never reveal should I fail."

"I promise," Kells said, his throat dry and tight. "I'll keep your name to myself if you.... if you don't come back."

"Thank you." She smiled again. "My name is Dulea." She stepped out the narrow doorway, swallowed by the darkness. Unsure what to do next, Kells wrapped his arms around himself and shivered on the hard stone steps.

* * * *

Dull pain thudded in Sean Kells's skull, the morning sun too bright by far. Bodies lay around him, some wrapped in blankets, some wrapped around other sleeping pilgrims. He laughed sourly, certain he wasn't the only one suffering a hangover this morning. Finally, he spotted Ammons, asleep beneath the tumbled remnants of someone's tent. Kells nudged the big man with his foot.

"I'm leaving."

"Leaving? Where?" Ammons blinked and scratched his neck. "Why go now?"

"I've seen enough." Kells started away. Around him other pilgrims stirred, a handful of early risers blundering across the littered tabletop. Cold, damp wind drove back the scent of sour wine and unwashed bodies while ash from a hundred dead fires fluttered like snowflakes. Kells reached the passage off the high mesa only to find it blocked by bodies climbing the narrow stairwell, bundles of firewood and trade goods slung over their shoulders.

"No sense in hurrying now, eh?"

Kells turned. A tall, balding man with a prissy mouth, stood beside him and picked his teeth with a twig. Kells nodded politely and secretly wished he would go away. Instead, the man leaned closer.

"Imagine. All the universe to choose from, and it is only here the Old Ones make themselves known."

"Imagine that," Kells said.

The man's eyes widened with recognition. "You are the off-worlder who touched the Walker, aren't you?"

Reluctantly, Kells nodded.

"Well, friend, I don't blame you for leaving. But, don't worry. Your secret is safe with me, eh? And who knows, the Old Ones may forgive her yet."

Kells's fists bunched at his side, the urge to hit the leering fool overwhelming. "Go to hell."

A trumpet sounded. Kells stormed away from the passage. A small crowd had already gathered near the tower's base. Blue silk blazed in the brittle morning light as Dulea was led out, surrounded by her sisters in white. People pointed as she walked past, her head low, and muttered to each other. Some dared laugh. Furious with them, Kells sprinted across the uneven ground.

"Dulea! No!"

The girl paused, her back perfectly straight, then moved on. Before he could stop her, she stepped through the narrow doorway. Kells threw himself toward her, but the small cadre of women blocked him.

"You can't let her do this." He tried to shove past them. The same gray haired woman who had confronted him the day before pulled him aside.

"We forgave you once. We won't do it twice."

"Forgive?" A bitter laugh burst out Kells throat. "You're sending that girl to her death because of your silly damned superstition, and you want to forgive me?" He shook her arm off and left. The crowd parted around him as if his touch might prove fatal to them as well. He wanted to hide and pretend he didn't care, but couldn't. Instead, he walked to the edge of the cliff, his

shoulders squared, and stared up at Dulea. Wind whipped her hair, her slim figure backlit by the rising sun as she moved into position. A blast of wind struck against the butte, so strong Kells swore he felt the rock sway beneath his feet.

A sudden burst of clarity descended over him, memories from the night before pounding in his brain. He forced himself to look over the cliff, the same jagged lip he had nearly blundered off in his drunken rage. The drop seemed infinite, though in truth he could see it was less than four hundred meters to the forest canopy below. A thin stream wound along the slope, a silvered waterfall directly beneath the tower. A small pool lay at its bottom. Water sparkled, rippled by the wind. Trees swayed, leaves torn loose as they swirled upward in the vortices. They fluttered bird-like as they rose, a crimson cloud slowly climbing the sheer rock wall. Kells remembered how the wind had pushed him back from certain death, the gust strong enough to drive even his heavy frame back from oblivion. Someone as light as Dulea, her robe acting as wings, might actually ride the cushion of air. In Alkas's weak gravity, she could fly.

If she timed her jump precisely.

If she kept her mind on guiding herself, using her sleeves as wings.

If she believed she might survive.

Kells stared up the tower. The girl stood on the edge, her shoulders slumped. Even from a distance he could tell she had given up. Without warning, the wind died, and he had the horrible thought that she would choose that moment to step off the ledge. He shouted at her, but she refused to look down, her face locked on the tiny pool below. The crowd thickened, every face turned upward. Kells wanted to cry. Ammons sauntered toward him, part of the ruined tent still wrapped around his shoulders as a blanket.

The wind returned, more violent than before. A few leaves blew over the ledge, lifted from below. Kells looked up and saw Dulea lean outward, her arms at her side, balanced against the current. He had to distract her, force her to believe again in herself. Before he could let himself think, he rushed toward Ammons and grabbed the tent flap out of his hands.

"What are you doing?" Ammons shouted after him.

Kells didn't reply. He wrapped the corners of the square around his hands and let the cloth billow out behind him. The wind dragged him backwards. He strained to simply reach the edge of the cliff. He only hoped Dulea noticed him. Eyes closed, he leapt.

For one brief, glorious second, he felt himself rise, buoyed by the wind in his makeshift parachute. Then, he fell. Out of control, he spun, the cloth wrapped around his hands so tight it seemed to slice through his fingers. He yelped as his right foot struck the cliff face. Down he tumbled. Even through his fear he knew he had failed. Dulea would still jump, still fall to her death on the ground below. The cold realization that he had thrown his life away for nothing pounded in his brain as the treetops rushed toward him.

The cloth in his hand tore free, his fingers unable to hold on any longer. Wind roared around him, twigs and leaves striking his face as he entered the heart of the vortex. Kells shut his eyes and waited for the end.

Something struck his shoulder, a harsh shove that sent him tumbling forward. Head over heels he fell. For a brief second he saw blue silk. Dulea fell with him, headfirst as she herded him gently away from the rock face. She shoved him one last time, then spread her arms wide. The wind caught her, the silk wings slowing her descent. She seemed to rise as the distance between them widened, a trace of a smile on her wind-blown face. Kells barely had time to wonder before he struck.

Pain filled his world, his shoulders on fire as he lit back first. He couldn't breathe, his breath gone. Soft, filtered light filled his eyes, and it took him a moment to realize he was underwater. The current swirled around his arms and legs as he fought to reach the surface, only to be sucked down again into the murky pool. Panicked, he fought harder and at last his head

broke water. Gasping, he swam toward the nearest shore. Nearby, something small and blue flailed in the cold water. Arms leaden, Kells grabbed Dulea as she sank beneath the surface and pulled her toward the rocky edge.

"What," he sputtered as he dragged her to safety, "were you doing?"

"I don't know how to swim." Her teeth chattered against each other.

"That's all right. I don't know how to fly."

She laughed weakly, and crawled onto a flat, sun-baked rock. Kells sank down beside her, so close he felt the shivers course through her body. He started to put his arm around her for warmth, then hesitated, unsure how the gesture would be taken. Her tremors worsened, and he pulled her close. She stiffened, but didn't pull away, and at last sank gratefully against him. They sat for a long time, until the wind and the sun had dried their clothes and warmed their blood. Once, a pair of curious faces peered through the underbrush, curious pilgrims no doubt anxious to see what had become of them. Kells smiled to himself as he imagined how wild the rumors would be by the time they reached the top of the dark butte.

"Did you hear any singing?" he asked at last.

"No. Did you?"

Kells shook his head.

Dulea pulled away and stared upwards. High overhead, a group of women dressed in blazing white, stared down at them. She sighed, and looked away, her face locked on the dark stone behind the pool. "I don't think I will climb the stairway again."

"The offer of my ship is still there. If you want to leave, that is."

"I think I do." She stood up, rising in a single graceful motion. Kells offered her his hand and helped her off the boulder to the leaf-strewn ground below. To his surprise, she kept his hand in hers as he jumped down beside her. They started toward a narrow trail leading away from the noisy waterfall. The water gurgled, the song ever changing, a symphony of wind and rock. Dulea paused. "You know, perhaps the Old Ones heard me after all." Kells nodded, understanding at last. Together, they walked away from the pool, the wind singing in their wake.

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About the Author: Justin Stanchfield is a full-time rancher, part-time snowplow driver, occasional musician, and struggling writer. He is the author of the well-received short story *Trader Pig* (Far Sector SFFH 035;17). His fiction has appeared in over forty publications including *Boys' Life*, *Ideomancer*, *NFG*, and two of the SFF.Net *Darkfire* anthologies. A member of SFWA, he lives with his wife and children on a Montana cattle ranch a stone's throw from the Continental Divide. All the gory details are available at his site (<http://www.sff.net/people/justinvs>), and Justin welcomes comments at justinvs@sff.net.

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