

# A Fool's Death

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The escalator ascends, carting our entire troupe up the side of the volcano, each of its ten thousand grooved steps carved from local obsidian. Two dozen of us rise toward the lip, half are technicians, heavy with heat resistant gear, the other half gofers and interns and personal assistants to the executives already at the top. The handler from *Fools' Death* is a thin man with too much cologne. I've heard the rumors that death-powered geomancy can lead to anosmia, but it could all just be coincidence. He's a mime, a fairly high rank in the *FD* necrocracy, but I guess they don't take chances with volcanoes. Somehow he senses my scrutiny of him and turns my way. True to the mime's creed he doesn't speak, can't offer me encouragement or heart-warming advice. Instead he winks at me, and plucks a trio of lemons from a fruit basket one of the gofers is carrying. Dabbing the tip of a finger against the kohl that surrounds his eyes he paints tiny death's heads on each lemon, deftly, like a Shinto priest painting a haiku. Then he starts to juggle them, the lemon heads of Death Past, Death Present, and Death Future. I feel sick. Maybe it's the elevation, maybe the rhythmic and minimalistic jerking of the escalator. Maybe it's the heat. When we finally reach the landing my mime slips his motley-garbed arm through mine and, still juggling the lemons one-handed, leads me to the railing and introduces me to the geomancer, an old woman with a weak chin and faint moustache. She mutters an introduction, dabs my forehead with some ointment, and moves away to finish her preparations. I turn towards the heat, the air rippling, and I get my first glimpse at the lava filled caldera. On the far side of its bubbly ooze a crowd has gathered to watch my suicide. None of them look like locals. They're here for the spectacle of death-powered geomancy; they're not the people my death will help. Bastards. I can hear a ringing suddenly, a disconnected jangling kind of sound and it's a good minute before I realize it's coming from me. The two-toned, three pointed cap I'm wearing has bells sewn into it. I'm trembling, ringing with fear.

The mime's hand is in mine, his fingers writhing, spelling something against my palm, like I'm Helen-fucking-Keller. I haven't a clue what he's trying to tell me. I turn and stare at him, and slip up. "What are you saying?" I ask, and his eyes pop wide, wider than any mime's game. I can see real fear. His head swivels and he starts to sob. I follow his gaze to one of the cameras, aimed right at us, its red light winking out too late. Seconds later Guild Cops are hauling us both away. A back-up suicide is already on the way up.

Hours later, my handler's been iced, indicted on four different counts of verbal (non-oral variety) communication while on duty as a mime. His employers at *Fools' Death* sever all possible electronic ties to him, purging the miscreant almost entirely from their records before the stain can sully their reputation as the industry's leader. I'm charged with aiding and abetting after the fact, but the charges vanish like the mime's employment history, so much static in the system. An *FD* junior vice-president waits for me when I'm released, garbed like a pinstripe harlequin in a coat and tie. His gold tie bar has a tiny image of himself juggling even tinier pearls.

"Ms. Culver? I'm Josh Harmony. Would you come with me, please. We're terribly sorry about this incident. I can't begin to apologize enough. Your guide has been under an inordinate strain. It happens sometimes, a fool rises through the ranks too quickly. Not everyone can handle the stress of miming. This was his first week, Oh? You didn't know? Well, that's a testament to how talented he was, I suppose, but yes, he'd just been promoted up from eighth level jester. Too much too fast I suspect. But, as I was saying, we're terribly sorry. To make amends, we've upgraded your demise. Top of the line, Ms. Culver. Nothing as common as a volcano sacrifice. Now, if you'll just come with me, there's a helicopter waiting to take us to the airport where we can catch a plane to Finland. There's a rogue iceberg with your name on it waiting for us."

"An iceberg?" They're the first words I've spoken to the man, and he nods enthusiastically by reply. He hands me a beautiful parka, functional, but festooned with myriad bright silk ribbons at the collar and sleeves. The *Fools' Death* logo has been embroidered on the back with gleaming metallic thread. The VP loops his arm through mine and hauls me off, like I'm the embodiment of that poem by Robert Frost, the one about the end of the world. And it is the end of the world, the end of my world anyways. I suppose an iceberg will be better; at least I won't have to wear those stupid bells.