

Ex Machina

By Margaret Ronald

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Judith floundered through the snow, her legs burning with cold. "Guide us, One. One who sows, One who cares for," she muttered, taking no comfort in the old prayer. "One who reaps, One who plucks. . . ." Ahead of her, the track dimmed to a bare shadow on the snow, winding around the side of the mountain to disappear into a wall of white.

She'd heard winter came on fast in the mountains. What she hadn't understood was how fast the mountains themselves came on. Before the pilgrims had noticed the drop in temperature, they were on a steep hillside already bearing traces of frost. Storm clouds swirled down to engulf them.

". . . Who cries with the infant, who laughs with the mother . . ."

Stefan was back there somewhere. If Judith had had the sense to halt their pilgrimage and set up a proper camp a day earlier, they could have prepared for this, and someone would have convinced the boy to wear shoes. Instead he was barefoot and frostbitten.

". . . Who races along the lightning's path, who sings upon the waves of light . . ."

A shadow loomed out of the snow, sudden as a stroke. Judith blinked and focused on a startled man in a green uniform. His weapon—

Projectile firing, second-generation trigger mechanism, poorly turned barrel—

She jerked her attention away, even as her techsense told her that he was holding it wrong. He stared at her in disbelief, but didn't move to stop her. Maybe he wasn't real. Surely a real guard would stop her, not just crane forward to look at her stomach as she struggled past.

White rose up on either side of her, and by this point she almost welcomed it. ". . . Who speaks to us through trance and call . . ." She stumbled and fell to her hands, the last words of the prayer erasing themselves just as the snow had erased all else. "Oh One . . . why even call us if we're just going to die?"

A gust of wind blew snow into her mouth, choking her. She spat and cursed, then blinked, staring down at the black metal under her hands. The rutted track had become a flat, paved surface, and she'd tripped over the first step of a staircase.

She turned. The path stopped here and flattened out into a circular cul-de-sac, walled by steep, snow-covered cliffs. Even through the snow she could see the angular lines of a door. The other pilgrims had followed; to Judith's relief, someone had picked up Stefan and handed the three-year-old over to his mother. They all huddled together for warmth, waiting for her to speak.

Shapes coalesced out of the snow, resolving into more men, all in green, all armed. Judith cursed silently. She'd been so concerned with staving off techtrance brought on by the man's weapon—and so mazed by the snow—that it hadn't even occurred to her to consider the man himself a danger. Some of the tinkers stared at the men in fascination, but the more disciplined among them kept their eyes firmly on Judith.

The men parted to let another through, this one shorter but with more ornamentation on his uniform. His hair was gray shot with white, as was his expansive mustache, and the lines around his eyes could have been kindly on another face. "Hollow Base is off limits to civilians," he said.

Judith shook her head. "We are called."

"I don't care who called you; you get off my base right—"

