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FROM THE SPICES OF SANANDIRA, PT. II

by Bradley P. Beaulieu

(Concluded from [Issue #70](#))

* * *

“Uhammad! Uhammad, Wake up!”

It was Jalaad, screaming into his ear. The call of the fyndrenna was so strong that a vision of Queen Rossanal’s beautiful face was all he could think of, but then a long, mournful wail filled the cool desert air, and the closeness of it allowed him to fend off the call of the spice. Uhammad managed to sit upright and scan the horizon. His balance swam and he fell back to the sand.

“Get up you fat fool, or we’re all dead!”

Jalaad dragged Uhammad to his feet and led him to the nearby cutter. As soon as they reached the top of the gangway, Riisi pulled anchor and they slid northward under a sky brilliant with dusk.

Uhammad shook his head to clear it of the haze. “Have you seen it? The ehrek?”

“No, but it’s close enough to kiss my hairy backside, I can tell you that. We’re sailing back to Sanandira, Uhammad. I won’t risk my life any further over memories.”

“It won’t do any good. We’ll be hunted wherever we go.”

“We will not....” Jalaad’s words trailed off as he glanced at the horizon. “You found something....”

Uhammad tipped his head toward Riisi, who gripped the wheel and stared intently at the horizon. “The boy,” Uhammad said softly. “He is the reason we’re being followed. The beast wishes him dead.”

“Riisi? Speak sense.”

“Riisi’s mother, the woman that Kaliil took aboard in Ilinnon....”

“I remember.”

“She was the Queen. Queen Rossanal.”

Jalaad opened his mouth to argue, but Uhammad talked over him. “Her eyes, Jalaad. Do you remember her eyes?”

Jalaad looked back at Riisi and swallowed. His expression softened from doubt and anger to one of outright worry. “The Crown Prince?”

“Just so, old friend.” Uhammad leaned against the larboard gunwale, his stomach curdling as Riisi guided them down a steep dune. “The ehrekh were sent by Sulamin to

prevent the Queen's return, though I don't think he knew about her son."

Jalaad slipped to the deck. "We have another two hours of sailing at most. Then *hours* of darkness before the silver moon rises."

"Yes, but I know where Muulthasa was headed," Uhammad replied. "Irhüd's Finger, the old fort there."

The ehrek's call echoed over the cooling desert, as if it were laughing at their foolish attempt to save themselves.

"And what good will a ruined fort do us?"

"They saved him, Jalaad. They saved Riisi. If a boy can escape its reach, then so can we."

Uhammad jumped up from the gunwale, for the ship was heading straight for a rocky outcropping. He shoved Riisi aside and pulled hard to larboard, and the outcropping scraped by.

Riisi's eyes were wide with fright.

Jalaad rounded on the boy, his fists gripped tightly, making the gaunt muscles along his forearms stand out. "How many times have I told you to keep your eyes on the sand?"

"Jalaad, take the wheel," Uhammad said.

Jalaad ignored him. Riisi, swallowing back tears, slid stern along the gunwale.

"So help me, Jalaad, if you don't take this wheel, I'm going to snap you like a carrot!"

Jalaad turned, his face angry, but he obeyed and allowed Uhammad to guide Riisi to the rear of the cutter. They sat on the bench there as the ehrek's harroon sounded once more.

"Something came to you just then, didn't it?"

Riisi stared sternward and shook his head.

Uhammad turned Riisi's face until the boy's eyes met his. "It did, and you'd better tell me what it was."

I remember the ehrek, Riisi signed. *I see him now. He....* Riisi began to cry—a rough, haggard sound, the only thing his ruined throat allowed him.

"Tell me, son. It'll help."

I remember my mother.... I remember what the ehrek did to her. I was alone on a dune, with my mother and... the guardsman from the ships—the tall one with hard eyes. The ehrek tore them... tore them....

Riisi's breath came in sucking gasps. His tears flowed freely.

"Finish the tale, boy. Get it out, now, here." Uhammad hated himself for forcing him to relive such memories, but there was little choice.

Riisi hit his thigh with a tightly balled fist. *I can't remember.*

"Try!"

He beat his thighs, over and over and over. *I can't remember!*

Uhammad grabbed his fists. "All right, son. All right. We have time yet. We'll find a way out of this."

It was then that Uhammad noticed Jalaad. He was looking sternward as the ship sailed forward. Uhammad turned.

And nearly wept.

Along the horizon, the glowing sails of a three-masted ship could be seen. Sulamin's warship, only hours away now. If the ehrekh didn't get them....

He stifled the thoughts and took the wheel. He refused to give up now. Not while blood still coursed through their veins. He guided the cutter to the rocky ridge called Irhüd's Finger, upon which stood a crumbling ruin of a fort. They pulled around the promontory, only to find an abandoned husk of a ship sitting half-buried in the dunes.

"*The Night Wind*," Uhammad said as Jalaad took in sail.

Jalaad glanced between the fort and the ship. "Where do we hole up?"

Uhammad swallowed. He needed to find the last piece of the story. He had to find out how Riisi had survived, for only in that did they stand a chance against the desert spirit driving down on them. He pulled the rudder over and headed for the derelict.

“If there’s anything to be found, it will be there.”

Jalaad nodded, his expression unsure.

They anchored, crossed the sand, and climbed beneath the deck of the rotting caravel. They reached the hold, where casks of spice lay strewn about. Peppercorn and mace littered the floor, and the door to the hold had been ripped apart as if the ship were made of so much kindling.

While Jalaad struck a lamp, Uhammad cleared himself a space and laid down several blankets. “What will you do?” Uhammad asked.

Jalaad shrugged. “We’ll sharpen a few sticks. Poke him where it hurts....”

“Be serious for once.”

Jalaad forced a smile onto his haggard face. “You’d best begin, you big lummo. The faster you find answers, the faster we’re safe and sound in Sanandira.” Uhammad could tell he didn’t expect any of them to live through the night.

Uhammad said nothing. He refused to believe there was no hope.

After Jalaad and Riisi had left, Uhammad sat and tapped the fyndrenna into his eyes, praying to the spirits beyond that Muulthasa’s memories would provide some vital clue.

* * *

I sprint up the rocky ridge from the *Night Wind*, dragging the Prince with one hand. My legs burn. I cannot catch my breath, but fear drives me on. One moment's hesitation and the beast will be upon us.

The ehrekh attacked just before we reached the fort—perhaps anticipating that we sought shelter there. The ship now lies ruined against the sand, her left skis torn free, a gaping hole in her hull where the ehrekh tore through.

A thud falls upon the earth behind me. Breath exits lungs with a sickening wheeze. The ehrekh roars. A scream is cut short.

When I glance back, the look in the ehrekh's jaundiced eyes as he stands over a bloody mass of limbs is one of satisfaction, of calm knowledge there is nothing we can do to prevent our deaths. It kills three more men, the rahib among them, before we reach the fort, and then it retreats, emitting a rumbling chuckle.

The fort is a broken and useless thing for any large force, but it is enough for our haggard band. We huddle in a room with no ceiling and three standing walls. I stare in shock at what the ehrekh has left us. The Queen, her son, and seven men, including me.

We have flint and steel, which we use to build a fast-burning fire from the brittle scrub brush that litters the fort's

interior. Five men stand guard with the only weapons we have left. Somewhere in the darkness, the ehrekh harroons something close to a laugh.

I stare at Rossanal. “We will most likely die this night, *my Queen*.”

Her green eyes flash, for this is the first time I’ve revealed her identity. The men at the far side of the fire exchange confused glances. Prince Riisi, chin jutting, frowns at me as if his lordly habits are already coming to him at the age of five.

“You’re just like us now. Dead as soon as the ehrekh tires of this game.”

“We have weapons,” she says, motioning to the crossbow and swords the men bear.

“Better we use them to grant ourselves quick deaths.”

The Queen raises her head. “How low you’ve come.”

“If I’ve come low, it is a thing of your own making.”

“The man that spirited me away from Harrahd would have fought until his last breath.”

I open my mouth to speak, but find I cannot. I *am* scared to fight. I don’t want to die ripped limb from limb by that infernal beast. I was foolhardy those years ago, true, but that has been tempered while hiding from Sulamin’s men and in my service to Kaliil. Still, I am shocked to realize how cautious I’ve become, how weak my former self would have thought me.

Prince Riisi stares at me defiantly as I study his face. There is so much blind bravery there, and I cannot help but think of my child. I imagine a girl most often. I see her with Alenha's pointed chin and sharp nose, with my high cheekbones, staring at me like Riisi does now.

"Well," I tell the Queen, "there is little choice in the matter. This game ends as soon as the ehrekh decides it so. Perhaps if we still had Kaliil's fyndrenna we could have at least died pleasantly."

The Queen stands suddenly. "There was fyndrenna on that ship?"

"No. The last of it was aboard *The Crying Gull*. What purpose would it serve?"

The Queen's face loses its luster, and she collapses to her knees near Riisi and hugs him close. "Do you know how it received its other names, King's spice and Hennisbane?"

I shake my head.

"Fyndrenna is the reason Harrahd has had the services of the ehrekh for so long. During Lord Henna's uprising hundreds of years ago, the King of Harrahd fed ten drams to each of his most trusted men, forty of them, men desperately needed in the struggle."

"Ten drams would kill a man in minutes."

“Just so. He did it before three ehrekh as a sacrifice, an offering to enslave them. Those three ehrekh destroyed Henna’s five-hundred in hours.”

“The spice has no such effect.”

“It does. It’s the very reason fyndrenna has been controlled so closely by the Kings of Harrahd. Right or wrong, they have always feared they will lose control of the ehrekh, that someone will learn how to do it for themselves. If they ever do lose them, control of the desert will soon follow.”

“This makes no sense. If what you say is true, the beasts are already bonded to Sulamin.”

“Yes, but the bond must be renewed each generation, and the blood of kings runs much stronger in Riisi’s veins than it does in Sulamin’s. If we give an appropriate sacrifice, the beast would bond with him.”

This news does not seem credible, but the Queen would be privy to such knowledge. If only Kaliil had kept some fyndrenna aboard *Night Wind*....

I stop.

My fingers tingle.

I am unable to move for the thought that has come to my mind.

“What?” the Queen asks, perhaps sensing the tension within me.

“There may be fyndrenna on the *Wind*.”

“You said it had been left on the other ship.”

“Kaliil told me there were only two cases left, both aboard *The Crying Gull* before it was wrecked. But lies come to Kaliil as easily as bleats from a goat. He was no fool—he would have spread the fyndrenna throughout the ships. He needed only one to reach Sanandira for him to buy the life he’d always dreamed of. There is more fyndrenna aboard the *Night Wind*. There must be.”

“You do not sound certain.”

“I am not.” I cast one hand to the shattered fort around us. “But one small hope is better than none.”

“Then I must ask”—she sits straighter and hugs Riisi closer—“will you help my son?”

I knew she would ask, but I am unsure of the answer. I gaze up at my birthing star, the Bull, hoping for some small amount of inspiration. But in my heart I know I’m only avoiding the one question that must be answered: will I or will I not lay down my life, that the Queen’s son may survive?

I thought any small amount of loyalty had already been burned from me—after all, this woman begged me to save her and then abandoned me and my men to the desert, leaving our wives without husbands, our children without fathers—but I’m surprised to find that some small amount of devotion remains.

I spent nearly two decades in service to the royal family, and no matter how poor the Queen's decisions might have been, she made them to protect her son.

I stare at the Prince, who gazes into the fire, hugging his knees to his chest, and think of my daughter. What if *her* life depended on the men of Harrahd laying down their lives? I'd like to think my countrymen would do so, and I'd like to think I'm man enough to do the same.

"How many men must take the fyndrenna?" I ask the Queen.

The Queen's eyes brighten. "Fewer and fewer have been sacrificed over the years to renew the ehrek's bonds."

"How *many*, my Queen?"

"Two, perhaps three."

My mind races, wondering which of my men will take up the call. I glance to Wahid and Ejhan and the others. That they are nervous is plain to see, but they nod, an indication that they will try if I ask them.

I nod back, my mind already racing with all we must do. I realize in the same breath, however, how truly tired all of us are. "All of us will go. If we can make it to the ship, we'll search it, take the fyndrenna, and try what you say. But we're exhausted. We rest until moonrise."

The Queen opens her mouth to speak, but I raise my hand. “We will never reach the ship in darkness. Tulathan will rise before long, and the rest will do us all good.”

I use the time to kneel and pray to the Bull for my wife, Alenha, for I don’t believe I’ll have the chance again. I cannot rest in any case, for the ehrekh keeps bellowing into the night, each time from a different location.

When the golden moon rises, we build several fires about the ruins of the fort, hoping to confuse the ehrekh if only for a short time. The gods only know if it worked, but we are not assaulted until we are within a hundred paces of the ship. The ehrekh, howling its blood-hungry fury, storms in behind us, taking three men in the span of a dozen strides.

We rush through the huge gash in the forehull. The ehrekh follows, and though it is too large to navigate the hole it snatches Darahim’s leg and yanks him outside. The screams last only a moment, and then the ehrekh begins tearing at the planking. We scurry to the stern storeroom, hoping to the gods above that Kaliil kept the fyndrenna as close to his cabin as he could.

We strike a lantern and search frantically. By the sound of the echoing booms, the ehrekh has reached the interior and is ripping his way into the middle storeroom. I order Prince Riisi to the back of the hold and tell him to hide as well as he can.

I find an axe in a pile of old canvas and swing against the pepper casks, since that was where the first box was hidden. The ehrekh roars, sending the entire ship to vibrating. Dust sifts down in waves as I swing at one of the last casks. A leather-wrapped package spills to the floor along with the peppercorns.

The hold door crumbles. The beast's head pokes through and scans the room, its bristly crown glinting wickedly from the golden lantern light. Then it rips the door jamb away and crawls inside. It uses huge, clawed hands to swipe at Wahid and Ejhan. My men, gods bless them, stand before it without fear, dodging its every move. When the ehrekh overreaches, Wahid darts in and catches it in the thigh with a quick thrust.

"Back!" I yell as I run forward with my axe.

The ehrekh charges and slams his crown into Wahid's chest. Wahid slides across the hold and smashes into the hull, his lifeblood spurting from a dozen wounds.

Ejhan releases a battle cry and hacks. His sword bites hungrily into the ehrekh's calf. I pull him backward just as the ehrekh launches a broken barrel at him. It clips Ejhan's shoulder and sends us tumbling to the floor.

We regain our feet, and only then do I realize a piece of the barrel has bitten into my stomach, though I feel no more than a sharp pinch. Ejhan's shoulder is ruined. His face has gone

deathly white, but somehow he ignores the pain and gives me a serious nod.

The ehrekh pauses and sniffs the air. Then, in a blink, it turns toward the rank of casks behind it and begins raking them from his path.

“No!” the Queen screams, for the Prince hides among them.

We charge. I drive my axe into the black skin of the ehrekh’s good leg as it crushes a barrel and grips Riisi by the neck. The claw of its thumb is so deep in his throat that I fear it is already too late. A rivulet of blood trails down Riisi’s neck and chest, and a sickening gurgle escapes him.

Desperate, I rear back and drive the axe into the ehrekh’s arm, nearly severing it. The Prince pulls the claws from his neck as the ehrekh stumbles backward over the barrels. Ejhan leaps forward and buries his sword in the thing’s chest. The ehrekh roars, shaking more dust down upon us, and swipes viciously at Ejhan’s head. Ejhan twists away, his head a misshapen mess of black hair and bone and red flesh.

“To the fore!” I scream at the Queen and Riisi.

They follow, and as I help them through the broken doorway, I spare one last glance. The ehrekh’s breathing is labored. It mewls as it grabs the sword and yanks it free. Ochre

blood spurts forth, but it holds the wound tight to staunch the flow.

We run from the gash in the hull and set out north across the desert. We reach a rise and collapse as the golden moon achieves its zenith—a boon, according to the Queen. She wraps Riisi's neck with her veil as best she can—by the gods, he seems to be faring better already.

“Unwrap the box,” the Queen tells me.

I stare at her, confused. “There's only me, my Queen.”

“It will work,” the Queen says and smiles. “I will join you. We will give ourselves, that Riisi might live.”

Despite the Queen's protests, Riisi stands and shakes his head furiously. He cannot speak, but he yanks on his mother's sleeve and points northward.

“We cannot, dear one. This is our only chance.”

“The beast will not harm you,” I tell him. “You understand? Take one of the skiffs from the ship and load it with food and water. Find the caravan trail to the east and sail north. If you are careful, you should be able to find shelter or a caravan in two or three days.”

The sounds of the ehrekh approach.

“Make your way to Harrahd,” the Queen says.

“No! He'll never make it so far on his own. Go to Sanandira, boy. Find a man named Uhammad. You'll recognize

him. He was the stout helmsman on the ship you took from Ilinnon. Tell him your story, and he'll make sure you get to Harrahd."

Riisi stares at his mother, tears streaming down his face.

"He understands," the Queen says, and then she kisses Riisi tenderly on the forehead. "My brave boy understands."

The Queen and I both kneel, facing the limping ehrekh that has just begun to climb the dune. The Queen opens the ornate case and pours a small pile of golden spice onto her palm. "This much," the Queen says, holding out the fyndrenna in her palm.

I take it and inhale the powder deeply.

The spice sears my lungs. The night explodes with bright yellow pinpricks. An earthy smell consumes my senses, makes my eyes see golden light, makes my ears hear the pour of molten gold, makes my tongue taste sugar and cinnamon and saffron and rosemary.

And blood.

I could die like this, so sweet are the sensations that fill my every pore.

I turn my head away from the ehrekh and stare instead at Riisi. He cries. I had hoped he would run, that he would be spared this sight, but he stands defiantly and faces the approaching beast with a burning hatred.

I hope my child will be as strong as this young Prince. I hope Alenha has the strength to make it so.

Good night, sweet love. May the sun set on your life, and on our child's, more kindly than it has mine.

* * *

Uhammad woke to the baritone call of the ehrekh. He could *feel* the sound in his chest. He thought he heard Jalaad calling his name, twice or thrice or more—it was too difficult to tell.

Or had it been a dream?

Uhammad slipped back into darkness.

But woke again to an all encompassing roar. The ship's hull vibrated and groaned. He coughed as sand and dust sifted down through the planking.

Uhammad was alone in the hold. Jalaad screamed above, a sound filled with pain and fright.

Uhammad fought his way to his feet and clambered up the nearby ladder. When he reached the deck, he saw the black, muscled form of the ehrekh looming over the ship's exposed sterncastle. Jalaad stood behind the mizzenmast, his left arm bleeding heavily from four deep claw marks, his right clinging to his curved scimitar.

The ehrekh had only one hand. Its left arm ended in a gnarled stump just below the elbow. With its good arm it

reached around the mast for Jalaad. He scored a shallow gash along the beast's forearm and retreated behind the helm, but with only the sterncastle railing behind him now, to do so again would be suicide.

Riisi cowered in a ball near the door to the captain's cabin.

"Riisi, get up! Get up! It's not here to kill us!"

Uhammad's words were drowned by the ehrek's roar as it smashed the helm with a bone-shattering blow. Jalaad flew backward from the force of it and slammed into the railing.

Uhammad ran forward. "Riisi, stand up! Let it see you!"

Riisi raised his head and stared at Uhammad, his face a fractured mosaic of terror and confusion.

"Damn you, boy, stand up! Show it no fear!"

Riisi cowered as the ehrek roared and charged. Jalaad screamed and tried to drive his sword into the beast's ebony chest, but it was too fast, Jalaad too weak. It slapped the sword aside and Jalaad fell to the deck.

Uhammad scanned frantically for something to throw, but it was too late. The ehrek brought its crippled arm down hard, and though Jalaad tried to twist away, its stump caught him deep in the stomach. Blood sprayed from Jalaad's mouth like a fountain, as the sound of his life was released in a sickening wheeze to the dry desert air.

Riisi, eyes wide, scrabbled away from the sterncastle. Uhammad reached him just as the ehrekh dropped to the main deck and stalked forward.

“Damn you, Riisi! Summon your courage!”

The ehrekh stalked forward, its footsteps echoing through the half-buried ship.

Riisi tightened his hands into fists and came up to his knees.

The ehrekh stopped only a few paces away, chest heaving, staring at Riisi, then Uhammad, then Riisi again. It spoke in some infernal tongue and pointed a clawed finger at Uhammad.

Riisi stood, eyes shut tight. His breath came in ragged, stuttering gasps.

With a hot exhale of fetid breath, the ehrekh stepped forward and grabbed Uhammad’s shoulder. Uhammad used every bit of willpower within himself to remain still. To do otherwise would mean death.

Then Riisi faced the beast and touched its arm.

The ehrekh released a pent-up breath like a winded bull and turned intelligent eyes to young Riisi. Long moments passed as the two stared at one another, but never did Uhammad think the beast was preparing to do harm to Riisi.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the creature's posture softened and it released its hold on Uhammad's shoulder.

And then it stepped back and kneeled.

* * *

With Uhammad at the rudder and Riisi standing nearby, their cutter neared the final rise before Sanandira. The ship had been horribly silent since they'd buried Jalaad at the top of Irhüd's Finger. Uhammad had become so used to his friend's ramblings that his life seemed empty without them. But at least Jalaad had gone to a better place. He may have lived a life that had little worth singing about, but in his death he had launched a story that would touch a thousand others.

Finally Sanandira's convoluted skyline came into view. Uhammad practically breathed in the crescent of docks in the harbor, the round dhobas and tall temples, and in the center of it all, the bazaar, where everything had started.

"Once we reach the city, my Prince, there will be no turning back."

Riisi turned to Uhammad and smiled. *I couldn't if I wanted to.*

He was probably right. They'd sent the ehrekh after Sulamin's warship. Uhammad had questioned the wisdom of such a move, but Riisi felt it was too dangerous for news of their escape to reach Harrahd so soon. Better for the King to

wonder what had happened to his men and send more resources to scour the desert while Riisi cemented his position in Sanandira.

Uhammad had thought it too tall a task for the ehrekh, but Riisi proved wise beyond his years. He had communicated with the ehrekh without speaking and told it to disable the ship, to let the men sit and use their food and water, to strike only if they tried to make their way in skiffs or on foot.

Their plan would become no easier once they landed in Sanandira. They needed to contact sympathizers to Riisi's dead father and mother. And here the King's dealings with Sanandira would bite him like a wounded viper. His stance toward the desert city had been overbearing for too long. With the ehrekh and the fyndrenna, men would flock to their cause.

The uprising would not occur tomorrow, nor the next day. But some day not far from now, it would.

And the King would fall.

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Bradley P. Beaulieu is the author of The Winds of Khalakovo, the first of three planned books in The Lays of Anuskaya series. In addition to being an L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Award winner, Brad's stories have appeared in Realms of Fantasy, Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, Writers of the Future XX, and several anthologies from DAW Books. His story "In the Eyes of the Empress's Cat" was voted a Notable Story of 2006 in the Million Writers Award. Brad lives in Racine, Wisconsin with his wife and two children. For more, visit www.quillings.com.

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THE GODSLAYER'S WIFE

by Therese Arkenberg

His sobs echo through the corridors of Datheiren Keep. The old stone absorbs its husky tone, the barely-voiced beginnings of words, apologies, curses; they reflect in only a sourceless, pitiable sound of misery. When there are guests, or the servants hear, I claim the cries are my own. I protect the pride of my husband, Valien Godslayer.

After all, though I have reason to weep, so does he, and he came by it all for my sake. He rescued me from the pale and tender hands of Rhiel Ghoulsmother, Goddess of Dust. He murdered Her for me.

And as the months, the years, go by, I begin to wonder if we will ever be able to live with it.

* * *

Sometimes I think I loved Rhiel, with the sort of love squires hold for their masters: part devotion and part envy. She was beautiful, in the alien way of newly dead things, as my mother's face was after her death in childbirth—fragile, composed, without a mark on her. And of course, being a Goddess, Rhiel was powerful.

I was neither. I still am not.

But for a time, I imagined I might stay down there forever; learn Her arts and become part of Her court, the unmarried and beautiful unliving. I could become a demigoddess. I could become a monster. There, in the gray dust in the white arms of the Ghoulsmother, I feared no possibility.

And then he came, Valien, to slay the Ghoulsmother and rescue those of Her captives who could be saved—only Faya, a dark girl from far lands who was stranger in some ways even than Rhiel; and myself, the merchant's daughter who became his wife. He asked me, and I could not refuse him.

He is not an unhandsome man, with flaxen hair, deep blue eyes—are we not supposed to find these handsome?—and sun-gilded skin, taut over muscle on a somewhat slighter frame than could be expected of a great hero. But that was not my reason.

It was a long journey, from the rotting jungle where we emerged from Rhiel's realm to the roads and towns of civilized folk. We slept two nights outside. From the first, Valien's nightmares came. He screamed, in agony, in horror—I had seen Her whisper to him, when his blade cut Her breast; did Her secret last words haunt him still?—screamed in grief and guilt. Perhaps this was justice, since he had killed a Goddess, even if a Goddess of Corpse-Dust and Death. But how terrible,

those screams. Faya left us the next day, taking her own path through the forest, to a place only the living Gods must know; perhaps Valien's screams drove her away.

But they pulled me close, helpless. I knew I was all he had in the world, the only one who might understand his burden, his torture, the punishment for his sin against the divine. So I kept near him on the second night, held him when he screamed; and when, upon returning, he asked me to be his wife, I accepted.

I loved him with gratitude and pity, and in time, as I saw the hero he was, I came to love him with reverence and envy, too. And all the time I hoped I might also do a great deed—that I might cure a hero of his scars.

But my love, and what understanding I can offer, do nothing. Still he writhes, crying out in the night. And sometimes in the day he curls in a corridor, where he believes no one will find him, and sobs.

* * *

We make love sometimes. At first I hoped it might be a way to exorcise our demon, to put Rhiel's ghost to rest. But if anything, our awkward, overly generous passions only awaken Her. I close my eyes, and instead of Valien's warm, strong embrace I feel Rhiel's arms around me like a necklace of bones. I smell musk and dust, sweet and dank perfume. I hear voices:

Faya's, my own, the rustling leaflike babble of the unliving court chanting with shriveled tongues behind broken teeth, and Her voice, more beautiful and terrible and strange. I see the caverns sculpted with designs I could not look upon, and even now dare not remember, and sepulcher halls walled with ancient bones.

I taste—but I will not share that. Sometimes, with a mother's smile, She would offer me metal-tasting water to wash down my meals. And She would sing to me—like a mother singing nursery rhymes, with a sort of lesson in the tune... Faya and I began to learn. I wonder how Faya lives with that. I wonder how I am able to. I still dream of Her. I know Valien does, too.

* * *

One night when the dreams come I take him in my arms, stroking back his sweat-damp hair, rocking our bodies on the luxurious down mattress, chanting nonsense as I did to soothe my little brother's nightmares. It has some effect; he wakes.

"Idaela?" He always says my name as if he is just learning it.

"I'm here."

He doesn't laugh at my statement of the obvious; he seems to have no sense of humor. I wonder if he ever did. He presses his face to my shoulder and breathes deeply.

“You’re safe here,” I say, falling easily into this role of protecting him.

“I know. She’s dead. I know She’s dead—” Words chanted like the incantation on a talisman. “Nothing can reach us here. It’s over, far past... And you are safe as well.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “You suffer because you rescued me.” He doesn’t reply. “I wish I could....”

Still no reply. It angers me, more than it ought. “Perhaps it was a mistake to marry each other. Now we’re always reminded of....”

In reply, deep, even breathing. I feel ashamed of my bitterness, even as I wonder at the way he so quickly fell asleep. Perhaps he has used this skill before to evade the troubling words of a troubled woman. They say it is a soldier’s skill, to sleep at will. Datheiren Keep is a gift from King Arlin for a great service rendered, not the inheritance of a lord’s son; I know little of Valien’s past before he came to free eastern Ekandria of the Ghoulsmother.

Before I became his wife.

And he knows little of mine. But we share the nightmares. Is there anything more we need to know?

* * *

What can cure a Godslayer?

Amaasin priests have told us Valien requires no healing, committed no sin, has no need for forgiveness.

A new cult, that of the Abyss and Great Trees, says there is no such thing as forgiveness, that only actions and not grace determine the health and fate of our souls. But they also see Valien's action as good, a sprout from the Trees, not something to atone for. I can find no help there.

Rhiel Ghoulsmother has no worshippers left.

Last night I saw Valien standing at the top of the northwest tower, at the very edge, and I realized I was waiting for him to jump.

I pray to the Divinity of Amaas, the Great Trees, the Earth and Sky, the ancient land-soul of Ekandria, to Rhiel's primordial rivals—anyone who might be glad or grateful for the Ghoulsmother's death. *Send me a miracle. Save him, heal him—or if You will not, at least show me how.*

Am I humble, moderating my request? Or do I still seek glory by performing the deed of a hero?

* * *

A miracle comes. Perhaps not the one I asked for. One morning, as I ride through the town that has grown before the gates of Datheiren Keep, I see Faya. She is unmistakable, with skin dark as mahogany against a sunset-red dress, black hair caught up in a silver net—she has done well for herself.

Just as I am about to call out to her, she turns, sees me, greets me, and soon we are sitting in the gardens of Datheiren Keep. I am telling her the story of the last four years, perhaps at her prompting. Yes, she does ask if Valien still has nightmares.

Faya takes my hand. “Then perhaps I can help,” she says, sounding almost surprised, but pleasantly so, as if a plan had been fulfilled when she hadn’t expected it to. “That’s why I came back, Idaela.”

“To help us?”

“I have... a certain secret. A gift perhaps. I think that was why Rhiel wanted me.”

Yes, Faya had always been strange, even before the time spent in Rhiel’s halls began to take its toll. Not just because she is foreign.

“There is a place very near my home village, far in the east. Once the home of a God—perhaps it still is. But not one like the Ghoulsmother,” she adds quickly as I pull my hand from hers. “No, perhaps the opposite. This place is a Garden, filled with unusually beautiful trees.”

I think of the cult of the Great Trees and the Abyss and wonder if this is its origin.

“There is a certain red fruit,” Faya says, again sounding introspective, “that will give eternal life to whoever eats it, or

will kill an immortal. But only innocents can enter the Garden. I only know of one who ever did....

“My mother sent me in, when I was barely walking. She told me to find the red fruit, and bring it back.” She smiles the way one does at bitter things long past. “But I was young, and hungry, and it was so beautiful... and sweet.” The hand that reaches for mine has a long, jagged white scar along its back, running up the flesh of her arm. The mark of a thorn switch, wielded like a whip. “She was angry when I returned empty-handed.”

“Then... you must....”

“It happened three hundred years ago.”

No wonder she can speak of it so calmly.

We sit in silence for a time. I let her hold my hand again. “You came back to tell me this? So it might... help Valien?”

“And perhaps help yourself,” she says softly. “It is a place of life, not like Rhiel’s.... Yes, that is why I came here. But I wanted to return to Ekandria, anyway. It’s very different from the eastern lands, so much more crowded, fuller.... After a time, you begin to enjoy differences so much.”

I look at Faya, feeling reverence and envy. Her tale is perhaps the strangest of all of ours—yet not unhappy. She seems to have escaped the pall of Rhiel’s ghost. And of course,

if she tells the truth—I don't doubt for a moment that she does—it is far from over yet.

“But neither Valien nor I are innocent as children.”

“Perhaps it won't be necessary to enter the Garden. Only to be near it.”

“What do you think will happen there?”

“It is a God's place. Who can say? But I have heard of things—healings, revelations. Miracles.”

One final question flies from my tongue. “If Rhiel wanted you for your immortality—” yes, there is an attraction there for an unliving, undying Goddess—”why did She want me?”

“I don't know.”

“I think She was teaching me things.”

Faya rises. “She taught me things, too.”

“What things?”

“How glad I ought to be to be immortal,” she says softly. “As to what you might have learned—shouldn't you yourself know that best?”

I learned of the madness that lurks beneath the world, waiting always to seize us. I learned that even good deeds might deserve punishment. I learned it is a mercy that even gods can die. None of this Rhiel meant to teach me. I have suppressed her words, as much as possible; forgotten her lessons. They surface only in nightmares.

At this, Faya and I part. Somehow I am sure it will be forever. She has left me with a miracle, or at least the hope of one.

* * *

Perhaps ironically, Gods have no souls. Upon death, they vanish into nothingness; Rhiel is now no more than the corpse-dust She was birthed from. Valien did not only kill Her, he unmade Her.

She should have no more power over us.

Yet still, after four years, Valien cries out in nightmares—and in the day—and sometimes, quietly, I weep, giving into a grief I fear as much as I am ashamed of.

No longer, I pray. And now my prayer is granted, and I must do more than whisper the psalms I learned on my mother's worn beads. I must act. *We* must.

* * *

Valien is slender for a man but broad-shouldered, and though I have never been a willow, his spare leathers fit me well enough. I am nowhere near the dashing figure he is as we ride out of the keep, leaving Datheiren behind, heading east. A wind, cool for summer, ruffles my newly shorn hair, cut with Valien's dagger. The waist-long tangle I'd borne since I was a child would never do on a journey like this.

He watches me strangely. I don't know if I look so different with my golden-red hair only chin length or if it's the leather armor. Or the fact that after four years, he is on a quest again—one taken at his wife's proposal, at that.

I have slept in feather beds for four years, on floor pallets for seventeen, and on piles of rotted-soft bones for one hundred nights, but this is only the third time I have ever slept outside. We curl in Valien's cloak, his arms around me.

"What do you think awaits us?" he asks the sky.

"I don't know," I say, when it makes no reply. "You're the one who's done this most often."

He laughs huskily. I've never heard him laugh before. His hands rest beneath my breasts and over my abdomen, close but not touching my most sensitive places. His breath tickles the back of my neck, and his hair, almost as long as mine now, tickles too. I force myself to only notice minutiae.

"What do *you* think awaits us?" I ask.

I feel the laughter leave his chest, pressed against my back. "Not immortality, whatever you've heard about this Garden."

Of course. Immortality would bring no healing—would only prolong the nights of nightmare, the days of pain that grows until it cannot be held back, and must be let out in screams. But I force myself to smile, defying dark thoughts like

the hero Finger-Tall attacking the monster cat with a needle for a sword. “How can you be sure?”

My parry, it seems, is very poor. A shudder runs his length, and Valien whispers, “She told me how we will die.”

My blood turns to ice. “Rhiel.”

“Yes.”

Well, I think pragmatically, being a Goddess of Corpse-Dust, She would know. “How?”

“Do you really want to hear it?”

In answer, I kick him gently, as if we were only lovers caught in playful teasing. “How could I not?”

“She said you would die in childbirth.”

I go very still in his arms. I think of my mother as she delivered my brother, his shrieks and her groans and cries, weakening. Her face in death, unmarred, beautiful. And I think, no wonder Valien makes love to me so softly, so reluctantly. Or is the reluctance on my part? Am I perhaps unconsciously aware of my fate?

Is that one of the things I didn’t realize Rhiel taught me?

“What about you?” I ask.

“Poison.” The word said flatly, without emotion. But his arms tighten around me as if to lend comfort. Comforting *me*. It is exactly the way a hero should speak about his death.

* * *

How does a man repent of slaying a God?

How does his wife help him? How does anyone?

What did Faya think we would find in the Garden? Is its God still there, grateful for the death of a rival, willing to work a miracle?

Or will poison be Valien's best cure? I remember how he walked so close to the edge of the northwest tower—he knew he wouldn't jump, knew no fall would kill him. Or did he think of leaping, of so boldly challenging fate?

Is that not the sort of thing heroes do?

As we travel east, the landscape grows strange. We leave Ekandria's emerald forests and golden fields and enter sheer mountains of dark stone and darker pines, more black than green. Past them, the land is flat and dry, as if no God ever bothered to shape this part of the world. The sky is cloudless overhead but not blue, as if it has taken up the gray of the earth, the gray of dust.

It rains once, clouds rushing overhead like charging armies, though there is nowhere to shelter and we are soaked to the skin. More often we are tormented by wind that draws the moisture from our lips as we lick them, sometimes driving grit before it. We begin to travel at night, a trick Valien remembers from his earlier life.

He tells me bits of it. He was indeed a soldier. Leaving home as a youth of sixteen, he dreamed of being a hero. He became one nine years later. In between, he learned how to keep a sword sharp, how to calm an angry drunk, how to cross any terrain, how to detect an ambush, how to find edible mushrooms and cook over an open fire. He uses every one of these skills during our journey.

I share some of my own life: mothering my younger brothers after our mother's death, mothering my father sometimes, too. At a young age I learned to mend, how to soothe a tearful drunken man, how to start hearth fires despite drafts, how to wash in any possible way and how to live with grime when washing isn't possible, how to carve up a roast, and how to calm a child—or a man—just awakened from a nightmare. And I too find a use for every one of these skills during our journey.

I ask him once why he did it.

“Set out to slay a Goddess? Well, someone had to, didn't they? She couldn't be left to steal young women and desecrate graves. All the others who tried to kill Her had failed....”

“Yes.” I had seen some of them die—if they were permitted to die.

“One of them was a friend of mine. Ojiv Knallisen. We were friends in the army. He'd served twice as long as I had,

taught me things.... We both wanted to be heroes. He tried, and in failing, at least he had a hero's death. I envied him."

"You killed Rhiel for envy," I say.

"Not entirely." He doesn't sound offended. "I still wanted to be a hero for its own sake.... And I wanted to avenge Ojiv as much as I wanted to surpass him."

The sweetness of his tone, a sweetness I know he is unaware of, prompts me to say, "You loved him."

He starts, and I wonder what exactly I have hit upon. But I will not be jealous of a dead man.

I wonder sometimes how closely the relationship of Ojiv and Valien mirrors that of Valien and me. Ojiv taught Valien swordcraft, and at my prompting, he shows me how to thrust and parry, and how to handle a broadsword without cutting myself. My winning argument is that, since by a Goddess' word I will die in childbed, I have nothing to fear from swords.

* * *

What answers for a death? A birth.

The connection comes to me in a dream, a nightmare prompted by Rhiel's prophecy. A birth. I tell Valien, but I'm not certain he hears me. Now it is his turn to soothe away a nightmare.

His singing is very pleasant. I realize it is a lullaby he learned from me. A lullaby I in turn learned long ago, from Faya.

* * *

Rhiel taught me nothing She did not teach the other members of Her court, back when they were alive—before they turned to perfect, gray, unliving tricksters and stewards and other servants of Dust's Goddess. I was of no significance to Her. She foretold my death, but also Valien's. We were the only ones in that tomb-hall who had deaths to foretell.

I was stolen at random, as other girls were stolen when they wandered too far in the forest or dark alleys, or stayed too long in graveyards at dusk. It meant nothing.

Did this revelation come from a dream, or arise naturally over long days of traveling and thinking? Does it matter? At least, unlike the other, it causes me no nightmares.

Rhiel knew my death. Did She also know what would come before it? Did She see my future as Valien's bride? What else might She have seen?

Did She steal me out of vengeance for it? Or was that, the captivity that led to my meeting Valien and Faya, to marrying him and learning from her of a Garden, to walking across the eastern deserts in search of redemption for a Godslayer, only an inevitable part of my fate?

* * *

A dust storm blows up, golden sand driven by a greater wind than I have ever seen—if Rhiel still had any existence, any power in the world, I would say She sent it as revenge. Though the storm is not made of powdered corpses—so I hope.

Valien and I shelter behind a great rock, a bone of the earth sticking up like a vast splinter. In its shade he steps on something. A dark, slender something that writhes beneath his boot, lashes out, strikes. It slithers away as he slumps against the stone with a cry more of surprise than pain. Our gazes meet through the blowing dust and his is wide with fear.

Poison.

Along with mother, I was also physician to my family. I am at his side in instants, drawing my knife, cutting a cross over the dark pinprick of the serpent's bite. I put my lips to the wound and suck. Blood fills my mouth, but the taste doesn't bother me. More troublesome is the bitter aftertong when I spit it out. I suck again, spit again. Over and over.

The venom is drawn out. As the storm continues, he sleeps curled beside me.

He is more surprised than I am when he awakens. Alive.

* * *

We come upon the Garden suddenly. It rises from the yellow dust, an emerald forest with jewel-bright fruits on its

highest branches. A river flows out of it, scented like flowers and whispering as it runs over sand—a sound I have never heard before, almost like words. As we drink the sweet water, I look around for a village. There is none in sight—but then, Faya did leave it three hundred years ago.

Just being around the place, drinking its water, breathing the spicy living scent the wind draws off it, seems good for Valien, still recovering from the snake's bite. And it aids me as well. For the first time I can remember, we both sleep without nightmares.

* * *

What answers to death? Life.

The Garden is life, that much is clear. Its fruit can grant life eternally. Even its waters summon life forth from a desert. Its God is a God of Life.

The answer is near. I can feel it close.

What answers for a death? A birth.

But how are Gods made?

* * *

I ask Valien. He doesn't know. But then, does any mortal?

"Is the answer important?" he asks. I cannot see his face. We haven't lit a fire, since there is no wood to use—we wouldn't take it from the Garden even if we could. But the night is warm enough.

“I don’t know,” I say. “But I think....”

I hear him leaning forward. As a girl I would never have imagined this, a hero leaning close to hear my words. But then, Valien is more than a hero. He is my husband and my companion on this quest.

“To be free of Rhiel’s death we must atone for it. And atonement... well, what is the opposite of a death?”

“Saving a life,” he says. A hero’s answer, as valid as mine, perhaps. But not, I feel, the right one.

“A birth,” I say. “And the opposite of a Goddess of Corpse-Dust, of Death, is....”

“A God of Life?” He looks to the Garden. “I tried to enter... the branches are too thick. And then I called, but with no answer. No one came.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” I say.

My eyes are growing used to the dark; I see him turn back to me and shake his head. “You want to create a God.”

“To give birth to one.”

He shakes his head again. Now mixed with incredulity is horror. “Where would we even begin? And that’s not even the most important....”

I nod, knowing his thoughts. “I imagine birthing a God could be hard on the mother.”

“You would do it?”

“Of course.” I do not tell him why. Perhaps he already knows. After all, after Ojiv Knallisen’s death Valien killed Rhiel Ghoulsmother, and not just for revenge.

He pays me the greatest compliment one like him can, that of not questioning me further.

* * *

The Garden works miracles. Cures. Revelations.

The answer to a killing is a birth. The answer to death is life. Gods are created, I come to believe, the same way they die: much like mortals.

What is the key difference, the catalyst? How can we be sure it will be present? Perhaps that will be another of the Garden’s miracles. But first, I must convince Valien to try.

He fears for me, and I can’t blame him. I don’t know why I don’t fear for myself.

But—another revelation—what is to death as the truth is to life? Lies. Does fate even exist? Not even the Gods have been able to prove that. And a lie would serve Rhiel’s purpose just as well.

What purpose? Revenge, for the blade in her breast. She foretold for Valien a death that might come from any source—a feast given by an enemy, a cup of wine from a false friend, a pricked fingertip, a rotting wound, the shadow of a rock. A fact

that could only lead to constant fear. For a hero, an ignoble destiny.

And by claiming I would die in childbed, what did She do but seek to prevent my ever having a child? It would hurt me, of course, and harm my marriage with Valien, mar our most tender moments and place a wall between us, that his love might be the source of my death. It is a risk run by any woman, but to *know* that it is more than a risk....

Also, there is the fact that She was a Goddess of Dust, of Death. Does it not make sense She would strike out at birth, at life? Perhaps at this birth particularly, at the Life I am contemplating?

Or perhaps She wasn't lying. Valien will die by poison, and I by giving birth.

But Valien has survived poison once. He might again, many times, before the end. Likewise, there is no certainty that *this* will be the birth that kills me.

Perhaps fate does not exist, but it will kill me anyway.

* * *

I try to explain all this to Valien, and he does listen, striving to understand.

"This is your choice?" he says at last.

"Valien." I sit beside him, lean close. "There's something more you aren't considering."

“What?”

“If you believe a child conceived between us will kill me, how can we ever bear to touch again?” Voice straining, urging, I demand, “Do you mean for us to stay forever celibate? An ignoble fate for heroes!”

I am rewarded with his second-ever burst of laughter. Then in the dark his callused fingers reach out, comb through my hair. It is shoulder length now; I am debating cutting it again. I decide I will wait a little longer.

“I remember when I saw you,” he said. “It was your hair first. Flame-bright in that gray place. And all of you—so vibrant, so *alive*. I knew then that if you let me, I’d never part from you.”

“You married me....”

“For your hair, yes.” He doesn’t quite sound embarrassed. “Though I’ve come to be glad of my choice, for... other reasons.”

“You married me *to remember*. To remember that first sight....”

“Of life, yes. Of life in that place—or perhaps anywhere. Until I faced a Goddess of Death I never thought so much about *living*.”

To remember. He knew that living at my side would remind me of everything, and he chose to anyway—no, *because* of it.

“We’ve been strangers for four years,” I say.

“I know. I’m sorry for that, truly....”

“As am I.” I can barely form the words. It is far easier to let my lips work in another way, as I bring them to his.

We are still gentle with one another, but no longer so cautious and generous. We dare to be selfish. Kindling something between us, something we can only guess at, we cry out our triumph across the sweet river, over the Garden, to every corner of the desert.

* * *

I am bearing a child. I didn’t bleed for the two months of our return journey, or the two months since we arrived home. My stomach is starting to grow. I haven’t been ill. A blessing—or perhaps something more than that. In fact, I feel curiously healthy.

Valien and I sleep well most nights, and as for our few nightmares—we are only mortal. We have our uncertainties, our fears as well as our joys. And some nights I still dream of Rhiel. I think he might, too.

But we also dream of a new Goddess—or God, it is hard to tell from the face of a child in dreams, though it hardly matters.

Our child is coming, and it might shape the destiny of the world.

If there is such a thing as destiny.

What is the answer to fate? A choice.

Four months yet. Sometimes I feel I cannot wait. I so look forward to seeing that face in the flesh.

Sometimes—rarely, it must be admitted, but sometimes—a burst of bright laughter echoes through the corridors of Datheiren Keep. The stone walls absorb its husky tone, the occasional catch that might betray inexperience with hilarity; the effect is only a sourceless, almost enviable sound of joy.

Knowing that my guests and servants wouldn't understand, I tell them the laughter is my own. More and more often, this is not entirely untrue—because if Valien has reason for joy, then so do I.

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COVER ART

“Fly High,” by Tina Marie Lane



Tina Marie Lane is a Environment Designer and 3D Artist with eleven years of professional experience in designing architecture and retail environments. Her freelance work delves into these areas as well as fantasy environments for games and literature. Recently her work has appeared in 3D Artist Magazine and can also be found at her website www.toyrocket3d.com. She fashions her worlds, both real and imagined, from Dallas, Texas.

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