

# Eldritch Science



Adventurer by Tiffanie Gray

April 2024

# Editorial

The short stories herein are winners of the 2023 National Fantasy Fan Federation Amateur Short Story Contest!

The First Prize goes to “Island of Avarice” by Clint Stevenson. This is high adventure, with blood diamonds, pirates in the night, deadly sword-to-sword combat, and desperate escapes, thrilling and exciting and heart-racing.

The Second Prize goes to “Denebolan Marathon” by Charles Walter. This is more than just a racing story, although it is a sterling example of that sub-genre.

The Third Prize goes to “Forged in Fire” by J.L. Cook. A metal-working magic user and blacksmith strives against an evil curse, finding a friend and saving a Queen.

The Honorable Mention goes to “Welcome to Vulpye” by Jeff Cassell. A romantic drama of foxes in love, sharing adventures and discoveries.

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by Tiffanie Gray

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## Eldritch Science

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The Staging Area by Jose Sanchez

First Prize in the 2023 Short Story Contest

## Island of Avarice By Clint Stevenson

“Five!”

The whip cracked.

Rowan continued packing her things in a hurry, doing her best to ignore the Arahuac islander as he moaned in agony.

As usual, she’d find herself back atop the watchtower tonight, one of thirty such towers enveloping Phaiial Island in its entirety... and for good reason.

Rowan stood then. She continued to watch the remaining lashes from the outside columns of the barracks, reminding herself what happens to

those who do not obey. Too many times she’d stood witness to the lashings of others. The agonizing pain etched into each of their faces, even in the strongest of men, was testament enough to do one’s duty and obey the captain.

Captain Dross stood behind the young major, counting the lashes while Bren carried out the islander’s sentence.

He’d been caught the night before, diamond in tow, forgoing his finder’s fee to collect the diamond’s full value on the Hipani mainland. He’d even made it to one of the local tribe’s rafts before Dross and the dogs were on him.

“Six!”

Tied to a stable post, the islander convulsed, his hair jerking backwards just as the whip struck the top of his neck, tearing flesh and flinging blood, a long chunk of his hair coming away with the popper. He yelped, crying out something in his native tongue Rowan couldn’t understand. There was no use in learning the native language any longer, she’d be gone in a week, her three-month contract with the Patraean Guard coming to an end. For Rowan, it couldn’t come sooner.

“Seven!”

The natural daughter of an Alayean spice merchant, Rowan had been born on Patraean soil as her father’s caravan made their way to the Patraean capital of Horizon. Following the death of her father, and the dismissal from home by her half-brothers, Rowan was forced to make her own way, finally finding work after being approached on the docks of Nisaar.

Hipani raised, Alayean by blood and appearance, it meant little to the Patraean Guard recruiter when she’d produced a certification of Patraean citizenship, earning her double wages for the stint on Phaiial Island.

With enough coin, Rowan hoped to form her *own* caravan. Having traversed the trade routes with her father and half-brothers a dozen times before, she’d lodged them into her memory, knowing every watering hole and tavern, from the Hipani deserts to the Patraean

Highlands.

“Eight!”

Rowan sighed. As the summer months grew hotter, more and more miners attempted their escape, sometimes with a diamond in tow, sometimes not. It’d become almost routine.

Some just couldn’t cope with the hardships any longer; the heat, the isolation, the slop they were fed, all on top of the soulless, arduous labor the mines required. Therefore, some risked the lash as opposed to completing their contracted tenure. The lucky ones toiled in the mines at night by lamp-light, a privilege granted only to those who’d worked in the mines the longest without collecting a finder’s fee.

Rowan knew miners who’d spent most of their lives on the island, hoping for the one rock to change their fortune, unaware, or unconcerned *that* hope was a disease from which no cure existed. Patraean, Hipani, the local Arahuac, Alayean, it mattered not—men and women from all walks of life came to Phaial Island seeking their fortune. Few ever would.

“Nine!”

The islander screamed once more, the unrelenting sun beaming down on his bloody back, along with the miners pouring out from their tunnels, exhausted, black with soot, and stinking of sweat. Only a handful bothered lifting their heads as Dross counted the last lash, having become accustomed to the violent spectacle.

“Ten!” Dross shouted, and the breathless Major Bren dropped the whip, rubbing the shoulder of his whipping-arm.

Then, a few men shoved through the small crowd, quickly rushing over to the man. Untying his binds, they all but carried him, passing out of Rowan’s line of sight as they disappeared through the physician’s tent flap.

The remaining crowd dispersed, murmuring amongst themselves as others walked swiftly passed, heading toward the commotion of a much larger gathering beginning to take form at the entrance to the nearest tunnel.

Illuminated from the dying light, the young miner in the center held up the diamond for all to see. It was nearly half the size of her tiny fist.

Rowan decided to leave camp before the fren-

zy could escalate, but not before being passed by Captain Dross, his officers, and a few of the miner’s superiors. With a diamond of such proportions, the young woman who’d discovered it wouldn’t be sticking around camp for long. The greed of others could not be trusted here. It wasn’t out of the ordinary to find a miner dead in the nearby jungle, the finder’s fee gone, and a skiff gone missing. If the young miner was smart, Rowan thought, she’d forgo all farewells and take her leave at the nearest opportunity. After all, there was no fortune to be found if you were dead.

*Greed*, Rowan considered the word—on Phaial Island it was a fatal bastard. For many, it was like filling a cup with a hole at the bottom... it could never be filled.

Rowan continued toward the gate and waved a hand to a few sentries slumped against the palisade. Deep in their cups, they didn’t wave back.

Reaching the foot of the jungle-path, she stopped as the distant rumble of thunder caught her attention. Rowan looked at the sky. From the south, it was dark grey, and the wind was growing stronger. No one would be leaving tonight.

#

Rowan followed her usual trail through the jungle, well-trodden from the months she’d flattened it, and the dozens of others before her. It led to one place.

Colorful birds sang and flapped their wings as she looked up to the canopy. She could name a few but not all, making a mental note to ask Varran about it after their watch. In the fading light, she could spot the beach through the edge of the jungle’s foliage. A gust of wind blew then, shaking the trees as the incoming storm drew near. She stopped to pull off her boots before the soil turned to sand, the sound of nearby waves growing as they crashed with greater intensity. The storm was moving in fast.

Rowan marched across the sand toward the watchtower, standing vigilant against the backdrop of endless sea. She entered the water then, holding up her boots and a small sack of her belongings as the water rose with every step. She jumped as a wave came crashing down, turning her back at the last moment to keep her things dry, but to no avail.

Completely soaked, she held up her things.

Rowan swore, “Ghyrzia’s tits!”, unconcerned with the local sea goddess’s wrath, glaring at the ocean around her as if it’d insinuate her cry. Not far off, a few of the Arahuaac on small rafts were busy lighting torches. They all laughed hysterically, slapping their knees as Rowan caught sight of them.

She ignored them, but it didn’t stop her cheeks from turning bright red. Spitting out a mouthful of seawater, Rowan trudged on.

Reaching the ladder, her toes curled around barnacles as she found her footing, clambering up before the next wave came tumbling by. With seventy-five rungs from top to bottom, there was nothing to keep her from falling to her death into the shallow water below but her own two hands.

Usually, Rowan stopped near the hatch to take in the view of the island without the protection of four walls, watching as the evening sun set once more behind a cluster of green hills. But not today. The clouds had covered the spectacular view as rain began to pour.

Rowan cursed under her breath as she lifted the hatch. Once inside the nest, she took out the cloak from her sack, setting it out to dry. The slab of salted pork the quartermaster had provisioned her and the other sentries appeared edible enough. Washing the seawater off the meat with the contents of her waterskin, Rowan munched quietly, never bothering to bolt the hatch.

#

Night came, and the watchtower swayed gently in the storm, the torch above the hatch flickering even with four walls surrounding its flame. Rowan pulled the hood of her cloak down further, but still, rain seemed to find its way onto her face. She debated hunching below the walls of the tower, but this was her post. She had one job... *watch the coast*.

An uneasy task, but simple enough. She’d never admit it, but Rowan feared every night spent in the tower. Time to time, sentries would go unaccounted for, only tattered bits of bloody cloak littering the nest. Some said it was the Patraean Guard, leaving a faux crime scene to keep the other sentries focused on the job at hand. But the Arahuaac knew better, as well as Varran. One drunken

night, he’d told her how he’d raised the alarm years before.

*That night was a haze. Viscid bodies, naked, slithering like fish across the black of the sea until they made it ashore. Then, the dregs were standing on two legs with webbed feet. When they blotched out the torches, I sounded the alarm, left the tower... and ran.*

It was bad enough for pirates to be a constant threat along their shores, but it was the dregs that presented the real threat. Pirates were merely hungry for riches, but the dregs...they were hungry for flesh, caring for little else.

The next morning, Dross had sent a patrol out to the nearest Arahuaac village, one of the two remaining on the island. They found it in a ruinous state, and its people...nowhere to be found, save for the stains of dried blood and gnawed pieces of bone left behind.

Leaving their craggy islands solely for mating season, the dregs sought out copious amounts of sustenance before proceeding with their monstrous orgies, eating anything soft enough to tear away with tooth or claw.

*They live simple lives, Varran had told her. Eat, mate, sleep, repeat. Not too bad if you ask me.*

Rowan concurred with her companion’s assessment. Life as a dreg would be much simpler, but a tad uncomfortable for her liking.

*Watch the coast*, the words of Captain Dross echoing in her mind. He’d told all the newcomers the same thing on their first day, along with their duties and island law. But when he’d said, “*Watch the coast*,” he’d been looking straight at her, as if he could see the fear hiding behind her eyes. She’d taken an immediate disliking to the man, along with his loyal subordinate Major Bren, always close by, awaiting the captain’s beck and call.

Rowan turned her gaze as the last of the Arahuaac disappeared from view, spotting the faint outcrop of the watchtower closest to her. If not for the soft glow of the torches lining the shore, the other watchtower would be lost to the night. After her first five days of sentry-duty, Rowan had

memorized every landmark in sight. With mounds and hills of rainforest blocking her view, the only other signs of life were the sentry in the tower next over—Varran’s tower. Aside from local wildlife, and Varran, only the Arahuac made themselves known, fishing on their tiny rafts up and down the coast, spearing for mackerel, and keeping the torches lit at night, once, being the lone counter-measure against the dregs. Inland, smoke from the mining camp and barracks could be seen, but that was it. The constant sign of *human* life was a comfort, small as it was.

Taking the torch from its mount, she signed to Varran, “Freezing?” The two had created their own language with the wave of their torches, practicing in camp when their ration of grog ran dry.

“Balls are frozen,” he replied with the fire. “Will die soon.”

Rowan grinned and waved her torch some more.

“Don’t need balls. Too ugly to have children.”

“Can’t afford them anyways,” Varran replied before his torch disappeared.

Rowan put hers back as well. Lonely as it was on the island, she counted herself lucky to have Varran nearby. A Hipani fisherman by trade, he’d seen combat against the Anukai in the Ring of Fire, had survived a raid by the *hooved folk*, and had fought alongside Patraean and Hipani soldiers alike against the invading forces of Jarmanna. He may have boasted he was no great warrior whilst speaking of his combat experience, but Rowan suspected the man harbored *some* amount of skill with the ax he carried. *Luck*, Varran had called it, but it couldn’t have always saved his life. No one was *that* lucky.

Rowan had taken the posting on Phaiial Island, despite the horrors dwelling within the inner cluster of the archipelago. It was good pay, and experience had taught her to bet on herself rather than turn and run simply because of the rumors, superstitions, and fears of others. She was making her own way, and in time, she would see her brothers once again. No longer would they see Rowan the Bastard, but Rowan the Spicer.

She chuckled at the thought of their stunned looks when she’d arrive on their doorstep in a garb

of rich Hipani silk, jewels glowing from the many rings adorning her fingers, and white pearls sparkling across her chest from the depths of the Aleyean Sea. Then, there was lightning, and she saw *it* slithering through the waves... directly toward her.

“Rub your eyes you tired fool,” she muttered, and did as she scolded herself. She pinched a forearm as she saw the shape again, ashamed of her own paranoia. When she looked again, still it came.

Its body glistened against the soft light from the shoreline, and she began crossing off the things of it what it could be.

*Crocodile*, most likely. With the dark body, and ridges of spikes quivering above the darkened water, she breathed a deep sigh of relief as its long snout became more visible the closer it came to shore. It wasn’t until it reached the sand that the torches began to disappear.

#

Rowan was panicking.

Five torches were out near Varran’s tower. It wasn’t out of the ordinary, but five?

*A wave mayhap*, Rowan tried to convince herself, but it did little good in quenching her fear.

She waved her torch at Varran.

“Ring bell?” she signaled.

There was no reply. But perhaps he didn’t see her, so she signaled again.

Still nothing.

“Oh gods,” she whimpered, and watched in terror as another torch disappeared, then the ones on either side.

*Please*, she prayed, not to any god in particular, just to those that might be listening. *Please*, she begged for her life.

Rowan looked toward the bell. Reaching the rope, she gripped it hard and then... footsteps.

*The hatch!*

Letting go of the rope, Rowan all but dove to the hatch as the footsteps clamored up the ladder. Whatever it was had no fear of heights as well, and obviously... no fear of her.

Just as her hand touched the bolt, the hatch came open.

Rowan fell on her backside and began scooting against the wall. She might’ve screamed if her

lungs had allowed her, but as the dark figure came into view, she saw the bearded face of Varran.

His eyes open wide, for a moment he said nothing, just stared at Rowan as he tried to find the words. Then, pulling himself inside, Varran shut the hatch.

Outside, Rowan noticed the rain had stopped, the wind turning into a silent breeze as the storm subsided. But Rowan's world was anything but calm.

Seeing the torch, Varran poured the rest of Rowan's waterskin over the flames until the only light was that of far-off stars and the continuing flash of lighting moving further and further into the east.

"They're coming," he began, breathing heavily as he poked his head over the walls of the nest down below. "Coming down the coast... I saw 'em from the torch-line, hundreds swimming from the east. More than before," and he shook his head, as if to erase what he'd seen. "They'll overrun the *entire* island."

Rowan stood then as she came to grasp the situation. "Then we ring the bell."

Varran grabbed her hand. "If you do, then we die."

"We c—" she stuttered, then looked at the hatch. "We bolt the hatch once the bell is rung."

"That," Varran gestured, "Will not stop them. They won't just *kill you*, Rowan. They will eat you *alive*."

Rowan held up her hands, defeated. "Then what?" she asked.

"We stay low, we stay quiet. We can't alert the camp and hope to live unless we *reach* the camp."

Shaken at the choices before her, Rowan argued, "They'll hang us for cowards... for leaving our posts... for not sounding the bells."

"Then we don't go back," Varran said, searching Rowan's eyes for her approval. "The Arahuc have rafts hidden away in the forest. We take one, and we leave this island behind."

"What of the others?" asked Rowan, but she knew.

Varran shrugged his shoulders. "The gods will decide," he said.

"Alright," said Rowan, and she wiped her tears away.

She hoped the tears were for her friends asleep in the barracks, and the dozens of poor miners in their tents, but as she climbed down the ladder after Varran, she realized it was because she was so, so afraid of dying.

It was either stay and be eaten alive, face the gallows, or flee for their lives. She was sure they'd settled on the most selfish option, but it was the option where they were most likely to keep their hide.

Opening the hatch, they climbed down.

Then, as Varran neared the end of the ladder, he looked down and shouted as wet, stubby claws clenched around his calves, pulling him beneath the waves.

#

Rowan jumped as the creatures huddled around Varran, but he managed to slip away as the dregs splashed about, flailing their claws wildly and snapping jaws where they thought their prey might be.

Rowan swam after him until they could both stand.

Stumbling as Rowan reached the shore, Varran pulled Rowan upward just as the two dregs came rushing into them. Knocked back down to the sand, Rowan looked up in a daze as one of the dregs came away with a small amount of flesh hanging from its jaws. The other was busy fighting to fit its teeth around Varran's neck.

Rowan searched for a weapon, *anything* to help her friend. Finding a rotten branch, she hurled it, watching as it bounced harmlessly off the back of the dreg still chewing its bloody bit of Varran.

The creature turned to face its attacker, screeching through fat jowls that hung loose as it came forth. Rowan screamed, and frantically began feeling the ground for something else to throw, but she came up with little more than sand spilling through her fingers.

She was sobbing now, helpless to do anything for Varran who lay there fighting for his life.

Seeing that fleeing may be her only option, Rowan was about to turn and run back down the trail to camp when the creature's next screech was cut short. The screech turned to a silent gurgle as Varran pulled his ax from the creature's neck. Bring-

ing the ax down a second time, he buried it atop its slimy, hairless skull.

Behind her savior, Rowan made out the other creature lying in the sand, its chest gently heaving in and out its last breaths as blood spewed from the ax wound in its large white belly.

It wailed once more in pain before Varran put the dreg out of its misery.

Exhausted, Varran didn't utter a word, but looked at the gash of flesh missing from the top of his left shoulder and fell to his knees.

"You're hurt," said Rowan.

"I'm still alive," Varran told her, and coughed. Catching his breath, he picked himself up, grabbed the shocked Rowan by her hand, and led them into the jungle.

With little light to guide the way, the two sentries ran into webs, banana palms, and ferns, constantly swiping at the space in front of them, all but blind. Dark as it was, Varran never once seemed to lose his way.

"How do you know the way from here?" she asked wiping water and sweat from her face. Both were drenched from the passing storm and jungle humidity.

"General direction," he told her, "and from hunting. Not much luck though. When the Patraean Guard opened the mine, they all but hunted and trapped the island out."

After some time, they entered a clearing.

"*They're not here,*" Varran said, clearly distressed. He wandered around the clearing where large branches lay scattered about, moving them in a hurry, finding nothing underneath. Then, burying his mouth into the ground to muffle the sound, he screamed his frustrations. "Gods! No! No, no, no!"

Standing in place, Rowan wasn't ready to give up just yet.

"Varran, are we near the beach still?" she asked him.

Wiping his mouth, Varran looked at her, defeated. "It doesn't matter, they're gone. Not one raft left behind."

"But the camp has boats. And the ship lies anchored in the harbor."

Varran looked back to the ground. "We'd need men to move one of the boats from camp, and the

ship... even more men for that. We'd be forced to raise the alarm."

*As we should have done,* thought Rowan, but it was far too late for that. There'd be plenty of time for regrets later.

"We *must* be closer to camp than the nearest tower, no?" she asked Varran.

"I've no loyalty to the Patraean Guard, Rowan. If you go, you'll be going alone. I mean to save my *neck* as well as my hide... what's left of it anyways. I'll be checking the Arahuc village for a raft... in case they left one behind."

She stared at him for a moment, then said, "You saved my life, Varran. Get out of here alive, will you? Find me in Nisaar if I'm not swinging from a rope come the morrow," and meant it.

He nodded his head, not saying a word as he clutched his bleeding shoulder.

As Varran turned to leave, Rowan called after him, "One more thing... point which way camp is."

#

Rowan made it halfway before the bells from the camp began to ring.

Climbing over the wooden stakes located at the northernmost of the camp's stockade, she landed gracefully, observing the hysteria before her. She watched as miners, and the men and women of the Patraean Guard ran about, looting tents, grabbing weapons, and supplies.

Near the barracks, Captain Dross barked orders at a small group of men wielding pikes and short swords. They rushed through the make-shift gate heading toward the beach, in the direction of Rowan's tower. Dross spotted her then.

"Sentry!" he called out.

She jogged over to the flustered man, his long hair unkempt, not tied back as it was usually fashioned. He gripped a longsword with a tight fist. The way he was glaring down at her, Rowan wasn't so sure she'd live past the next few seconds. But the strike never came.

"In the morning... you'll be swinging from the gallows," he growled.

"Varran witnessed hundreds coming down the coast. *We need* to get everyone off the island."

Dross scowled at her, and asked, "And where

is Varran?"

"He was killed," she lied. "Trying to warn me."

Dross considered this. "A lesser coward he might be. You and two others have returned. Not *one* of you sounded the alarm. You ran... all of you... the rest were killed at their posts."

"Captain, we need to get the men on boats," she reasoned, but Dross ignored her as his mind was lost in thought.

"They'll be headed to the Arahuac village first, they've raided them before," Dross muttered to himself. He turned then, addressing the young major behind him.

"Major Bren!"

"Sir," acknowledged Bren, and he stood to attention, though Rowan could see his eyes wandering to the madness around them. He was scared shitless.

"We're getting out of here. See to it that two boats are taken to the eastern shore," Dross looked back to Rowan, "and *arrest* this woman, along with the other two sentries that *abandoned* their posts."

Once he'd finished tying the cord around Rowan's wrists in the place of shackles, Bren turned his attention back to Dross.

"Captain, it is my duty to inform you that the other two sentries have abandoned the camp as well, taking their leave over the palisade... Dubs saw them." Bren gestured to Dubs, a good-natured lad, but Rowan didn't figure he possessed the soundest of minds, based on what she'd seen. The boy had been lashed only a week prior for sleeping on duty beside the gate.

Dubs nodded his head furiously, "Aye sir, saw 'm boys runnin' hard through the jungle I did."

"Never mind then," Dross waved a hand, "They're headed in the wrong direction anyhow. The dregs will see to it that justice is done."

"As for the coward," he turned to face Rowan. "You'll face the gallows alone when we reach land."

Then, Dross took Bren to the side and began to whisper.

Bren left soon after, returning within a few minutes. There was blood on his hands...and he



Curving Unicorn by Angela K. Scott

carried a small chest.

Rowan knew exactly what the chest contained.

Every month, Dross and the mining chief met with Hipani merchants on Phai'al's beaches, and near her tower of all places. From the watchtower, the contents of the chest gleamed bright, leaving little to the imagination of what it could be.

Reaching into the chest, Dross attempted to make the action of snatching a diamond out and placing it in Bren's coat pocket appear inconspicuous, being anything but. Aside from Rowan, Varran, Dross, and the mining chief, not another soul knew what lay hidden inside.

Dross stuffed the chest inside of a sack, tying the end off with cord.

Then, somebody screamed.

#

Dregs began hurdling over the walls as Dross rushed after his men, already well on their way to the eastern shore. Bren ran after their captain, with Dubs and Rowan close behind. Dubs tripped in the pursuit and Rowan hopped over his body just as several of the creatures came rushing to Dubs' side. Rowan didn't bother to look back. His cries ceased seconds later.

*Lucky*, Rowan thought. If there hadn't been so much to feed on, the dregs may have taken their time. On the contrary, Phai'al Island was littered with food, currently running for their lives in the

jungle, or fool enough to try and remain hidden in the mine, or the barracks. Rowan knew by reputation, the dregs would scour the island for every last morsel they could find.

Rowan kept her distance from Dross and the others, crouching along as the miners and Patraean Guard grunted, pulling the skiffs by ropes fastened to their bodies as fast and silent as they could muster. She could see their shadows through the faint starlight, unsure when or if to approach the party. Escape with the others or stay on the island... each choice would lead to her death. For the moment, she kept her distance as the screams and moans from camp became distant. That, or the dregs had devoured the survivors.

Sneaking further away from camp, Rowan growled as she bit at the cords binding her wrists. Tearing them free, she spit the loose cord to the jungle floor.

Other sounds came from camp now, that of the dregs, their screeches coming close to unison, like a pack of wolves howling at the moon, and their tone... full of pleasure. Rowan didn't have to guess what was happening then, she knew for certain. The dregs had begun mating. Soon enough, they would nest, and do so before the next full moon's turn, keeping their eggs hidden from the sun, buried deep within the sand and caves of the island.

Varran had explained this to her as well.

*They will roll their eggs to these very beaches when it comes time to hatch. Hideous as their sires, the pups will venture out to sea, preying upon anything and everything. Once sated, they will follow the adults back to the islands they call home.*

He hadn't told her what might happen if the dregs chose to remain on Phaial Island, but it was just as well that he hadn't. Rowan could not imagine Patraea's investment of the island going to waste. No. They would storm the island by force, hacking and burning their way across until all the creatures either perished under the sword, or fled.

As the first skiff made it to the water's edge, Rowan crept forward on all fours, hiding behind a cluster of ferns. She stood then, her mind made

up. The gallows appeared a cleaner death than suffering the fate of Dubs, or the other poor bastards she'd heard eaten alive this night. With some luck, her neck would have a clean break. A sharp, *clean* death. If not, Rowan had seen what becomes of those who swing a bit longer, gasping for breath until the end. Regardless, it remained the better of the options.

Emerging from the jungle, strong hands grasped her mouth, pulling her back into ferns.

Rowan fought her assailant, kicking her legs wildly about, using all her strength to squirm free. Surpassing the urge to scream, she tried to open her mouth to bite, but the hand was pressed too tightly to her lips.

Pinning her to the ground with a knee, a familiar voice whispered through the darkness.

"You're not dead yet," Varran said. "Keep your silence a while longer and we'll come out of this breathing yet. Watch, our salvation comes snarling down the coast."

#

Major Bren turned in time to see the snarling jaws of the dreg before taking him to the ground. He shrieked then, begging for help as the others became aware of what was happening.

Chaos ensued.

Dross yelled at the others to repel the attack, but his orders fell on deaf ears as they screamed for their lives. Already, two more of their number lay in the sand with jaws sucking at their necks with a starving ferocity.

From their place behind the ferns, Rowan and Varran watched the onslaught of their former comrades. They watched as Bren reached out a hand at Dross as the dreg on top of him lapped the blood leaking from his neck.

He said something to the captain, a plea for help Rowan figured.

Then, the point of Dross's saber was poking through the dreg's face, and for a moment, Rowan thought it may still attack as it flailed its arms about in panic. But Dross pulled his sword free, bringing the blade upward as the dreg turned to face him, dark blood streaming from the empty socket where a golden eye had been only a moment before. Dross brought his blade downward.

Roaring in fury, he slashed across the creature's chest.

Falling back onto the sand, the dreg rubbed at the long gash with webbed hands before feeling around its empty eye socket, as if it'd expected to find its eye back in place.

Rowan wondered what it might be thinking then. Perhaps it was in silent prayer now, pleading with whatever kind of horrendous deity to heal its wounds, so that it may pop up from the sand, rejuvenated, still hungry, prepared to mate with its tribe after it'd gorged itself on flesh and blood. But it'd never get the chance.

Dross stood over the dreg, and brought his blade down again, again, and again, until he was satisfied. The remaining dreg was hunched over one of the dead miners, greedily suckling blood through an open wound where claws had opened the stomach. Casually, Dross strode over behind the dreg and removed its head with a single swipe of his sword.

He looked about then, dropping his sword when he noticed Bren's lifeless corpse on the sand. Rushing over, Dross fell to his knees, cradling Bren's head in his lap. He sobbed gently as he shook Bren's neck, but never woke.

Rowan realized then Dross hadn't just lost an officer of the Patraean Guard, or a friend, but possibly more than that. And for the slightest moment, the man who'd condemned her to death, who she'd seen subjugate the men and women under his command with such cruelty, appeared as human as ever... and at his weakest.

A moment later Rowan was standing. Marching her way across the beach, she aimed toward Dross's back, whose attention was busy staring out across an ocean of endless black.

Rowan picked up a cutlass from the sand, dropped in panic by one of those who'd run off. She was no swordsman, but the weight felt good as she gripped the hilt tight. As she neared the captain, Rowan played back the grisly scene from that morning. She remembered the islander's screams, Bren's arm jerking forward, causing the lash to snap as it tore away flesh, and Dross, counting out each strike.

The islander had been but one of many. Now

here she found herself in a most fortuitous situation, blade in hand, and the man who'd carried out each sentence with a passion that saw pleasure trump over duty... kneeling before her. The same man who'd sentenced her to die. Corrupt, vile, greedy, but not heartless so it seemed.

Dross hung his head in sorrow, peering down at the lifeless body, and sobbed harder. He stroked the side of Bren's cheek with the back of his hand, oblivious of the world around him, the waves crashing in the background, and the woman with her sword raised high.

"Oi!" Rowan shouted, enough time for Dross to jerk his neck slightly before she swung.

Rowan wasn't sure if he ever saw her through his peripherals. She'd swung too early, having meant for the two of them to share a last glance before taking his head. She'd wanted the bastard to know who'd done it.

She told herself then that it was for all the men and women who'd suffered the hardships of their labors under the iron thumb and lash of Dross. But in truth, she *knew* she'd killed the man out of her own desire. Perhaps the lie would help her sleep better at night, and in time, she'd come to believe it, it didn't matter. What *did* matter was Rowan still found herself breathing.

Rowan watched as Dross's head rolled across the sand, until the tide washed in, taking the head out to sea.

"Come on!" Varran called after her, already in the boat Dross's men had pulled into the water.

Rowan averted her attention at the small fish who'd found Dross's drifting head, pecking at it with a covetous hunger and found Varran. She raced toward the boat, tossing the cutlass inside as she threw herself over the gunwale.

Varran handed her an oar.

"Row!" he exclaimed, his eyes darting from Rowan to the beach as the agonizing wails of a man died away and the screeches of the dreg intensified.

Rowan did as she was bid.

The two of them rowed until the stars no longer illuminated the outlines of Phaial Island. They rowed east, toward the shores of Hipani.

"With some luck, we'll make it in three days,"

Varran assured her as morning dawned on the horizon. A red sky began to paint the sea around them, and for the first time since they'd climbed into the boat, Rowan set her oar down to rest and sighed.

"No food, no water... three days isn't so bad. I've been without them for longer," Varran said.

Watching his face contort, Rowan saw as Varran looked toward the bow, his eyes squinting as if he wasn't sure what he was looking at.

"A sack I think?" Varran said aloud.

Rowan's expression turned to surprise, nearly gasping at what she saw.

Standing up too fast, the boat wobbled a bit as she made her way toward the bow, grunting as she heaved the sack upward with both hands. Pulling the chest out from the sack, Rowan undid the latch.

"Ghyrzia's tits," Rowan muttered.

"Not tits, a chest," Varran replied, eyeing the chest of diamonds until he couldn't resist it any longer. Taking a handful of the diamonds, he let them fall between his fingers until he'd found a stone so large that it could fit into the palm of his hand.

As Varran whooped and hollered, praising their good fortune, Rowan looked toward the cutlass, hoping Varran hadn't noticed her do so. She stood then, moving herself to the back of the boat, as near as she could get to the cutlass.

Varran had saved her life, it was true enough, but with a chestful of diamonds between the two of them now, what was her life worth to him? She could only guess.

Finally, Varran sat down, and when he did, she thought she saw him glance at the floorboards behind her. Hanging at his hip, Rowan couldn't help but eye the ax, the handle knocking against the wood each time the boat rocked, as if it were begging to be set free once more.

*Gods* she wanted to trust him.

"Three days and we're both rich, forever," she said, keeping a friendly smirk across her lips.

"Three days," Varran agreed, and began packing the chest back into the sack. Then, he tossed the large diamond he'd been palming toward Rowan.

She caught it with her body, arching back as the white stone rolled down from her neck until

she cupped it with her hands.

"If this is some sort of proposal, you'll need a bigger diamond," Rowan said, chuckling to herself as she held the diamond up, trying to catch the light with it.

"And what if it is?" Varran asked, as serious as he could make himself sound.

Rowan took her eyes away from the diamond until she found Varran's.

"What?" she asked him, not believing she heard him correctly.

"*What*, wasn't the answer I was hoping for but... you think on it. Three days is a good while. With a bit of luck, the sun will be beating so fierce that you'll become delirious enough to say yes."

Rowan laughed.

"It was me taking off Dross's head, wasn't it?" and she slapped her knees at that, but he didn't laugh.

"No, lass."

"Well, it damn sure wasn't when you left me there in the dark, while you went runnin' off."

"I never left you. I followed you. Wouldn't be no good if Dross had executed both of us on the spot. I had to be sure I could get you out of there if it came down to it. Luckily, he was fool enough to make your death a public sentence. To the gallows was it then?"

"Aye," she said, surprised at every word that'd come pouring from his mouth.

"I couldn't let that happen," Varran said, patting the head of his ax. "I'll protect ya... as I've done so far. Besides, I'm a rich man."

He'd warned her, before all others, he'd left his post to see her safe. Then, he'd killed for her, losing a chunk from the top of his shoulder for his troubles. Rowan couldn't deny the man was committed to her, before she'd ever known it.

Suddenly, she tossed him back the diamond, chuckling as Varran barely kept the rock from bouncing overboard as it hit him in the chest.

Rowan smiled at him then, and for the first time, felt like she truly saw him for the courageous man he was.

"Like you say, three days," but she already knew the answer she would give him.

The wind blew in from the south then, and Rowan moved the long, black strands of hair covering

her face before gazing at the sky.

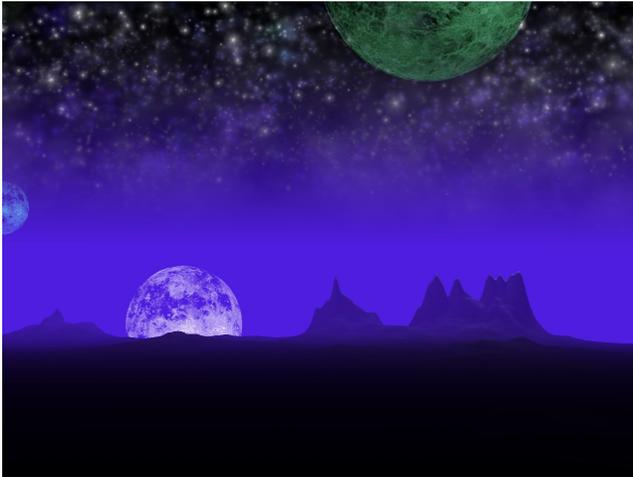
Dark clouds were moving in.

The boat rocked as the waves grew restless, and Rowan wasted no time in putting her oar back into the water. Varran did the same. Small raindrops had begun to fall, and at the same instance thunder rumbled quietly in the distance, accompanied by the ominous flash of lightning behind a thick wall of clouds.

Rowan and Varran continued on their way, exhausted, but alive.

Rowan pulled her oar with a new determination. Together, they would reach the shores of Hipani. Making it off the island had proven that much to her. And as the sound of thunder grew closer, and a bolt of lightning cracked, lighting the sky and sea, Rowan had little doubt.

They would brave the storm... but there'd be no outrunning it.



Three Moon Night by Tiffanie Gray

## Poem

Jean-Paul L. Garnier

reluctant spacemen  
leaving Earth against their will  
off to space prison

Second Prize in the N3F Short Story Contest

## The Last Debebolan Marathon By Charles Walter

August 9, 2944 19:53 UTC 11:00 Denebolan Local

“Breathe in the bright, sharp tang of what passes for the Denebolan atmosphere, if you can, Kevin.” Scott Langford said to me. “Oh yeah, that’s right, you’ve been breathing it for the past year. Easy to get confused with that Capellan singlet you’re wearing. You don’t spend much time there. They didn’t have anywhere there you could train?”

No, they didn’t, not for a race like this, which Scott knew, and is why he teased me endlessly. Where I grew up there was actually real atmospheric pressure. You didn’t have to worry about vomiting, confusion, headaches, lack of cognitive function. Fun stuff. You did on Denebola, so obviously home wasn’t the place to train for the Olympic Marathon, held on the course of the annual Denebolan Marathon.

Scott had been my best friend for years, since college, before the war, or really before the war had been a concern. So it was natural we would train together, his comments about which Earth colony I really preferred aside.

A snide voice spoke, off to the side. “Capella had no one better to send than you? At least I can cross them off.” That was Curtis Jackson, the top marathoner in the Earth Federation for the past several years in fact. “It’s kind of sad considering what’s at stake here. Why even bother?”

“Nice to see you too, Jackson,” Scott said, as he placed his arm around my shoulders and gently led me away. It was a wide starting line; where we were didn’t matter. “We’re running together, right, as long as it makes sense?”

I nodded. It wasn’t an actual question. We needed to do well; our worlds needed to do well. The last Olympics had been canceled, and before then, Earth hadn’t been destroyed yet, so they tended to dominate these proceedings. Now it was just thirty runners from the colonies. Some of my family had emigrated from Earth when I was in my early teens. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here either.

Jackson was here from Altair. They were our strongest competitor, and he was mine. Long and lean, with a grace approaching breathtaking, running came naturally to him. The stakes what they were, he'd already won the 10000 and 5000 meter races this week. I wondered what he'd have left, and what tricks he would try this time.

The gun went off, and I avoided the inevitable urge for the sprint start. I'd tapered my training for three weeks. Now my body overflowed with energy desperate to be spent. There'd be time for it for sure. Scott and I tucked in near the back and let the nervous rhythm of the race carry us along.

#

August 9, 2944 19:58 UTC 11:05 Denebolan Local

The race had started on the University of Gernersheim's track, rapidly progressing to the connecting road to the colony capital, Caravaggio. I focused on the adjoining farmland and how strange it seemed, Earthlife crops alongside the native Denebolan fauna, prized for being nutrient-rich. As I expected, I smelled the camataj, the Denebolan superfruit, its intense sweet aroma penetrating directly to my olfactory cortex.

I was ravenously hungry, and yet I knew it was a mirage. Almost everyone on Denebola understood it too, but only intellectually, so the colony featured an 87% obesity rate. On Capella, the problem was the opposite. You had to stuff your face with the native food to receive any nutrition whatsoever. Once I'd taken up athletics I'd learned to avoid the stuff. I needed my glycogen fuel, but at this moment I didn't need to eat to receive it. The tablets I'd ingested right before the race were custom-designed to directly deliver glycogen at pre-defined intervals over the next 2 hours and 15 minutes, gradually increasing in intensity as my need grew.

Scott and I still sat in 7th and 8th place. I glanced over at him, and as usual in races envied his bald head, which was an idea I refused to entertain. Instead, my unruly blonde locks required a hat to stay in place and keep the sweat from my eyes. He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. I held my hand out in a stop motion. It was too early. We still needed to run our own pace. The urgency the runners ahead of us were feeling due to

the race importance wouldn't make them any faster over 26.2 miles, probably the opposite. Gimmicks and games never worked in the marathon. You respect her, she'll give you the result your training earned. You underestimate her, well, you pay.

Two years ago the Vena conquered the human race, betraying and destroying the remainder of the Earth fleet arrayed in formation for a peace conference where the Earth Prime Minister stood prepared to humiliate himself to end the war. Some athletes I know from Eridani said one ship survived and escaped there, where it fought its way to freedom. I'm not sure what to think about that. The Eridani colony has been known for its conspiracy theories for quite a while. Why propagate false hope? It was far better we accepted the universe for what it was. The human race, which numbered 4 billion before the war, now stood at 650 thousand and on the decline as the Vena looked for more excuses to perform summary execution. If our singing abilities, far more advanced than their own didn't amuse them, I'm not sure what would motivate them to let us live, let alone stage an Olympics for our own entertainment.

#

August 9, 2944 20:23 UTC 11:30 Denebolan Local

The miles went by without significance - 5, 6, 7, 8, which was a good thing. I shouldn't feel any stress until the 15th, except for my right ankle of course. That was a given. It'd been hurting off and on the past year or so. Before the war it was an easy fix, but now, medical services weren't quite as advanced as they'd once been.

I'd been offered a pain-blurring drink at the start, which of course has been quite legal for centuries, but the price is it blurs the mind as well. At least it's done that to me in the past. I'd been told it was all in my head, but it was my head after all, and I possessed limited ability to change it. Pain meant I was alive I told myself to try and feel all tough, but it was all about my ego, as most things usually were. I thought I could do just as well without, and given the race significance, it'd make a better story. So with each step it throbbed rhythmically, an old friend by this point.

The best doctors my colony could supply told me the issue was pain management. Running on it wouldn't risk any more damage. It was the same with my heartache. My cousin Nessa had been more of a sister than a cousin to me, so her recent death still sat heavy on my heart, the pain punctuated with anger because it wasn't necessary. It certainly wasn't necessary to provoke that Vena, but even so, if she'd gone to a doctor, she might have survived. If I'd been on-planet I would have taken her myself. Instead, my pleas rang empty across the intervening light-years.

In her memory I was running this. I'm much more suited for the 10000, or even the half-marathon, but my colony wasn't deep in this event, so I volunteered. Why not? The colony that won the Olympics earned a special prize. Sometimes Scott and I would have a few synthetic adult drinks, and speculate wildly regarding said prize, but we really had no hints. Mainly we worried about what would happen to the losers. He said Denebola had a Plan B if things went really poorly, but it was a secret. It couldn't be that great of a plan, because if they had some hidden offensive capability, they were derelict in not using it yet. I hoped he was right, because they'd been mathematically eliminated the previous evening.

While I reminisced, runners started dropping back, unable to sustain their optimistic early pace. We were in 3rd and 4th now, a point Scott made with his fingers. I nodded and smiled. Damned if I would run someone else's race. I knew my capabilities.

#

August 9, 2944 20:43 UTC 11:50 Denebolan Local

Mile 12 flew by, and I realized I'd been humming softly to myself for the last few minutes, a popular song from my teen years, a heartfelt ballad about unrequited love, at 140 beats per minute. Well, anything to give me energy and pump my heart, although it seemed quite unnecessary now. We saw the outskirts of metro Caravaggio, the road beginning to be lined with imported pine trees, more of a status symbol than anything else, but their appearance meant the halfway point was near, which meant the third aid station, where Ra-

chel Darnell would staff the Denebolan table. Talk about heart-pumping.

We'd met the year before the Earth was destroyed. Isn't that the start of all classic love stories? I was a nobody; she was my pastor. I found myself drawn to her instantly, her voice, her hair, her sermons, her innocent poise, completely unaware of the impact she had on men. It seemed there might be mutual interest, but I backed off. What if she said no? Would I still feel comfortable in the community with the sting of rejection, even though no one would know? What if she said yes? Could I handle that public a relationship? That wasn't a big draw, to be honest, but it was ironic, fear of being a public figure, when now I was an Olympian carrying the hopes and dreams of my colony. Ah, there she was smiling, the warmth enveloping me. I wasn't sure if this was good for my cause, but there'd only be time for a quick interaction.

"Kevin, you look strong," she said. "Miguel and Jackson are a minute ahead of you, but if Miguel can't win you need to finish third."

I grabbed the drink from her, and looked back. "So no pressure now. I'm trying. This is hard." Then I took a sip, pulled off my cap, and poured the rest over my head. It was cold, but I just didn't care. I was halfway done, I was where I needed to be, and I was feeling fine. Physically fine. I started humming childhood tunes again to clear my head. Scott looked completely focused. Maybe he hadn't noticed?

"Well Kevin, I see you have some other perks on the line. Does she have a friend?"

He saw. So be it. It's not like I didn't have years' worth of his buttons to push if I so chose.

#

August 9, 2944 21:08 UTC 12:15 Denebolan Local

"Caravaggio City Limits" read the sign, just a few hundred yards after the 16-mile marker. Nessa and I visited here before the war. It'd be great to have her in the crowd, but I knew even if she hadn't been caught hiding an antique revolver (it was *unloaded* for God's sake!), it would have been unlikely. Travel between colonies was highly regulated now, the Capellan contingent at these games consisting exclusively of those on-planet when we

lost the war, athletes and training staff, and those lucky few like Rachel with the eminence necessary to score support roles. We lived and died at the whims of a hostile race.

Instinctively I looked sideways, expecting to find barriers with fans running alongside for a few hundred yards or following for longer distances on hoverboards. Remnants of the past, I told myself. The Vena allowed just enough spectators to fill the stadium. Now looking behind I could see no one in hot pursuit. The loneliness of the diminishing countryside washed over me.

The leaders would be just one minute ahead, which at these speeds would be three hundred meters. There was a straight segment ahead after a sharp left-hand curve. Three hundred meters? I'd be able to see that. Hold on one minute. Slowly I counted. One, one thousand, two, one thousand... Yeah, I saw them, just about to make their own turn. Then Miguel went down, bracing the fall with his left hand and right knee. What in the world? He rolled over and tried to stand, but soon collapsed. He needed help, but there was no one else around.

Scott held out his hands, palms up. I motioned ahead with my index finger, and we picked up the pace. When we reached Miguel he bled from a small hole in his left hamstring. I bent down to aid him, but he pushed me off. "Go!" he said. "You have to. Careful..." He stopped and gulped. "He has a laser."

Scott looked back at him as we resumed our pace. "We'll let them know!" Yes, we would, but it was over ten minutes to the next aid station. A laser weapon! It was illegal for a human to be armed. We weren't even allowed a knife to eat with outside the home. I'd been scanned. So had everyone else. I shook my head, overflowing with thoughts of accusations and conspiracy. How? Why? I counted to ten and kept going. Best to focus on what I could control.

#

August 9, 2944 21:23 UTC 12:30 Denebolan Local

We pressed forward with an added sense of urgency. It shouldn't have been possible. Here we were competing in the Olympics, with real if mad-deningly unstated stakes at play for our home colo-

nies. Over the years I'd listened to countless motivational speakers opine on how to give more than 100%. I wasn't an analytical sort, but that always seemed unrealistic to me. Everyone was forced to achieve some math fluency, which seemed a waste of my time, but if I hadn't, I wouldn't know about asymptotes, which seemed more appropriate. The destruction of the Earth left me one of the top ten distance runners (among humanity) in the Universe (yes, I'm humble), but I'd never credit myself with 100% effort. The closest I got, well, that's why my ankle throbs to this day (Jackson still won), and that's why I started to stumble half a mile outside the aid station. C'mon Kevin, you know how to power through. I took slow, deep breaths, adjusted my stride, and settled back into gear. It hurt. It usually did, but I couldn't rest it for half an hour.

When he noticed me struggling, Scott took off with an exaggerated burst, then slowed while I pulled even. "Can you blame me?" he asked. "I need to open a gap somewhere to avoid your vaunted kick." I sighed melodramatically. We'd probably have to challenge each other before the day was through, but at this point it was far better for us both to run side-by-side.

We approached the final aid station, at mile 22. The Capellan representative was Eduardo Martinez, a high-ranking diplomat who'd been one year ahead in school. His hair was prematurely gray at the temples. At least I hoped it was prematurely. Were we really that old?

"Where's Miguel," he asked, forehead scrunched in concern. No, I didn't expect to be the first Capellan competitor he saw, either. Jackson could make his jabs, but I was well aware my role here was originally secondary.

"Hurt, three miles back," I said as I grabbed a water bottle and accelerated away. "Needs urgent aid."

"You have to win now, Kevin! He's 70 seconds ahead, but he doesn't look good!" he shouted at me. 70 seconds, over 5 miles. Sure.

#

August 9, 2944 21:43 UTC 12:50 Denebolan Local

The course after the aid station immediately took a sharp turn. On one side, the Denebolan cap-

ital, on the other, a mine, originally used for copper, but trace heavy metals were found as well. In the pre-war years it had been the colony's top export.

I knew a little of the history because my father had been one of their prime customers. He was a chemical engineer working for the colonial government. I never knew exactly what he worked on, just he would stay in his lab and try combinations over, and over, and over again, gently tweaking his test's compositions the slightest bit, until he got the result he wanted. I'm sure all the success I've had derived from the training habits I picked up from him, but I've never been sure if it was just watching his meticulousness, slowly absorbing it into my system until it was a part of me, if it was part of me, or rather passed on through the man's genes. When the war started, he joined the military, and he was there that fateful day. This was for him as well, so wherever his soul now resided, he knew I was out here pursuing excellence in the name of Capella. I said a quick prayer, grateful he got to see the beginnings of the man I became, and not just the knuckleheaded teenager I'd once been.

No, I needed to try to win this. "Let's pick it up."

Scott shook his head while he grimaced. "Kevin, if I had any burst left, I really would have tried to leave you. My hip is locking up. Now all I can do is maintain. Tell me, do you feel strong?"

*Did I?* "Yes, now."

"Then good luck! I'll see you on the medal podium."

"Don't you get caught from behind."

"You saw Miguel. No one's getting near me 'til this is over."

I didn't know what else to say, so I patted him on the shoulder as I started to accelerate yet again.

"Kevin, watch out for that laser!" I heard as I pulled away. To the left was an Earthlife park through which led the stadium built at the initial colony landing site. To the right was the mine entrance. I'd read the heavy copper deposits shielded any surveillance attempts. Not surprisingly, it was a popular place for teenage trysts.

Digging down, I found my next gear, the one just below sprinting. I hurt. I also didn't care.

There wasn't a lot of time left, and I never knew how much I'd have left at this part. As I entered the park, the smell of Earth birds registered, a distraction. I didn't need distractions, so I closed my eyes, concentrated, and locked them out.

#

August 9, 2944 21:58 UTC 13:05 Denebolan Local

Dad had seen me to adulthood, but I'd lost Mom early on. I didn't remember her, but Dad couldn't forget. He never remarried, which made me an only child, which is why I'd been so grateful to have Nessa in my life, the sister of my heart. The last time I'd seen her, she'd taken me out dancing. First she prepared me though, for hours. It never made any sense to her how I could be a world-class athlete without any grace whatsoever. Eventually she declared me ready. Maybe I was, or maybe I'd just exhausted her patience.

My heart pounded, a little dangerously perhaps, a stitch appearing out of nowhere in my upper chest, but I kept ticking off the quarters, 1:07, 1:08, 1:06. Technology wasn't allowed at all on the course (how did he smuggle a blasted laser in?), but I'd practiced counting in my head plenty. The course curved through the side streets of the capital as I caught regular glimpses of Jackson. He wasn't close enough for me to identify precisely the landmarks he passed, but I gained with each count. The last I saw him, the gap couldn't have been more than 30 seconds, but now he was gone. The stadium loomed ahead, not far. Once I entered there would be a little more than two laps to complete on the track before the finish.

I started to sprint as I passed through the small archway marking the entrance to the stadium. Ten seconds, then I burst out into the open and a roar shot through the crowd. Jackson turned automatically, visibly angered. He was rocking side to side, either hurt or out of gas. I didn't care which. On my left I spotted the Capellan contingent, in yellow, standing and trying to will me home. On the other side those from Altair, in orange, hands across their face in disbelief. Everyone knew the stakes, at least as well as we knew them. Winning this race meant somewhat more than a prettier medal placed over your neck as you stood on top

of a podium while a song you've listened to your entire life played.

He was half a lap ahead of me when I hit the track. I started narrowing the gap immediately, as I felt the tension in the air. My ankle throbbed, who cared? I tasted iron in my mouth; had I bitten my tongue? 300 meters remained, then 250, 200, 150, before a few seconds later I came alongside on the curve to his right, but in the fourth lane to his first, remembering caution, knowing it sacrificed precious milliseconds. He leaned outward toward me, and I planted my left foot, then spun backward as he shot, harmlessly slicing the bunting that draped the side of the stadium.

#

August 9, 2944 22:03 UTC 13:10 Denebolan Local

I heard the crowd gasp as I broke free, but I couldn't see much rounding the final curve except the tape, so enticingly close. I bit down and tasted iron again. 100 meters remained, around 13 seconds now that I was in a full sprint, a little serpentine in case he tried again. I tried counting them in my head, but lost the count at 6.

A quick glance over my left shoulder. He was sprinting also, but leaning forward, his head dragging, so I turned back, brimming with renewed confidence. Two seconds later I heard a thud. He had fallen, or leaped, but I wouldn't get distracted and look. The crowd roared as I hit the tape and started to walk over to the Denebolan contingent in the stands, hoping to grab a flag. I'd be a hero now who saved my colony from whatever the Vena had planned.

I heard the announcement. "With this win by Kevin Hatch, the Capellan Colony are declared the winners of the 2944 Olympics, and will now receive their prize."

Rachel leaped from the stands, grinning widely as she ran to me, then fell lifelessly. The guards turned and started randomly but silently executing my countrymen. Some reward. I ducked my head, and ran out of the stadium, through the same archway I had entered just a few minutes ago focused on triumph. In the chaos I escaped, no plan in

mind, completely overcome with an emotion I couldn't yet process, and limping at half-speed.

Just about to enter the stadium in third place was Scott. Deep at his own red line of pain, he didn't notice me immediately. When he did, he raised an eyebrow.

"I won," I huffed. "So they're executing the Denebolan contingent. That's the damn prize. Can you believe that? I'm gonna fly now."

Scott stopped and sighed. "Come with me," he said, then took off in the opposite direction. I followed without question, the ability to reason struck in my shock and fatigue, knowing when I got a chance to rest and reflect, I'd be overwhelmed.

My aches were back, threefold now because I'd briefly stopped and let up mentally. "Slower, Scott."

"We can't."

We soon went off-road to avoid incoming runners, but headed straight for the mine.

"Where?" I asked, but he stopped me with a look. We slowed to a walk and stepped down to enter the mine, where he grabbed my hand. It was pitch black, but Scott appeared to know his way intimately.

After a few minutes, he stopped, leaned over, and lifted an entrance I couldn't see in the ground. Thin light drifted through from down below. It wasn't much, but it still blinded me. He put his hands on my shoulders then motioned for me to climb down the steps I could now barely make out.

"Go, and I'll follow," he said. "When the Vena check the cameras, they'll see I left the course. I can't risk returning."

I coughed as I stepped carefully downstairs, my legs leaden with overwork. "Sorry you won't get your medal, Scott."

"Sorry I didn't get to see you win the last Denebolan Marathon."

I turned back, apologetic. "Sorry I won."

He shook his head sadly. "Glad I didn't."

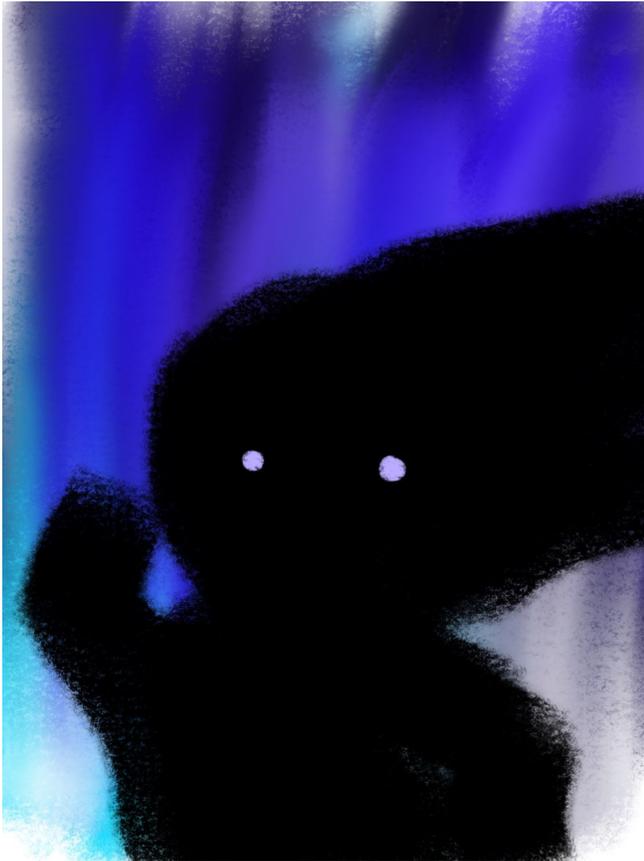
Shock was wearing off, and tears were starting to flow. "I'm glad you're my friend. That's the real prize."

"Yeah, me too."

"Are we safe here?"

"As safe as any humans can be in this universe, for a while, but this is where we stay. Everyone in

my colony who's needed to disappear is down here, flying under the radar. Remember, where there's life, there's hope."



Shadow Kid by Artist Fish

### Poem

Jean-Paul L. Garnier

granddad paradox  
my twin and I plan murder  
family tree mess

Third Prize in the N3F Short Story Contest

## Forged in Fire by J. L. Cook

Sweat trickles down between my shoulder blades soaking my already dirty tunic, but I'm nearly done with my current masterpiece. *Suck it up Kev and finish.* This beautiful short sword is perfectly balanced, which is to be expected of all my work. And the intricacies that you can see from the grip to the pommel will wow many a buyer but—it's the magically etched symbols along the fuller part of the blade that are what makes it so special.

I reach up and adjust the navy stretchy fabric that's wrapped around my head like a bandana covering my hair and tied at the back of my head. It serves two purposes—soaking up the sweat on my forehead while I forge in the fires of my father's workshop while also hiding my gender from the chauvinistic male dominated kingdom. I mean I'm not truly hiding my femme status it's just more beneficial to me to do so while working.

We get visitors frequently back in the workshop, so I like to always be on guard. I not only create most of the pieces here, but I also have to man the front desk of the shop. My father tends to get annoyed when I'm too focused on my work to deal with customers. I mean—I left a small sign up front telling them—*buy something or get out!* That's polite right? I could have just wrote leave me alone while I'm working.

I tend to be a bit... "prickly" as my father calls me. Other townspeople and customers would probably call me waspish or disagreeable. It's not that my father, who was once the best swordsmith in the kingdom, doesn't love me. He's just very blunt and honest however he does pick his words better than I do. I like to think of myself as passionate... perhaps fiery and intelligent? Nah—who am I kidding, I am prickly and irritable most of the time. But that's because people irritate me! Sometimes I feel like the whole kingdom has picked out everything about me and made it unsavory to possess.

For instance—being a woman here comes with

many connotations. You have to dress a certain way, talk a certain way and act a certain way as if we don't even have basic rights to our own body or personalities. Women also should be married by a certain age and definitely shouldn't have their own career or business. They have one purpose in life—marry and create a family, which is fine for many women. Nothing wrong with that, it's just not me. The fact that I work in my father's forge making weapons? Yeah—that's definitely outside of the expectancies of a woman's place. The fact that I'm better at forging than my father, a man, supposedly is inconceivable.

Try selling a sword or dagger that you spent days making only to have someone turn their nose up at the first sign you are a woman swordsmith. It's beyond frustrating...hence why I'm waspish. And— why I make an effort to conceal my gender when working in the shop. It's not hard since I'm usually covered in anvil dust and sweat. I just cut my hair a few months ago from a black wavy waist length to an easier shoulder length. However, you wouldn't know it was shoulder length or even that it was black for that matter because I tend to keep it in a small pony tail under my bandana, a hat, or a layer of anvil dust.

I finish tempering the blade by removing it from the heat so it can cool. I'll smooth and polish it down later after I eat something. Arching my back and stretching my hands over my head, I start to notice the fatigue creeping in from using my magic.

That's the other reason I tend to be surly...my magic. Just like my gender in a male dominated kingdom, being a magic user can be detrimental. I have to suppress it when around others. Not that I think my powers are bad—actually it's quite the opposite. It's just that magic is actually banned, forbidden in the entire kingdom for past ten years. I was only twelve at the time the proclamation occurred and luckily my powers didn't manifest until a year later because our current King Barabus herded all the magic users up and exiled them.

Somehow my father and I weren't reported ten years ago. I remember hiding under the floor boards that night while my father sat waiting judgement. But—they never came. No one snitched on us, thank goodness. Not many people

know we have magic except some of the other magic users left here who hide their own powers.

Mother died giving birth to me and was a non-magic user, human in all ways. My father however was born with an elemental power—fire. He can manipulate fire and heat which explains his renowned career as a swordsmith. People travel from all over the kingdom for his blades. When I reached the age of awakening, thirteen, we thought I would inherit a similar power to my father. He took me out into a clearing in the woods in case I caught on fire like he did when he was a boy. But instead—nothing.

Everything “awakened” once we went back to the shop that night. I set my father back nearly a month of work when all the swords and weapons completed in his shop curled up like parchment and bent unintentionally. Instead of getting angry at his loss of income, he smiled and embraced me while I looked around bewildered for a moment.

“You're a metal manipulator, Kevlar. My girl is a rarity, as I always knew you were. Special—that's what you are. Explains that adolescent temper of yours, child. Tough as steel.” My father said to me that night with pride shining in his eyes.

“But father—I don't feel stronger. I don't feel like I bent the metal...it just happened.” I say getting hit with exhaustion suddenly.

“Strength isn't something you just suddenly get, it's forged. This power...it's part of you now and you need to control it. Toughen yourself up and train. Just like you forge a weapon in my fires, you need to manipulate your powers into something you can control. It's only harder now that magic is forbidden in the kingdom. We will somehow make it work in the shop. I'm sure it will benefit us both once you master it.” He wraps an arm around me and squeezes before putting me to bed that night.

Thinking back on that night, I decide to check on my father in case he needs any help. My metal manipulation does come in handy when our swordsmith skills can't get the result we quite want. We try to make our blades through skill most of the time saving my powers for the more intricate pieces so as to not expose my magic more than necessary. Father was working on this monstrosity of an axe for one of the kingdom's warriors so he's

probably in the back near another forge used for some of our bigger pieces.

“Kev, my girl, come and take a look at this...” My father says over the roaring forge he stands before. It’s even hotter in here than where I was working, but—my father does tend to keep his fire stoked more than me, elemental fire power and all that.

I peek over his shoulder at the massive axe that’s nearly done. It’s a good thing he worked on this one because it’s unlikely I’d be able to even lift that thing. “Wow. Impressive. Must have taken up most of our steel to form that. Need me to add anything to the grip?”

“Thanks honey. You know these old hands can’t do as much detailing as they used too. Damn joints.” He says while continuing to work.

I open myself up to my power and ask him, “Any specific design?”

“Not on the grip, just keep that basic. But—he wanted his family crest on the pommel. See that sheet over there where it’s drawn? Yes—that one.”

Looking it over, I use my power to add detailing. “Perfect. Just like you honey. Thanks! You off to see your friend?” He asks.

“Yeah, I’m going to bathe and eat, then head over to her shop. You ok here?”

“I’m fine. Go relax and have fun. I’ll see you in the morning. I might play cards with a few of the other men. Be careful Kevlar.”

“I will, father. You be careful too! I remember last week after you *played cards* with the other men. Your fires were spluttering a bit the next day. Don’t disappoint me and make poor decisions.” I say sternly in deep manly voice before I smirk and nudge his shoulder teasingly. He half smiles back at me before chuckling and shaking his head.

“You’re right. That one was bad. I already heated the water for your bath.” He mutters while I wave goodbye.

I head towards our bathhouse that has a large tub (which I made from metal) and a continuous fire in the evening hours in preparation for a warm bath. I filled the tub with water earlier and my father always starts a fire near it when we are getting close to closing shop. He can heat the water instantly with his elemental power which is an amazing perk. It’s honestly one of the nicest rooms at

our place. The shop, where we sell our wares, sits below our living space and the forges are out back behind the shop with the bathhouse adjacent. We designed it that way, so we didn’t track all our dust into the living quarters upstairs.

Undressing I lay back and enjoy the hot water scented with lemon and jasmine. It’s a mix I created myself. I slowly start to feel my sore muscles relax and nearly fall asleep in the water from all the fatigue of using my powers today. I really need to eat so I can gain back some energy for tonight.

After a while I clean up and dry myself then dress in my signature tunic with pants. This time going for a dark purple tunic that’s nearly black and black leather pants. I leave my wavy shoulder length hair down and pin up one side. I won’t be working in our blade smith shop so I can actually look like myself.

I grab a quick bite of food and chug three glasses of water before I head out. Working in the heat all day makes a girl thirsty!

It’s only a short walk to my best friend’s jewelry and clothing shop. Tegri Ruben and I met years ago when I sold my first piece of jewelry to her, and we’ve been friends and business partners ever since. It’s late enough in the day that she’s likely upstairs in her apartment above the store relaxing or she’s out enjoying some company which she prefers most evenings.

As I walk up to the back door, I notice it’s cracked open. Tegri and I always, *always*, lock the shop up when we leave. There are too many valuable pieces inside to be lazy with our security. Not only that—but I specially made that metal lock on the back door to not open for anyone but me or Tegri...

Looking closer at the lock on the door, I notice it’s rusted like it was soaked in water and disintegrated a bit. *Huh*. I draw a small, curved metal dagger that I made myself, holding it by the grip with the blade against my forearm in preparation should I need it. I’m decent with weapons... I mean—you have to be in order to make swords and various weaponry. Whoever this burglar is, they better be ready.

Creeping in through the door by squeezing my petite frame through the crack, I let my vision adjust to the darkness of the room. I could walk

through the shop blindfolded since I know it so well. I hear a rustle near the front of the shop where my jewelry is displayed before broken glass shatters through the silence. *Crap on a cracker! Maybe I should get the city guard?*

As I look around a rack of dresses that Tegri sewed herself, I spot a tall figure dressed in all black holding one of my creations up. I must have made a small noise because the person startles a bit and then shoving *my* necklace in their pocket, they distort and liquefy into a fluid like substance sneaking under the front door without a trace. *That THIEF! He—he's a magic user!*

I run over to the broken display case and see one of my most expensive necklaces missing. It's a special necklace that took me days to make. Blood, sweat and tears were put into making that. All my jewelry pieces are special in more ways than one. They aren't just beautiful in their intricacy, their delicate metal etching and design. Everyone that's a magic user in the city knows—they know my jewelry is imbued with special properties. They can project certain powers onto the person wearing them at the time. But...they have a time limit on their use. Eventually, the power I imbued into them wears off.

People will pay a hefty sum for my jewelry, but—it's a secret that they contain magic. I think many non-magic users have a suspicion because many have sought out my pieces and not just for looks. Word traveled fast when I started making them. I worry for Tegri though. When I sold my first piece to her, she begged me to create more and let her sell them in her shop. I hesitantly agreed but only on one condition—she had to keep my work anonymous. I was scared that someone would find out I used magic. So—she sells them in her shop but states the artist is unknown and transported from across the sea outside of the kingdom. I still worry she could take the blame if someone reports that she's selling magic imbued necklaces.

I make a split decision, probably a reckless one, to get my necklace back. There's no way I'm going to let that thief take my work! How dare he betray one of his own! Usually, us magic users have each other's backs. It's like betraying an unspoken code to take from another. Once I'm out-

side the shop, I lock the front door behind me and look both ways. I see a black blur in the corner of my eye to the right. *There! To the right!*

Taking off running, I quickly make it to the alley he disappeared into. I see him up ahead turn into water again and then reform on the other side of a metal chain fence. Just as they reform into a body on their other side, the thief looks over his shoulder and smirks at me before jogging off. I chuckle to myself. He thinks he's won since there's no way a normal person could scale this huge fence and catch him in time. Little does he know...I'm not normal.

Running up to the fence, I use my power to split the fence and bend in back in on itself creating a perfect sized opening for me to fit through before fusing it back together. I do all this in a matter of seconds without pause as I run through and catch up to him. I may be small and delicate looking, but little do people know—I'm packed full of lean muscle from lifting heavy metal all day and forging weapons. I'm also in top shape. So—it comes as a shock to the mysterious thief when I grab the bottom hem of his black shirt slowing him down before he turns down another alley.

He looks over his shoulder with a shocked look before his face clears of any emotion. Then twisting to the side, he rolls making me lose my grip on his shirt and stumble a bit to catch my feet. He rolls up onto his feet in one move and takes off again. I see him run looking around as he moves closer to the upper city. We're nearing the castle and where more of the wealthy live.

He looks over his shoulder again and grabbing a large trash can throws it back at me trying to slow my approach. I easily swipe a hand moving the metal trash can out of the way and back upright. Then I throw my dagger at his leg hoping to slow his running. It spins in a quick circular motion around and around before grazing his left calf. He gasps a bit at the shallow cut continuing to run but that moment of distraction was all it took for him to catch his left foot in a groove between the stones of the street.

He falls to his knees gracefully somehow. Then reaching backwards, he grabs my dagger before transforming into a puddle of water. *Well,*

*blustering bellows!*

I cautiously walk over to where he disappeared catching my breath. Squinting my eyes at the ground, I look around frustrated. Then—*there!* I see a trail of water trickling over towards the wall and away from me. The ground is flat so there's no way there should be moving water in here.

"You should figure out how to become steam or something so you can float away... a stream of water in a flat alley isn't as incognito as you think, thief!" I say stepping in front of the slow trickle of water which slowly trickles around my feet. I hope I'm right because I feel like an idiot talking to a puddle. I don't get any response, so I start doubting myself and wondering if I'm losing my mind. Then muttering to myself, I start to get irritable which is my usual state of emotion. "Talking to a damn puddle, Kev.... looking like an idiot. First, get your jewelry stolen then wander off into the upper city and start talking to dirty water."

I go to kick at the water and splash it since I'm angry now that I wasted my time and breath chasing that man. But instead of the water getting splashed away, I slip with my feet kicking up and out from under me as I land onto my tailbone.

*Ugh...Ow!*

I roll to my side to rub my sore derriere and see the dirty water I was trying to punish transform into the tall man again. *I knew it! That—that jerk!!!*

Paying attention again, I focus and hear the man laughing—loudly! He's laughing so hard he's bent over at the waist with his hands on his knees. *How—how dare he! The nerve of this thief!*

"I—" He starts to say while trying to contain his laughter. "I—I'm sorry...it's just—" He wipes a tear from his eye before continuing. *Ugh!* Then in a deep raspy voice says, "I'm sorry. That was rude of me. I just couldn't help myself. You made it rather easy. You know—you have quite a big attitude for someone so little."

My mouth gapes open in utter astonishment. The audacity of this man! First, he steals from me. Then he causes me harm and insults me! While I try to get my mouth shut and my thoughts in order, I take a second to look him over.

He's tall that's for sure. As I gain my feet under me again, I have to crane my head up to look

over his face which is another foot taller than me. He has light blonde hair that's half pulled back into a bun. His eyes are a deep blue and seem to swirl with amusement. But—it's his face that has me gaping in shock again. He—he's...

"Yes, yes...I'm the prince. I know." He finishes for me. And—just like that the amusement fades from his eyes into a guarded one. Opps—I must have said some that last part out loud.

"What in the ever-loving kingdom is the esteemed Prince Ashari doing stealing from a jewelry and clothing shop in the lower city?! You could buy anything you want! You can have the entire kingdom at your pampered feet and at the end of your sword if you so much as nod." I say in a surprised and irritated voice.

His mouth twists in dismay at my words and he looks down. Then he looks up at me standing there with my hands on my hips and his eyes fill with curiosity and hope.

"Did you—" He says clearing his throat before continuing in his deep masculine voice. "Did you make the necklace? You muttered something earlier suggesting it was yours..."

I stand there tensing up in a defensive posture. *Shoot...if the prince of our kingdom finds out I'm a magic user and made those necklaces...I start to mentally freak out since magic is banned in the kingdom and this man's father is the King!!*

Just as I go to answer him and come up with some excuse, I realize something. "Wait..." I say thinking over the events of the night. "You—you're a magic user! I saw you! You have elemental water power or something. You're powerful too! I've never known anyone who could transform into their element." I smile and cross my arms after I point at him accusingly. Then I tap my foot on the ground and raise an eyebrow waiting for his answer. I feel a lot less concerned now that I have something on the prince! No one in the kingdom has ever suspected Prince Ashari is a magic user!

His gaze is assessing as he considers my words. He nods his head to himself coming to some conclusion. "You're right. I am a magic user with elemental water as my power. But—no one will listen to you if you tell them. You're just some commoner, some woman, who works in a

shop. Who do you think they will believe if you accuse me of magic? Hmm? What will your husband think of you wandering the streets at night trailing after a man?" He crosses his arms and stands firmly in front of me imitating my stance. I immediately get angry which is my characteristic reaction to threats. And—how dare he insinuate I'm just some common woman having trysts with men at night while a husband waits at home to order her around! *Chauvinistic pig!*

"You—" I start sputtering in anger and walking up to him. Poking a finger into his massive chest I say, "You, pig! I'm not common! And I'm not married or chasing any men around! Well- other than your thieving hide! You stole from me! How dare you threaten me after what you did! It's—it's not right!"

He smiles and amusement fills his eyes again as he reaches up and grabs my finger that's poking his chest. "You're rather prickly, you know that? Stronger than I thought too." He chuckles and reaches up then pulls a piece of trash out of my hair from when I must have fallen. "I think I like you though. No one ever talks to me like that. Ms...?"

"Kevlar. Kevlar Smith." I say naively before I can think through giving my name to a sneaky prince that knows I use magic. *Ugh, stupid stupid Kev.* Then—like my mouth has its own mind I say. "But people call me Kev for short. And—if my strength intimidates you, I hope you understand that's a weakness of your character not mine."

He smiles and his eyebrows raise in surprise. *Wow, he's sort of handsome in a big annoying prince way.*

"Pleased to meet you Kev. You're right. You're blade master Favian's daughter, no? I've heard your name before, but I always assumed Favian had a son, not a daughter, that made just as good of swords as him."

"Hmm. You assumed wrong then, *your highness.* And—I'm not prickly...I'm passionate or feisty as my father calls me. I'm also just as good as my father at making my blades."

"Forgive me then Kev. Feisty and *passionate* you are. I can't wait to know more...Now, I have to ask again. Did you make this necklace?" He

asks holding up my necklace, the one I made, and he stole. I'm having trouble focusing on the question after hearing his words. I blush instantly at his words and their insinuation. Did he mean...?

Clearing my throat, I ask while trying to focus, "I—I'm sorry. What did you say?"

He smirks like he knows my thoughts. "Did you make this? It—it's important to me. Please Kev..."

*Wow, did he just say please? A prince asking me nicely?* I take a deep breath and follow my instincts. For whatever reason I instinctively know this man means me no harm. So, I decide to trust him with my secret.

"Yes. That necklace is one of my best works. I spent several days making it. No one is supposed to know I made it though. Or, that I am a magic user. Please—Prince Ashari... I know you saw me manipulate that fence back there...if you could just pretend I don't have any magic.... I won't say a word. I promise!"

"Stop. Please call me Ash. I think after tonight, we can drop the titles. I figured you were a magic user...I just didn't know your element. But after seeing you change that fence...it must be related to metal, no?"

"Yes. Metal manipulator. I guess it's rather rare per my father. I help him in his forge and make the jewelry on the side for extra money. It's a secret hobby of mine. I like making something delicate but yet powerful in its own way. Sort of like how people underestimate me."

"I can see how that would be enjoyable. I myself enjoy working in the castle's gardens...using my water power to feed the plants around the castle. It's a favorite pastime of mine. I think I might even have a blade you made...or maybe it was your father. I'm not sure..." He pulls out a small dagger from his boot and shows me. I smile feeling my irritation melt away and suddenly amused picturing this prince on his knees working in the garden.

My gaze focuses on the long thin dagger with custom gold scrolling along the blade that extends up into the hilt. "You bought Yivi." I accidentally say while running a finger along the blade and nicking a drop of blood onto the edge. It starts to hum in response to me saying its name which

causes Ash to jolt. His eyes get big then look up at me.

“I felt that...what did you do? And...you name your blades?” An embarrassing blush covers my face.

“Well...I—you see...” I stutter in my embarrassment. Then huffing out a breath and I explain. “Yeah. I name them all. It helps imbue power into them. They respond to their creators and owners. This one, I named Yivi. She’s thirsty. For blood... saying her name and then feeding her blood excites her which can project her energy to the user.

“Wow. That’s...incredible. Thanks.” He says staring at the blade like he’s never seen it before. Then he gently sheaths it back in his boot. “I need your help, Kev.”

“Ok...” I say hesitantly while my mental guard goes up again. “I’m not sure how much I can help you. You’re a prince while I’m...just a common woman.”

“We both know you’re more than just a common woman, Kev.” He says smiling. Then he grabs my hand and latches it onto his forearm and starts walking me towards the castle. He makes it look like two lovers strolling elegantly through the streets. *Huh. As if...* “I need this necklace I borrowed from you for my mother.”

“But—but your mother...she’s the queen!”

“Yeeesss...and as you know—she’s sick. Cursed.” He looks around while he talks to me softly then pulls me down another street towards the back side of the castle. Slowly the castle wall comes into view. “She doesn’t have much time left, Kev. Come with me? Help me save her?” He pleads turning to me and begging with his big blue eyes.

Taking a deep breath, I respond. “You know that necklace is imbued with healing properties. I’ve never tested it other than on minor illnesses or mental states. It can soothe sadness or grief from what I’ve tested but can also help cure a mild cold while wearing it. Of course, once its removed, the illness could return if the body hasn’t healed it by that time. And grief or depression can return if the wearer hasn’t addressed the issue in time as well.” I then say thinking of his mother. “You hope to use it on your mother...?” He nods his head. “I don’t know if it will work for an illness caused by a

curse.”

“Hm...I guess we won’t know unless we try? That’s why I realized it may be better to bring you with me. I didn’t know who made the jewelry when I stole it. I had heard whispers that there was jewelry in that shop which could help cure an illness or project beauty to its wearer, etc. I’ve tried every healer in the kingdom, every medicine. Nothing works!” He says angry and frustrated slicing his other hand through the air. “It’s a curse... so it’s magic. But my idiot father refuses to allow me to find a witch and reverse it. He swears magic is evil and when my mother was cursed...his thoughts became more and more irrational. He doesn’t know I’m a magic user, and it’s taking its toll on me. My mother is the only one who knows. She’s my everything. My best friend. She doesn’t deserve to die for a mistake she made when I was a child.”

“I’m sorry that you have to hide who you are, Ash. And I’m sorry for your mother’s suffering. I’ve heard she’s a caring and beautiful woman. It’s said the people used to love her back when she would travel outside the castle, before her curse.” I say squeezing his forearm in comfort. Then I come to a probably rash decision. “I’ll help you but I—I don’t know if it will work.”

He smiles widely down at me. His first true smile. It’s a beautiful thing to behold on someone so handsome. Then, he reaches up and tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. “You are truly incredible, Kev. I can’t believe I didn’t notice you in your father’s swordsmith shop before. I only saw what you wanted others to see. A regular boy working with his father. I think you must know what it’s like to hide your true self—just like me. Together, maybe we can both reveal who we are? Maybe we can find acceptance?” His eyes plead with me and fill with heat. Then he leans in towards me and I have a brief flash of panic that he’s going to kiss me. *I just met him! And—he’s a prince! Kev, he could never be happy with you... think friendly thoughts.* My misguided thoughts extinguish when he says, “I see you Kevlar Smith. There’s no more hiding...not from me. We’re too similar in that way.” Then he gets a thoughtful look on his face and tilting his head leans back. “Not yet then. Come on. Time is of the essence.

My mother doesn't have long."

He makes some excuse with the castle guard at the back gate for why I'm there and we sneak inside the castle silently. I look around in wonder. I've never seen the castle from the inside. It's beautiful and yet a bit intimidating. *What am I doing here!!* I think having a moment of doubt.

Ash doesn't pause in pulling me through hallway after hallway. He does pause and peer about every now and then trying to avoid people and likely questions. I keep finding myself studying him, observing him instead of my surroundings.

He's not what I thought he'd be in every way. I mean—he's handsome and has a presence to him. That must be a given when you're born a prince but it's his mannerisms that are a bit different. He keeps glancing at me, making sure I'm ok. Holding my arm to make sure I don't trip but not in an overbearing way as if he doesn't think I'm capable. It's a difficult thing to explain. He's also caring, compassionate especially if what he tells me is true. I mean what son loves his mother enough to expose his deepest secret in order to save her life... not many. Chivalry has been dead for many years in this kingdom, but I feel like Ash may be bringing it back.

Suddenly he stops and looks at me. Staring into my eyes with a teasing smirk, he asks, "Ready?" But deep down in those blue gems he has for eyes, I can see the truth. Fear mixed with hope.

*Well, bursting bellows! I hope I can help him. Oh—and his mother.* Even though, I'm actually not fond of the royals given they placed that ban on magic users. But—I can't blame him for his father's actions.

I nod my head to his question, and he reaches back opening a large double door. I wasn't paying much attention, but we must be entering the royal suite. My palms instantly get sweaty at the realization.

We enter a darkened room which has a small fireplace and a few candles lit. I can see tables and chairs around the area... it must be an antechamber to her bedroom.

"Wait here for a second while I make sure no one is in there with her. I'd rather do this in private." He whispers softly next to my ear making

me break out in goosebumps. I nod my head again as he walks into the next room. I'm starting to think that all I can do is nod my head like one of this primped up demur ladies of the court around him. Irritation floods me at the thought. *Never!*

Before I can get too "prickly", Ash returns and softly says, "Come on. All's clear." I hesitantly follow him into the next room where I see a large elaborate bed. The feeling of despair and gloom is heavy in the room and for some reason my magic flares a bit in warning. *Well—that's just strange.*

A woman with golden blonde hair lays in the bed with her eyes closed and a pale complexion. She's clearly beautiful in a feminine way however her body shows obvious signs of ailment. The bones of her face are more pronounced, and her eyes appear slightly sunken. I look down at her chest covered in a modest silk sleeping gown and notice her breathing is rapid and irregular. She's clutching some tissues in one ring laden hand that rests on her abdomen but doesn't stir at our approach.

Ash sits gently down on the edge of the bed with a sad look on his face. He reaches forward and brushes some hair off his mother's face tucking it gently behind her ear. "Mother. Mother—wake up just for a moment. I want to introduce you to someone. She has a gift for you too. Well—something you can borrow." I raise my eyebrow at that.

The Queen's eyes flutter when he gently shakes her hand. A soft voice whispers through chapped lips, "Ashari? Be a good son and get me water..." He uses his water power to fill the cup next to the bed and grabs it holding it up to her lips while she sips. It seems to wake her up a bit since she looks around noticing me.

"Who's this, Ash? She's pretty. I wasn't aware you were seeing someone. You never bring anyone around me anymore." He starts to say something, but she interrupts his response by speaking to me. "Come here dear. Sit and talk with me. I'm literally *dying* for company. Ash never introduces me to any women he likes. His father arranged a marriage to that horrid girl Bivariella Casperi. Thank goodness I heard and made sure she was already seen with one of her weekly trysts in the kitchen.

Saved you with that one, son!” She gives off a raspy chuckle while Ash smiles fondly shaking his head.

“Mother, please. She’s not *my* woman. I literally just met her tonight! Meet Kevlar Smith. She’s daughter to that renowned blade smith Favian.”

“Ahh. Sorry, I misunderstood.” She apologizes with a smile, but I can tell she already knew and was trying to push her son a bit into an uncomfortable conversation. “Very nice to meet you Kevlar. Interesting name but I like it. I guess it’s rather appropriate if your father named you...I have heard of him but never knew he had a daughter.”

Bowing at the waist, since I have no clue how to curtsy and I know you’re supposed to do something when approaching royalty, I glance up and see her smile before I step forward sitting at the edge of the bed Ash vacated.

“Your highness...err—majesty? Nice to meet you. Please, call me Kev. I know it sounds like a boy name and many assume that, yes. But—I prefer it that way. People tend to judge me less if I fit their expectations. They assume a boy or man should be working in a blade smith shop forging weapons, so I make it easier by hiding my appearance some with clothes and anvil dust.” The Queen smiles and nods her head.

“Please call me Sharah. That must be hard. People assuming you’re a boy and that your work is done by someone else. You create your own blades like your father?” I murmur a quick yes. “I bet they are the best. You seem like a strong woman. Sure of yourself and your trade.”

“Why do you say that? You’ve never even heard of me. If only you knew—I’m grumpy and irritable all the time. Hiding away and not being able to take credit for my creations. Accepting that my work isn’t as good compared to other men simply because of my female status. Back when I was younger, I didn’t hide, and no one would buy my blades. Not only that—they said I had an attitude. That I should learn my place.”

She gets a sad and disappointed look on her face. Her eyes flick to her son for a second like she’s making sure he listens before she looks back at me and grabs my hand. I get another flare of my magic at contact with her hand giving me a “yucky” feeling that quickly goes away. Squeezing

my hand she says, “Strong women don’t have attitudes, they have high standards and firm conviction. Don’t let others change you unless you *want* to be changed.”

*Well, crumbling coal! The Queen—er—Sharah makes a good point.* “Thank you, your majes—Sharah.” I sincerely reply with misty eyes. I never missed having a mother, since mine died at my birth. But in this moment, I have a pang of feeling bereft.

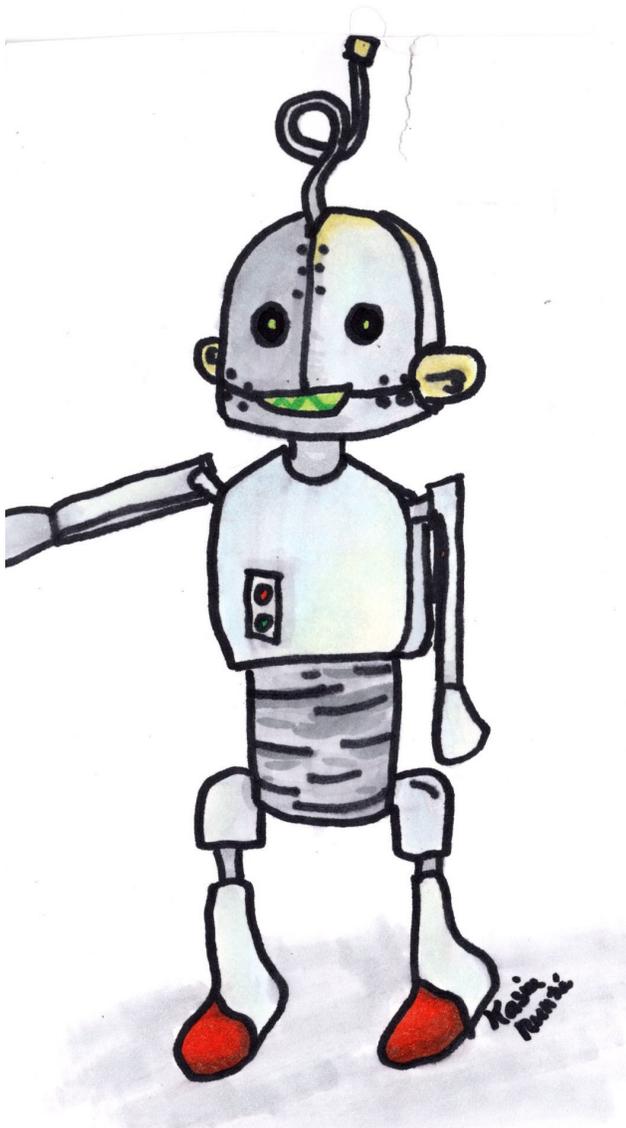
“Mother, I brought Kev for another talent she possesses hoping it could help you.” Ash says approaching quieting and placing a comforting hand on my shoulder. I stiffen up at first contact but then relax back into his large warm hand. I’m not use to affection from others except for my father who never withholds a fatherly embrace.

“Another talent? Hm—she seems too good for you, Ash. We need to brush up on your courting skills.” She teases and gazes at her son affectionately while not missing his carefully placed hand on my shoulder. “Tell me why you’re here.”

“Well—I—you see, I make jewelry too...with metal.” I stutter out while she looks pleased but confused. I’m not sure how much I should say... should I trust her? Tell her—I’m a magic user in a kingdom where magic is outlawed and she’s the Queen? It seems ludicrous! But then I look into her eyes and recall her words. “I’m a metal manipulator...a magic user. I make special jewelry...things that are imbued with power and special properties. Your son stole one of my necklaces, a powerful one, which is how we met. I- I chased him down and caught him, the slippery thief!” Ash laughs out loud at that and his mother chuckles.

“Yes, I know about how slippery my son can be. Try catching him as a child while he sneaks sweets from the kitchen. It was impossible! Now, don’t be worried I will spill your secrets to my husband. We have been in disagreement ever since this ugly curse was placed me. I myself have a sliver of magic...I can barely blow out a candle with my air from across the room but—it’s there. So, you make jewelry and I’m guessing you have one piece that Ash wanted to try to heal me with?” She guesses while Ash and I gape at her.

“Well, yes! But...I don’t know if it will work. It only helps heal illnesses and promote health.



## Robot One by Artist Fish

Sort of like assisting the body fight off what's wrong with it. Or at least that's how I think it works. I just don't know if it can heal something of the magic sort."

"Please let us try, mother. We've tried everything else. I can't lose you!" Ash begs his mother.

"Ugh, fine. Doesn't hurt, does it?" The Queen

asks while a shake my head. "Alright then. Ash help me sit up a bit so she can put the necklace on." Ash passes me the necklace he stole before he goes to his mother.

Ash then gently cradles his mother behind her upper back and props some more pillows behind her while I reach forward and clasp the necklace around her neck.

She takes a deep shuddery breath once it lays against her chest. We all sit there in silence for a few beats before she lets out a sigh and her shoulders droop forward.

She looks up at her son and reaches a hand forward placing it on his arm before she says, "I'm sorry son. I don't feel any different. You need to accept this is it. I have."

"No, mother." Ash shakes his head in denial.

Just as I get up to give them a moment of privacy, I see her hand resting on his arm. My magic suddenly flares again and my gaze rests on an elaborate ring wrapped around her index finger.

It's instinctual—almost primal really—the way my hand darts out unconsciously to grab hers.

"How long have you worn this ring?" I softly ask jolting when I make skin contact with the ring. My magic flares up in warning and that "yucky" feeling flows through me. Ash and Sarah look at me in concern and confusion. I must have made a face of disgust when I touched the ring.

"Um...I've had this ring for a long time. Over a decade maybe? I'm not sure honestly. I don't even remember who gave it to me..." Sarah says in a confused voice. "That's so strange..."

"You've always worn that ring. I also can't remember when you started wearing it." Ash says.

My magic identifies the metal in the ring as palladium. It's a rarer type of metal but can be used in rings and jewelry, although I've never had the money to obtain it for my creations. It's one of the best metals for holding onto a magical signature. I always wished I could obtain some for my work for that reason alone. It's not the *type* of metal I'm concerned with though—it's what's imbued into the metal. A curse of disease and ultimately death.

I can't believe it...this whole time she's been wearing a cursed ring. All it would have taken to

heal her was to take it off so why didn't she in all that time? Searching my magic through the metal again, I notice a second feature to the curse—resistance to removing it.

I hold her hand firmly with one hand and use my other to slowly slip the ring off her finger. She pulls back a bit at first, but she's weak from her illness and I overpower her easily. As soon as the ring falls off her hand, I drop it into the tissues she was holding and wrap it up. Avoiding contact with that nasty thing is a must.

Ash stands next to me still as a statue watching his mother. Her breathing immediately starts to even out and her shoulders relax down comfortably. Then her pale complexion transitions to a warm rosy one within a few minutes.

It's the smile that overtakes Sarah's face that lets me know it's over. *Busting bellows! I did it!*

Ash turns to me with a gaze full of awe and adoration that makes me feel something I haven't felt in a long time. Pride.

He drops to his knees in front of me and bows his head at the same time he grabs both my hands. Taking a deep shaky breath he says, "I'm forever in your debt, Kev. You're truly a wonder." Then he looks up directly into my eyes searching for something. "Fierce but full of compassion. Intelligent but yet humble. Tough as steel but yet delicately beautiful."

Scoffing at his words in discomfort and looking away from his intense gaze, I try not to show how much his words mean to me. How after only one day this man has peeled back my layers to see the real me. "You can't know that...you hardly know me." I whisper swallowing the lump in my throat.

Peeking back at him when he squeezes my hands, he says, "Yes. Yes, I can and I do—know you. The true you. I see you, Kevlar. Together, we can be ourselves. Reveal who we truly are, remember? And—I intend to bring change to my kingdom...make it a place where people are judged on their merits instead of their status or gender. Where people can be free to practice their magic. Will you step up, be that fierce passionate woman that chased me down?"

"Ugh, fine." I say crossing my arms and giving

him a look that is supposed to project irritation but instead likely comes off flustered. "But don't think you can just sneak into my shop and take anything you want. I don't need any dirty puddles of water laying around. I have enough work to do without worrying you're going to slide under my door and steal something." He chuckles and flicks a few droplets of water on my face making me give off a huff of annoyance.

"Very well, no sneaking around as a *dirty* puddle. But—I will be checking in on you...for your protection of course. You're going to have a target on your back if anyone finds out about your powers or the fact that you just saved the Queen."

"He's right, dear. You need to be careful. Someone wanted me dead and as royals we have many enemies who are likely now yours. I have a feeling I'm going to be seeing you more. Be careful." Sarah interjects looking between us. Sitting up easily, she stretches out her arms. She already looks so much better!

"I'll be careful. I always have. Don't forget I make swords and weapons for a living. I can protect myself." I reply.

The Queen chuckles and pats her son on the arm. "You definitely have your work cut out for you. Just remember, she was never looking for a knight, my dear, she was looking for a sword."

## Poem

Jean-Paul L. Garnier

burnup reentry

atmospheric conditions

thick and harsh return

## Honorable Mention

### Welcome to Vulpye by Jeff Cassell

Kette hurried up the hill from the tiny, makeshift learning-hut and into the woods of the foothills, not knowing whether to be angry at herself or her two pupils.

How could a pair of fox kits wearing such colorful clothing slip away from the class without her and her helper Oona noticing? There were only six little ones from four families to begin with, for star's sakes, and if Oona's adorable little badger cub sibling Reep hadn't tattled, the harried "teacher of knowledge" she-fox would have missed the retreating sound of mischievous giggling until it was too late.

The scream from one of the kits made Ketta's heart pound in her chest. Veering towards the cry, she put the front hem of her dark blue dress in her mouth and scrambled on all fours as fast as she could up the steepening slope. It was then she heard snapping underbrush and the angry, snorting grunts of a large, feral grazer from somewhere up ahead, and was startled when both kits suddenly burst from the bushes directly in front of her – an



Jungle Landing by Jose Sanchez

enormous chep'ta bull close behind them.

Snatching the kits into her arms, the panicky vixen leaped to her right on the side of the incline just as the brown and green-striped plant-eater skidded past them in the crumbly topsoil so closely Kette was pelted with dirt, pebbles and torn vegetation.

Like bruins, the massive, long-haired grazers could not run downhill; they frequently tripped and tumbled, so most of the beasts preferred to walk along the sides of hills from one grazing meadow to the next. This was rutting season for the chep'ta, though, so the bull pursuing the foxes was probably a cow-maddened male protecting his territory.

Kette scurried diagonally down-slope with her charges, but slipped and landed on her backside on the rocky soil, dragging her precious tail in the dirt and bruising her rump.

The grazer had recovered his footing and was upon them in a heartbeat, crashing down beside the vixen. She saw the animal's huge rack of pointed antlers out of the corner of her eye and pushed the two kits out of harm's way just as one of the tines pierced her lower left leg, the bull flipping her into the air and forcing a scream of pain from her throat.

The frantic voices of a number of villagers came to her ears as the grazer began trampling the feebly-crawling vixen, and she heard angry yelling at the creature to drive it away while several pairs of arms gently carried her battered body to safety...

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It had been a year since Kette saved the lives of two of her younger students by shielding them from the enraged grazer bull. She had survived, a hero now to the other denizens of Vulpye, but at the cost of her left leg below the knee. The flesh and bone had been so badly gored in the attack the attending healer could do nothing to save it, and a risky surgery was performed to remove the torn limb before it became so infected it might endanger the vixen's life.

After her convalescence she spent most of the growing season getting accustomed to the handicap, hobbling about her home using the graceful, sturdy walking staff crafted by her father Dern.

The fox had taken great care in creating the staff, making it as long as his daughter was tall and emblazoning upon it the runes of courage, compassion and beauty.

As soon as her wound had healed, a family friend skilled in woodworking made a slim, rigid wooden leg-section for the vixen that held her stump in a cushioned cup and strapped to her upper leg for security. Between the staff and her artificial leg section, Kette could at least move about with some confidence.

Mother Arna doted on her beloved younger child, feeding and grooming and coddling the recovering vixen until the nightmares subsided and that delightful, bubbly persona for which she was so well-known had returned. Even her older-by-one-season sister Keeta stayed by her side whenever the two were out; in fact, Keeta introduced her sibling to Beet, a handsome young red whose family owned the one *manygoods* store in the village and who had only recently returned to Vulpye from Dreben, a trade town four days' travel downriver on the Clawmark.

He had been in that rough little outpost of ne'er-do-wells to learn tools trading, a popular line of business that was on the brink of becoming the most important commodity along the coastal territories: building supplies and planning.

Unfortunately Beet turned out to be – in the words of Kette's father – a “selfish little ratbag” after the fox left Kette alone at a neighborhood gathering to spend time with a like-minded business associate. The crestfallen female had limped home alone in the dark after she realized Beet wasn't going to rejoin her, arriving home as her family was preparing for bed. That disappointing evening was one of a half dozen the increasingly lonely she-fox would endure over the next two seasons.

Kette eventually became so depressed she stopped going anywhere after her students were reclaimed by their parents for the day and she had straightened-up the interior of the learning hut. At first Kette was worried she was somehow embarrassing her potential escorts by saying or doing something the tods found objectionable, but that notion was instantly dispelled by her mother.

“Most tods are a different nature of creature

than us, darling; they live in a world full of distractions and distant promises, where their imagined destiny lies beyond the horizon,” her mum explained one evening.

“They can't help themselves, I suppose, so we are left to build the home and community and patiently await their return. After their wanderlust is satisfied, we marry and start families. You just haven't found your soulmate yet, luv. But, he's out there, don't worry...”

Keeta was more critical, suggesting the tods were merely selfish slaves to their base desires, only wanting a dalliance with Kette rather than a real relationship.

Whatever the reason, spending all of her free time with relatives and immediate family soon grew monotonous, and her small circle of female friends could think of nothing new with which to entertain her. She eventually turned to seek peace in solitude, her lack of interaction with peers only adding to her somberness.

It all came to a head one day as she stood in a darker mood than usual, motionless in the late afternoon sunshine on a craggy hilltop. Listless and benumbed by feelings of despair and still wearing her black frock from the day's teaching, Kette leaned on her walking staff a little ways back from the edge of a sheer, hundred-cloth-yard vertical drop on the east face of the hill overlooking Vulpye.

A fall from such a height would be fatal; there had already been one loss of life here, last season, when old Luco had fallen (or *jumped*, depending on who you asked) to his death late one night when the moon was a huge, bright orb floating across the silent sky.

The cliff hadn't always been here. When Kette was younger, heavy rains had deluged the area and weakened the soil on the hillside enough that an enormous part of it broke loose and rumbled downhill in the middle of the night, waking everyone in the valley with the vibrations. Fortunately no one was injured by the landslide, which created a spectacular view of the valley to the east.

And, because all the other hills in the region were so smooth and rolling on their way north to the mountains, this precipice had become some-

thing of an attraction to the denizens of Clawfoot Valley, luring lovers and the curious alike to enjoy the natural panorama.

Kette closed her eyes as tears ran down the soft fur on her face, and put her paw to her heart. She thought of all the rejections, all the disinterest shown by the tods in the village towards her, and came to the conclusion she was fated to be a *huarnya*, or unmarried matron.

Huarnyas were bitter, older vixens of traditional vulpine folklore. Considered either mad or preternaturally unpleasant to those around them because of an evil spell or other influence, huarnyas usually ended their days in someone's cookpot or devoured by large predators...

Hero to some parents Kette may have been, but such celebrity disappeared rapidly among foxes her own age, replaced by biting, "funny" comments about her injury or the fact she could no longer run or move about as gracefully.

A couple of tods had even compared her hobbling gait to the pace of *log crawler*: small, slimy creatures with round shells that oozed slowly along on decaying logs or moss-covered boulders in the woodlands.

Such comments ultimately placed her there at The Edge, as it had become known to the locals, to either cheer herself up by seeing the wonderful colors and visual textures of the treetops and distant hillsides... or to work up the nerve to take more drastic measures.

Her sorrowful solitude was suddenly interrupted by a calm, richly-accented male voice from somewhere nearby.

"Is wery nice look from here, yes?"

Kette gasped inwardly and trembled, remembering old tales about benign forest spirits who would occasionally give guidance to bereaved or troubled souls. Could *this* be..?

She stood rooted to the spot, wide-eyed and breathless, and listened as whoever it was continued. The voice was insightful and friendly, as if holding a conversation with no one in particular.

"Is quiet. I like it much, wit' no speakink from odders. Only wind to bring scents and whisperings of forest."

There was the muffled sound of chewing, and

the vixen smirked: a mysterious manifestation from the spirit world, and he was eating a *snack*?

"You are teacher of kits, yes?" asked the voice.

Kette swallowed, her mind a flurry of emotions. How did he know..?

"Yes, I am. Teacher of kits, I mean..."

She pictured a smile behind the voice when next it spoke.

"Dat is wery important task, teaching of de little ones. Do you enjoy such a... how you say, *responsibility*?"

The she-fox shook herself from her immobility and looked around, sniffing the air and searching in vain from her vantage point to find the source of the voice. There were just enough bushes and boulders around her to easily conceal someone, so whoever it was could very well be nearby.

She slowly craned her head this way and that, and suddenly – on an errant puff of wind from somewhere, she couldn't tell from which direction – Kette caught a whiff of the most exotic, intoxicating dog-fox musk she had ever smelled.

"Yes, I do," she answered with a shiver. "The teaching of little ones is something I've wanted to do all my life."

She paused and smiled wistfully, seating herself on a low, rounded stone. This was so unreal, like a wonderful dream. She decided to enjoy the distraction.

"Have... do you live around here somewhere?" she began a bit lamely, rolling her eyes at the commonality of the question.

"Dah, but away from odders; I am not, what you say, gude for look at. Scars of war are not kind."

*War?* Kette gasped to herself. She knew of no one in the valley who had ever fought in a battle, but she sensed an immediate connection with the owner of this voice. Here was another soul, like herself, who bore enough of life's wounds that he sought the solitude of this clifftop.

"You know, when one of my pupils tells me he or she feels like others are judging them by their appearance, I tell them to believe only what those closest to them say," she said, trying to be helpful. "What does your family think?"

There was a long silence. "My family is gone

to paradise, some seasons ago. I am alone.”

Kette's shoulders sagged as she put her paws to her mouth and blinked back tears of both sorrow for this poor soul, and embarrassment for asking the question.

“Oh, I am *so* sorry!” she whispered. “I didn't...”

“Is not for you to be sorry, kind Kette,” the voice said gently, with an almost omniscient wisdom. The fact that whoever it was knew her name increased, by a *hundredfold*, her desire to meet him.

“Is for you to liff long and happy life, teaching dose little ones de ways of gude souls. You haff safed some at great cost to yourself. If you were to leafe dem, dey wude be wery sad.”

Kette sat there for a while longer without speaking, a sense of renewal growing within her and somehow aware that the owner of the mysterious, benign voice had already departed unseen from the hilltop. Memories of childhood tales came back to her. Could it have been a guardian angel?

She smiled, warming to the realization that there was a wise, kindred spirit in the valley; someone to whom she could relate, and possibly befriend...

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Things were relatively normal in the village until the middle of the growing season, when Fate decided to give everyone something to take their minds off some of life's frustrations: Duna and Sage, an older silver fox couple, had found and adopted an apparently orphaned young vixen they discovered wandering the trails outside the village.

The kit was in fair health, but when found she was living like a feral, underfed and extremely nervous around anyone who came near her. To make things more difficult, she could neither read nor write any of the local dialects, but spoke a strange language with which no one was familiar.

Her fur was mostly black, with white blotches of different sizes on various parts of her body, but the most intriguing mark was a distinctive white spot at her throat that looked eerily like a skull.

Black foxes were not native to the valley, with most of the exotic visitors being traders from regions to the east. But Teshye – the name the young female had managed to give to her new parents – bore several differences in her physical appearance that intrigued those who were trying to get to know her.

Firstly, Teshya's muzzle was a bit heavier and carried larger teeth than that of other foxes, and her front paws bore the beginnings of what were going to become a formidable set of claws. She was big for her apparent age as well, and after she began eating regularly, her physical strength increased to that of an adult dog-fox.

“She does look *kind* of like us, though...” Keeta had mused thoughtfully one morning, as she and Kette were visiting neighbors.

Most of the females in the village were of course instantly taken by the foundling, and the newly-mixed family needed for nothing during the first weeks of adjusting to their lives together.

The kit already knew a few words in the red fox tongue, so Kette was given the task of teaching Teshya as soon as the kit had gotten comfortable enough with her new surroundings to concentrate. Both Sage and Duna were overjoyed by the opportunity of raising another kit, as their own young had departed several seasons before on adventures of their own.

In the days that followed Teshya calmed and made good progress in her new home, but something in her past weighed on the young kit's mind.

Clues to the she-fox's mysterious past came early-on: one morning upon arising, Duna discovered the tyke missing from the house, but after a frantic search soon found her with Sage's hunting bow behind the modest home angrily shooting arrows – with unnerving expertise – into a fallen tree.

Normally kits weren't introduced to shooting skills until they were a good bit older than Teshya, but someone had taught her well at a very early age. More troubling were her actions while play-fighting with other youngsters. One kit's father had watched the vixen rough-housing with several young tods and described Teshya's actions as resembling something one would see on a battlefield

from the past, calculated and meant to cripple or kill an adversary. Teshya hadn't actually harmed any of her playmates, but it raised the uncomfortable notion that the kit may have witnessed such carnage firsthand...

One evening a number of neighbors were gathered near the learning hut at the center of the village talking to one another as Teshya enjoyed head-rubs and hugs by her parents and others in the group.

"It isn't normal for little ones to know how to use deadly weapons, or exhibit such warlike fighting ability during playtime!" Keeta opined. "Kits should be protected from that kind of terrible influence."

"Oh, so now you're full of wisdom on what kits should or should not be exposed to?" Kette grinned.

Her older-by-one-season sister smirked and pushed her shoulder. "No, it's just that we're all supposed to be civilized creatures who have risen above savagery."

"Do you think the poor thing actually *saw* a battle somewhere?" piped Keeta's badger friend Oona, with a touch of concern in her voice. "I mean, to act-out something, you had to have seen it with your own eyes, right?"

This serious conversation among parents and neighbors was going back and forth with opinions aired and suggestions offered when a lone figure came into view a ways down the road, walking towards the group.

It was Vled, a familiar visitor to the area. The reclusive, mild-mannered fellow had taken up residence in an old, abandoned stone hut in the foothills above the village and was pulling his dried-meat-laden cart behind him. A skilled hunter who shared his kills with those in the community, he was at once well-received and avoided by many of the village folk because he was... well, *unusual*.

Kette had a keenly observant nature, a trait which served her well as the valley's teacher of knowledge. In addition to reading everything she could get her paws on to learn about life's facts and mysteries, she had trained herself to be aware of even the most subtle changes in her surroundings.

So it was that, when Vled made his appearance

that day, she noticed similarities between him and Teshya right off. Most folks took it for granted that Vled was a fox of some kind, but there were more than a few who argued that he was too big to be vulpine.

Both Teshya and Vled shared the same, sturdy muzzle shape, large teeth and rather unnerving front claws. No one had ever seen such broad paws on a fox, and the claws at the end of them – in Vled's case, at least – rivaled those seen on some bruins.

Vled kept to himself much of the time, but could still be recognized at a distance by his large, black-and-white-furred frame. He apparently had only one set of clothes, as well: worn, brown linen trousers suspended with a narrow ox-hide strap running from his left shoulder to his right side, matched with a similarly threadbare shirt.

His ears bore the irregular notches of conflict, fairly common among males of most clans and tribes. Other scars – thought by most to be from ferals' claws or hunting weapon tips – decorated his muzzle and the right side of his face.

As he neared the group he acknowledged the few welcoming nods and paw waves, but his eyes immediately fell on Teshya, who stood staring at the fox as he approached.

Vled lowered the handles of his cart and stepped slowly beside Sage and his wife, kneeling to allow Teshya to tentatively sniff around his ears in silent greeting. Teshya's eyes grew wide when she caught his scent, and Kette trembled when she did the same...

"Ah, is daughter of de Bruk Tof!" he said gently in stilted Animese as he hugged the young vixen.

Kette gasped. This was the voice she had heard on the clifftop a short while ago, bringing her out of her depression! The one who had so accurately read her feelings now stood before her, but he was not at all what she had expected. Where she had dreamily envisioned a handsome, angelic red fox, she viewed this dark, scarred presence as an exotic mystery yearning to be explored.

Teshya's face had brightened like a candle, and she burrowed into Vled's embrace while rattling-off questions in her strange tongue which the large

tod answered, to Teshya's obvious excitement.

There were eyebrows raised among those present at this revelation of what some had suspected earlier not only of Vled's origins, but now of Teshya's as well. While most communities honored as noble the Bruk Tov tribe of mysterious foxes from the far northern mountains, some remembered tales from earlier generations of how the foxes' ancestors had fallen from the sky on a huge, flaming orb...

Vled held the youngster close and listened as the conversation rapidly progressed from shy questions to a tearful deluge of events in her young life.

The dark fox translated much of the emotional speech for those listening. "She had been on her own for most of de season before you found her, frightened and unsure of where to go for help." He looked up at Duna. "And, she tinks *wery* highly of you, *piel ko cer madonye...*"

Duna wrinkled her brow, and Vled smiled. "It means, *my lofely shiny modder.*"

The vixen smiled amid the chorus of "Awws" around her and put her paws on the young one's shoulders while Vled stroked Teshya's head and continued, the look on his face becoming difficult for those present to read.

"De mountain grew angry and buried her willage in de snow an' stones," Vled translated, but now with closed eyes. Kette saw him take a deep breath. "All of her family and odders disappeared, but she was trone into trees and liffed. She could find no one, and walked for many days alone..."

Arna gasped and wept, burying her face in her husband's chest, while others in the group put paws to their mouths or stood wide-eyed in shock.

"How *awful!*" muttered one of the vixen neighbors.

Kette shed tears as well at the tragic tale, but realized part of the mystery of Vled had just been solved: he was a Bruk Tov, a member of a tribe shrouded in mystery.

Not only had the large "foxes" learned to live among the Fire Mountains – a land so inhospitable, flaming stone would sometimes pour from great holes in the mountain and flow downhill like so much muddy water – they were also believed to be the first speaking tribe in the world, becoming

fearless hunters of the giant creatures that existed in the dark past.

Kette was suddenly filled with a tremulous curiosity, wanting to know all about his life before coming to this village.

The dark fox looked up at her, and his honest, toothy grin made her smile. She sensed a warm friendliness about him.

"You, wise one, will teach her now?" he asked quietly while touching her paw, as if secretly alluding to their conversation on the clifftop. Kette nodded slowly, but without hesitation.

Vled turned his gaze on Teshya's new guardian. "And, missy Duna, to be modder of Bruk Tov will be, how you say, a *challenge* for gentle wixen like you..."

Duna folded her arms across her chest. "Are you saying I cannot be a good mother to Teshya?"

Vled's eyes grew wide and he shook his head quickly. "No, no! You are to be *wery gude* madonye! I say only, she has seen hard life for one so young, and you must be *understand* of her. As, I know you will..."

Duna knelt beside her adopted daughter, hugging her and kissing her cheek.

"Of *course* I will!"

"Let us giff her supper, now, yes?" Vled smiled. "She is weary, and shude eat."

Sage scooped Teshya into his arms and rubbed noses with her as Vled gathered a large portion of dried meat strips from his cart, following the older fox to the front door of his home, where both of the silver vulpines thanked him for providing the food.

"I shall take leafe now," Vled said at the door, with a final, kindly smile at Kette. She stepped with him a little ways from the others and put a paw on his arm. He cocked his head to one side. "Yes?"

"It was *you*, wasn't it?" she asked quietly. "The other day, up on the Edge. You talked me down," she said quietly. "Thank you for that. I...I wasn't myself..."

The large fox grinned. "You are most welcome, lit'le one. We all haff times when we question fate; I once asked the Great Spirit why I was allowed to liff wit' bad memories, but now I am



### Dragons Duo by Angela K. Scott

here, in willage, wit' friends!”

They gently shook paws and parted, she walking with her parents and Vled pulling his cart away from the village into the darkening forest...

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Supper was a varied offering of harvest time favorite stone baked hopperbugs, mushrooms, dried fish and the remaining ox strips provided by Vled. In the midst of her meal, Kette was nibbling on one of the tough, meaty bits when she made a decision about something that had occurred to her recently. Arna noticed the look of concentration on her daughter's face from across the table.

“What is on your mind, dear? Care to share?” she asked sweetly between bites.

Kette smiled. “I'd like to invite Vled to supper with us some evening, if it's alright with you and Papa. I think, as the students get a bit older, learning some facts from him about the Bruk Tov tribe would be a perfect way to teach them about different cultures!”

“Good idea!” said Dern, munching a crispy hopper. Mother agreed as well, but she revealed

an ulterior motive...

“Vled is bold and a bit wild, but I think he'd be a fine provider. And, even though they are a bit scary at times, the Bruk Tov *are* well-known for having strong family bonds...”

Keeta snickered at first, then covered her mouth to laugh at the unexpected turn of the conversation.

“*Mum!*” Kette gasped, smirking at her sister. “I'm inviting him here to learn about his tribe, not see about his potential as a husband!”

Dern shook his head in amusement as Arna smiled broadly. “All I'm saying,” she continued in a whisper, “Is such a mysterious fox would certainly be a romantic choice for a mate!”

“Oooh, Kette and Vled setting up house together!” Keeta snorted, poking fun at her sibling.

Kette's demeanor suddenly dulled, and she smiled wanly. “You'll be married and have kits before *any* tod looks at *me*, Keet. No male wants a mate who can't even walk normally...”

She excused herself from the table and limped off to her alcove bedroom, Arna at her side with a loving, supportive arm around her daughter's shoulders.

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Two quiet, normal days passed, but the morning of the third brought a most unusual sight: a *vyetka blet*, or trade line, the kind of thing one normally saw only in the larger, more established townships. A tradition of the eastern Cze'cyen communities, these single-file groups of colorful, enclosed wagons were the purveyors of goods, exotic foods and baubles from other areas of the country. The treasures were sold or bartered by one or more families of foxes who owned the wagons.

It seemed as if all the residents of Vulpye greeted the skulk when the seven wagons arrived at midday, and business began almost immediately. Local foods were the most popular medium of exchange, bartered for material for making clothing, tools for building things or harvesting crops, and many other useful items.

The foxes who operated the *blet* lived not in any particular region but in the wagons from which they sold their wares, and traveled most of the year as weather permitted.

They were a delightful blend of silvery hill country, red woodland and the slightly smaller white northern foxes, with a few variances within the group from the inevitable marriages. Each was dressed in bright, cheerful colors.

Many villagers paused the day's activities to go and peruse the offered goods, with Teshya and other little ones running back and forth between home and their parents at the *blet* carrying bunches of berries, vegetables or dried meat to use as barter.

The cheerful atmosphere echoed with conversation and gentle laughter, each local fox examining the wares and talking with the *bletniks*, or cart owners, with news from towns and burrows recently visited high on the list of topics. Kette and her mother were deciding on some new material for dresses and haggling over the price with a lovely snow she-fox named Seva, when Vled walked by pulling his cart.

Seva's demeanor went from friendly and helpful to disbelief and amazement even as Arna was speaking with her; the snowy vixen dropped the

material she was holding, gasped and put her paws to her cheeks.

"Szhhek tse et *Vled!!*" she shouted, pointing at the startled dark fox and waving at her companions.

The very air seemed charged with excitement, then, the *bletniks* leaping from their wagons and gathering in the street near the large, black-furred fellow. Vled grinned and extended his paw to the elder red fox who stepped up to him, the red bowing reverently.

"Ah, Yunze! Pr'vyek!" the dark vulpine greeted him.

"Pr'vyek, honored Vled," Yunze replied. "Ye are vell, ve 'ope. All prayed ye lived after de fight at Blood River!"

Vled held-up his paw. "N'ych, please not to speak of old days now," he requested quietly, casting a furtive look around. "These gude ones I liff wit', do not need to hear of such madness."

But Kette had overheard the cryptic exchange, an excited tingle going through her at this new, fascinating revelation.

An older vixen with similar fur color as Vled's and many years on her shoulders, stepped up to him and put her arms around his neck. His eyes shown with recognition, and he knelt before her as she whispered into his right ear while gently patting his back.

Kette, standing only a few cubits away, strained to hear what was being said, but heard only some words in whatever language the *bletniks* were using. Vled nodded to the she-fox as they spoke.

Kette and her mother leaned towards an admiring *bletnik* red who stood near them.

"Hello! We live here in the village, but know little about Vled. Is he of your tribe?" Kette asked. The weary-looking red smiled with a bit of surprise.

"No, he is uff de high mountains. Ye... do not *know* uff this great one?" he responded.

Both vixens shook their heads, and the handsome fox beamed.

"He is *fierce* warrior who safed us at de Blood River, some seasons past; he killed wolfs who..."

He was gently interrupted by one of the elder

white vixens with beautiful, brushed fur and wearing an elaborately-embroidered gray dress. She stepped over next to him and touched his elbow, shaking her head and whispering something in his ear. He nodded, and when he next spoke it was as if he were reciting a memorized lesson.

“He is an old friend uff our band, one who has shown us great kindness.”

Kette looked over at Vled, who was now surrounded by the bletniks who showered him with offerings of food and goods. The fox speaking with the vixen chuckled at the spectacle and put his palms together in front of him.

“Please excuse. I must return to my kret... or, how you say, *cart*.”

Kette and Arna stepped back to the side of the street, the mystery playing out before them becoming more and more enticing. Vled was obviously much more than merely a humble denizen of Vulpye, and Kette was determined to learn more about him.

As she and her mother resumed their trade with the white vixen, Kette noticed one of the bletniks retrieving a folded garment from a wooden box on the side of her kret had what appeared to be a piece of wood attached to her lower right leg.

The wearer was moving about so normally the only reason Kette had seen the addition was when the vixen stretched to reach something hanging on the side of the cart and the hem of her long dress had ridden up. The teacher approached the female, and introduced herself.

“Is that a brace to support your leg, dear?” she asked, trying to get a better look at the thing.

Mati, the vixen in question, an attractive red about the same age as Kette and wearing a colorful blue-and-yellow frock, smiled and nodded when she saw Kette's own injury.

“Dah, is for short leg to fix! Dere is hoppy of genius mind in Leap Valley who invent such ting for ones who haff bad leg! Comen see!”

She sat on one of the steps on her cart and lifted her leg so Kette could examine it in more detail; the device, a wooden extension that was fitted to the vixen's malformed leg with ox hide straps, was an ingenious blending of carved wood and thin metal bands that not only made the short leg the

same length as the normal one, but provided a softer step than one of the older, solid “peg” things upon which Kette depended.

“You say this was invented by a *rabbit* in Leap Valley?” she asked the visitor. “Do you think he could make one for me?”

The friendly, exotic vixen giggled and shook her head, holding a paw up level with the tops of her ears. “N'yeh, is not lit'l bunye – is jackrabba! *Wery* tall hoppy! An' dah, he make one for you, but you must to his shop go yourself for fit. Each leg only wear by one who need it.”

By the time Mati went back to her business, Kette had memorized the name of Oren, the elder of a clan of jackrabbits that lived in two of the valleys to the west of Vulpye. The valleys mentioned were several days' travel from her home, but she easily justified the journey as *limp there, walk back...*

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That night at supper Kette could barely contain herself. She eagerly offered to her parents her reasons for planning a trip to Leap Valley, as well as what she would need to accomplish it. Her mother was naturally worried about the length and potential dangers of such an expedition, while father Dern was concerned about execution: supplies, means of transport, protection from dangers, and who would accompany her.

“I can take care of myself, you know. I really don't *need* an escort...” Kette began after numerous questions and answers had circled the table. Her mother leaned forward in her seat with both paws flat on the tabletop.

“You are NOT going on such a journey *alone*, young lady! That is *absolutely* out of the question!”

Kette nodded respectfully, hiding her disappointment, but then Keeta spoke up. “I'll go with her! Me and Ned; he'd *love* an adventure trip like this!”

Dern furrowed his brow. “I thought Ned and his father were going to a trade gathering soon... a fortnight from now, isn't it?”

Keeta smiled. “If *I* ask him, Ned will come

with us. He's sweet that way..."

Kette rolled her eyes and shook her head at her sister from across the table, but couldn't help the broad grin that brightened her face. Many of their friends found humor in Ned's strong attraction to Keeta, and joked that she had the enamored tod so wrapped around her finger he would do almost anything she asked.

"Thanks, Keet. I'd appreciate the company."

She looked at her father. "So, I have an escort. If we allow three or four days' travel out there, the same back and a few days with Oren to get my new leg fitted, we'll be back here before Ned's trip! Please, Papa? It's important to me..."

Dern looked at Arna, who shrugged with a hopeful smile at her husband. He sighed. "Well, I'd still want more going with you – safer in a crowd, and all of that – but that device sounds like it *could* give you more freedom to get around..."

Kette sprang up with an excited cry and hugged first her mother, then Dern, kissing them both and thanking them repeatedly as Keeta snickered with wellmeaning amusement.

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A journey covering such a distance as the one Kette was planning required a number of special skills, of course. The first one which came to most folks' minds was the means to defend oneself against any threats, either from feral beasts or bandits.

Being the sensible soul she was, Kette took time from her teaching duties to learn basic cart-smithing (how to change a broken wheel-hoop, for instance), fire-making, and weapons-handling. Brandishing and using a spear or dagger was fairly straight-forward, but archery was a skill of which Kette would need training by someone with experience.

She somehow knew that Vled had such ability, and asked the large, scarred fox to teach her and Keeta how to best use a bow and arrows.

Before high sun that day, Brun arrived with his hunting bow to begin the lesson. Both sisters examined the powerful weapon as the dark fox explained all the parts and their use, but it quickly became apparent that neither Kette nor her sibling

had the strength needed to pull the string back far enough to use it. Undeterred, the eager vixen borrowed her mother's bow and arrows, and the Bruk Tov prepared a suitable target site behind Dern and Arna's home, with the forest as the backdrop.

Using his own, well-worn weapon, Vled demonstrated everything from stringing the bow to nocking an arrow. After tying a paw-length, thick leather strap around the shaft of the arrow he was using, he stood with the relaxed bow pointing at his feet and asked Keeta to toss her wooden bracelet towards the nearest tree.

As soon as the vixen threw the small circle of polished, engraved hardwood, Vled raised the bow, drew back and let fly the arrow in one fluid move, the black-fletched missile next appearing embedded in the bark of the large pine with the bracelet spinning around the shaft... held in place by the leather strap. Both sisters stared wide-eyed at the arrow, then at the archer.

"My stars..!" Kette breathed in amazement.

"Is simple, wit' practice!" the fox said humbly.

Since Keeta had already learned the finer points of the bow while spending time with her friends, her younger sister was first up. Vled patiently placed her in the proper stance and let her nock the arrow. Standing close behind her with his arms around her shoulders, he guided her paws as she drew-back the string and aimed for a thick, broken branch standing upright against the trunk of a tree as the target. With him thus bracing her, the first arrow hit very near the center of the target.

The next shot he let her do the work; however, the warmth of his body against hers, and the nearly intoxicating fox-musk emanating from his muscled form broke her concentration for a moment. She released the string smoothly but jerked the bow a bit to one side, sending the arrow off target and into the trees behind it.

"Drat!" she muttered with some embarrassment, as Vled shrugged and Keeta smiled knowingly.

"Is alright, little one. De bow takes practice for shoot straight. We will try again!"

The trio had but three arrows for their training, and after the next one hit nearer the mark, the first, errant arrow had to be retrieved.

Kette moved off in the direction taken by the

arrow, scanning the woods around her for the white fletching, still trembling ever so slightly from her contact with Vled. After a few minutes of searching, she saw the arrow stuck in the trunk of a large soft-wood needle tree, about twice her height above the ground.

Poking the arrow to dislodge it with her walking staff proved fruitless, as the rough iron head seemed to be firmly embedded in the thick bark. Climbing up to the arrow and pulling it out by paw would be necessary, but there weren't any branches close to the ground upon which to climb.

Keeta stepped beside her sister. "Kette and Vled..." she whispered mischievously, giggling.

"Hush!" Kette smiled, shaking her head, "And help me get that arrow down."

"What if we throw rocks at it and try to knock it out that way?" Keeta suggested after a moment, hurling a small stone but missing the tree entirely. The second attempt resulted in a bounce-back which nearly hit Ketta, who dodged it while laughingly commenting about her sister's poor aim.

Vled chuckled, stepping over to the tree. "If I may offer help," he said quietly, standing with his back to the trunk and holding both paws out in front of him at hip level.

"One of you step in my paws and stretch up while I lift you; den arrow will be easy to grasp."

Keeta pushed her sister towards him. "That sounds like a task for you, Kett," she smiled. To her surprise, Kette stepped backwards and shook her head.

"No... no, I can't. *You* go ahead!"

Keeta frowned. "You know I don't even like to stand on a stool in the house because it looks too high off the floor! What makes you think I want to climb a tree?"

She nodded towards Vled. "Go on, he's waiting! Just hop up there, get the arrow and be done with it."

Ketta reluctantly hobbled over to stand before the fox, leaning her staff against the tree, and with her paws on her hips looked him menacingly in the eye. "Don't you *dare* look up!"

Vled gave a wry grin. "You haff no worry for such ting, Kette. But haff care, and hold to branch abofe."

Kette put her paws on Vled's broad shoulders and her good foot into his cupped paws, standing as he easily lifted her upwards. At her height she came to the arrow at chest level, grasping a wispy, nearby branch in one paw and the arrow shaft in the other.

One good tug on the arrow caused several things to happen in rapid succession: the arrow popped out of the tree's bark much easier than she had anticipated, throwing her off-balance and causing her foot to slip out of Vled's paw, and the thin branch she was using for support snapped-off at the trunk.

The startled vixen fell straight down, and before Vled could call-out "I've got you!", she landed astride his shoulders with the tod's head under her dress and both of his paws on the small of her back to prevent her from falling backwards.

Keeta gasped and leaped to help her sister as Vled staggered blindly about in a circle for balance, Kette letting-out a confused yelp and shouting, "Put me down! *Put me down!*!"

The fox set the vixen on her feet as gently as he could, and as soon as her toes touched the ground Kette struggled off his shoulders and limped frantically away towards her father's home. Keeta retrieved her sister's walking staff and hurried to catch-up with her, following her sibling through the back door and down the hall.

"What's wrong, Kett?" she asked worriedly at her sister's obvious distress.

"Are you alright? Did you get hurt slipping off the tree?"

The vixen sat on her bed, a look of humiliation on her face and hugging her knees; Keeta could see the redness of embarrassment beneath her fur.

My gosh, Kett, what..?"

"I... when I fell on Vled, his head went up my dress, and I ended up on his shoulders..." Ketta began.

Her sister smiled sympathetically, but waved it off as trivial.

"Yeah, I know *that*. So?" she shrugged. "Big deal! I'm sure he..."

"I'm not wearing anything *underneath*..!"

Kette blurted quietly through clenched teeth, an angry-but-mortified look in her eyes. "I went outside before I was finished getting dressed! How

was I to know he'd... That I'd..."

Keeta stood in stunned silence for a few moments, then put her paws to her muzzle as her eyes lit-up with glee.

"Oh...my...*gosh!*" she managed before she burst out laughing. "Ohmygosh..!" she gasped. "You mean he got a *snootful* of..?"

"Hush! And, don't you DARE say *anything* about this to *anyone!*" Ketta growled at her sibling, who was already starting to get tears on her cheeks from laughter.

"Say what to whom?" their mother Arna asked, stopping in the doorway. Kette groaned and put a paw over her eyes and Keeta started laughing again.

"What's going on? Is everything alright in there?" came father's voice from the parlor. Kette buried her head under the blanket on her bed and Keeta slid down the wall to the floor in breathless mirth.

"I swear, if Vled comes to the door and says anything about me I will do something *terrible* to somebody!" Kette yelled from beneath her bed-covers, hoping no one would sense her intense excitement.

Between Keeta's amusement and Kette's reluctance to go into detail, it took Arna quite a while to calm her daughters and find out what was going on, but afterwards they all had a quiet laugh about it.

Dern's curiosity was indirectly defused by his wife's invoking the females only explanation of "secret vixen business"...

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Kette awoke at dawn the next morning to an enticing whiff of Vled's musk, smiling at what she first thought was a delightful dream. As she sat up, however, she nearly yipped in alarm when she saw Vled sitting on the foot of her bed.

"What...?" she blurted, but covered her mouth with her own paw to avoid waking her family. Vled smiled at her.

"You are to traffel long way to odder walley soon?" he asked quietly in that fascinating accent of his.

Kette nodded, her mind a blur of questions and

emotions. How..? The two doors on the house were secured from inside by wooden throw-boards, one of which she could see from her bedroom through the curtain, still in place on the front entry panel. Keeta probably forgot to latch the back door again, she figured. Then his question reclaimed her attention.

"Uh, yes, I am. Me, Keeta and Ned are making the trip to get me fitted..."

"For wuden leg of gude build by wise bunye; I know," he finished for her. "I go wit' you for protect and, may be for friend?" he suggested... and it sounded very much as if there was a note of hope in the query.

It was Kette's turn to smile, and a shiver coursed through her. Here was the perfect opportunity to learn more about this mysterious fox while spending a good many days on the road with him. She nodded.

"Yes, I'd like that very much – for you to come with me. I mean, *us..!*" she stammered quietly, blushing. The flustered vixen straightened, holding her pillow at her middle and trying to choose her words more carefully.

"Look, about my archery lesson yesterday, when I fell on you; thank you for catching me, but I'm really embarrassed about..."

Vled grinned and moved to sit at her side on the bed, where he bestowed a surprisingly tender kiss on her left cheek. And suddenly, Kette's entire world focused on him.

"Is not for embarrass you, kind Kette," he said gently. "But, to me, you haff scent of angel. And, I tink we haff gude life-journey togedder, yes?"

He kissed the top of her paw in parting, letting her trembling fingers gradually slide off his own as he stood, and it was all she could do to keep herself from seizing him in her arms.

Then, putting a finger to his lips and winking playfully at her, the large fox walked out of sight... directly through the stone wall at her bedside, as if he were little more than a wraith.

Ketta gasped, her heart pounding in her breast as she sat open-mouthed and staring in stunned disbelief at the wall. Keeta flounced in a moment later wearing her favorite, tattered green night-dress.

"Good, you're already awake!" she said cheer-

fully, sitting on the edge of the bed and flopping over her sister's legs. "I could hear you talking in your sleep again, you know." She eyed Kette's still-shaken face and grinned.

"And, looks to me like you were dreaming about Vled; it even *smells* like him in here, for star's sakes!"

As Keeta rambled on about this and that, Kette's mind was in joyful disarray; for somewhere, somehow her life had taken a breathlessly delightful turn towards adventure, and love, and things about which she was now determined to learn all there was to learn.

Her journey with Vled promised to be not only a trek to a distant valley for a new leg, but one of lifelong wonder – and she couldn't *wait* for it to begin.

END