Born Unto Trouble

by K. A. Sutherland
Contents

Letter from the Editor

Fiction
p. 5 Dust of Red
   -Emily Blue

p. 11 Shadow of the Ziggurat
   -Isobel Mackenzie

p. 18 Always Finds a Way
   -Sadie Maskery

p. 19 A Daughter’s Aim
   -Anna Madden

p. 27 Roll the Bones
   -Michael M. Jones

p. 30 La Relique
   -Alex Evans

p. 50 Vultures on the Ground
   -V. R. Collins

p. 55 Born Unto Trouble
   -K. A. Sutherland

Author Biographies

JW STEBNER, Editor in chief

On the cover: Matt Emmons’ illustration inspired by
K. A. Sutherland’s “Born Unto Trouble.”
Letter from the Editor

The planning for Issue 5 started way back in December 2020 when I received a submission on Christmas Eve from Alex Evans. The piece, titled “La Relique,” left an impression on me. Not only because it was a spectacular story, but also because it was submitted in its original French.

For those who may not be aware, I founded *Hexagon* while living on the Canadian Prairies. English is still the majority language here, but a small percentage of Saskatchewanians also speak French. These French-speakers are called Fransaskois, and I joined this amazing community when I began learning French as a second language.

When I was younger, I never knew what to read in French. Most of the books available in Saskatchewan were translations of popular YA novels or original classic French texts. It was a struggle to find books that interested me at my reading level without the internet to help.

When I read “La Relique” for the first time, I was reminded of the pre-internet struggle to find French stories in Saskatchewan. *If only I could have found stories like this when I was a kid.* Then, my brain caught up with me. I now have the ability to publish the stories that I wish had been available to me when I was younger. From there, I set about creating an issue that would envelop Alex’s story.

I am incredibly proud to be publishing *Hexagon*’s first bilingual issue, and I hope that there will be many more in the future. Allons-y!

Opening the issue is a tragic tale written by Emily Blue. “Dust of Red” is heart-wrenching and horrifying, recounting a mother’s journey across the hot sand, pursued by a mysterious stranger. The story is colder than it has any right to be in the heat of the desert.

Next is Isobel Mackenzie’s short story, “Shadow of the Ziggurat.” A sharp turn from Emily’s tale, Isobel’s love story follows a pair of workers as they leave their home to work on the king’s ziggurat.

The sole poem of the issue, “Always Finds a Way,” is an absolute delight to read. Sadie Maskery paints a picture with words as she describes what might happen when our world finally meets its end.
You may recognize Anna Madden’s name from our fourth issue. She wrote the brilliant cover story “Wings of Light.” Now, Anna has returned with another story just as full of emotion and weight. “A Daughter’s Aim” is a story about how everyone deals with grief in their own way. And of course, there’s a dragon.

Also returning to the pages of *Hexagon* is Michael M. Jones! Michael’s piece “The Midnight Bride and Her Starshine Love” was one of my favourites from our very first issue. And now, “Roll the Bones” packs another punch in a small package.

Alex Evans’ “La Relique” was the first story that was chosen for this issue, and the inspiration for the desert theme. A dozen warrior-priestesses have been tasked with protecting the heiress of a remote Divine City. But, not everything is as it appears to be in this place.

“Vultures on the Ground,” is a hopeful story in a seemingly hopeless setting. In the middle of nowhere, two mech captains have found a relic of the past. What will they discover as they investigate further?

Finishing off the issue is K. A. Sutherland’s “Born Unto Trouble.” This story, which inspired Matt Emmons’ beautiful cover art, is a weird western/fantasy tale of adventure and excitement. Nothing gets the blood pumping like the impending arrival of a dragon through a raging dust storm!

Matt Emmons has provided us with a second cover after the incredible work that he did for Issue 4. Full of anticipation and terror, the dust cloud hangs like a held breath while a tiny dra waits for the oncoming storm.

This oversized issue has been filled to the brim with amazing new speculative fiction thanks to the fantastic support of our subscribers. Without them, we would not have been able to kick off Year Two of *Hexagon* in such style. This issue also welcomes our first returning contributors Matt Emmons, Michael M. Jones, and Anna Madden. We are so happy that they could grace our pages again with their beautiful work.

Nearly 23,000 words of weird, wondrous, and whimsical fiction awaits you! What could you possibly be waiting for?

JW Stebner
Dust of Red
by Emily Blue

Every time Basil looked over her shoulder, she saw the watcher, a hunched fragment of a person hobbling in her footsteps. Every time, Basil hugged her daughter closer and tried to walk faster, with more purpose. The ever-changing landscape fought her advance, sand and dust whipping in streams around her worn shoes. Dunes rose and fell straight on to the horizon, a shifting sea of gray and brown and white, brown and white and gray. Mostly brown, a crumbly and dried-out tan, like flakes of skin.

In a way, it was skin. The skin of the earth.

Basil shuddered and shuffled on, her footprints blurring, becoming indistinct. Her walk carved furrows in the dust and dirt, markings of her passage that lasted a few seconds before the wind covered them in another layer of friable soil. Aside from the wind and the endless hiss of dust sliding over dust, the only sound was her own breathing. Ragged and phlegmy, yet dry. Always dry.

Her vision fogging with exhaustion, Basil kept walking. The action had become automatic. She could hardly feel her legs yet they continued in their motions, skimming through the dust one after the other.

This would be her fourth trip across the endless plains. When she was but five years old, she and her family group trekked out of the Rocky Mountains following the end of the Flood of Fury, one of the worst wet spells in memory. They spent the next ten years in the shadow of a ridge of smaller mountains, the Smokies, before returning to the western range just before the next Flood. That had been the Silver Flood, marked by a brilliant moon phenomenon the elders called an eclipse. There they had remained, living as best as they could, climbing higher and higher up the mountains as the water level rose. They followed it back down as the floods ended and the droughts began anew, farming the rich, wet lands for as long as the bounty would last. Twenty years they remained, until all the water had gone away, before crossing the plains again.

Basil looked over her shoulder once more. Her heart jumped. Her watcher had come closer, gaining on her, moving at the same steady pace while she, herself, faltered down to little more than a crawl.
She couldn’t keep this up much longer. She would run herself into the dust. A choice had to be made.

Basil lifted her thin daughter, peered worriedly at the pale, wind-scraped face. The child continued to sleep, as she had for most of the journey. Breathing a sigh of relief, she kissed her daughter’s forehead, and resecured her mask over her mouth and nose.

Basil looked at the dust, then at the horizon, or the vague suggestion of it through the screens of billowing dust. She felt the small weight of her daughter, which had grown steadily more difficult to bear.

A few minutes of rest, enough to regain some of the feeling in her legs, and then she would get moving again.

Basil lowered herself on top of a drift of soil, crossing her legs. She cradled her daughter’s cool little body in her lap, turning the child’s face to her breast to shelter her as much as possible.

In the shadow of the Smokies, little water could be found, no more so than anywhere else. Why her group made the back-and-forth trek, she didn’t know. She had never bothered to ask.

Four years ago, the weather changed. Moisture fell. Infrequently. Scatterings of rain every few months, hardly more than a spitting, but enough to signal the group needed to return once more to the taller mountains, before the true rainstorms arrived.

Basil had been left behind.

The decision was unanimous. She still remembered casting her own vote, adding her stone to the growing pile.

She had been left with nothing, left to die, and she had agreed to it. She understood her situation as well as the rest of her people. At almost fifty years old, she became pregnant. Almost old enough to be an elder herself, she would not survive the pregnancy, and she would be a terrible drain on her people if she did.

She remained. And she gave birth, somehow managing to survive, raising her daughter as best she could.

With the rainy season coming fast, threatening their lives, she had made the decision to cross the plains to try and join with her people once more.

She hadn’t realized how being with her family made it all so much easier. She had no one to share her burdens.

Footsteps approached, a distinctly familiar crunching of compressed dust. Basil jerked to her feet, dislodging the drifts of dust which had piled up on her and her drowsing daughter. She whirled.
Not far away at all now was the watcher, meandering steadily closer. It was a woman, Basil noted with some surprise, half her own age and with one leg withered. The woman supported herself upon a thick, petrified branch, a very rare find when all large plants had long since been buried in tons of loose soil.

She spun and started running, clutching her little girl close to her. Still the watcher plodded on after her, a curious three-part gait, like the heartbeat of some unimaginable creature.

Basil cried out, choking around the dust in her throat. “Why are you following us?”

The watcher kept coming, trudging along. Basil lowered her head and kept running, breathing faster, tasting dirt on her tongue as dust entered her lungs and refused to leave. She coughed and spat a brown wad of mud on the parched earth, staggered, hurried to make up the lost ground. She had no idea what the stranger could do to her and she truly didn’t want to find out. She would do anything at all to avoid it.

The wind whipped loose sand and dirt into a frenzy, forming black clouds that blotted out what little filmy sunlight there had been in the first place. Hair on Basil’s arms and the back of her neck stood on end, static crackling in the air. Not now, she begged. Not now.

But nature ignored her, just like men had ignored nature, and the wind blew so fiercely she could hardly move her legs. Every step became a mile, a journey in and of itself. The thick, choking clouds made it so she couldn’t see where she put her feet. She couldn’t see the watcher, didn’t know if the woman kept up her relentless chase; she couldn’t even see the tip of her own nose.

If the storm deepened now, they would die, all three of them smothered in the dirt, choking on the failures of their ancestors. Basil shifted her daughter to one arm and waved the other as she ran, searching, hoping to encounter something solid enough to provide shelter. A boulder, even the crackling skeleton of a shrub would suffice at this desperate point. Her fingers encountered only dust, streams of dust that swirled around her hand and massive blowing drifts like serpents made of earth, slithering past.

A helpless sob rose in her throat. Speckles of mud flew from her lips. Basil pulled in a gasp, but nothing would come, no air.

Her throat was blocked.

Her aching lungs already burned.

Basil stumbled, her legs knocking together. She collapsed, twisting as she fell to protect her daughter. She hit the ground hard, a pang reverberating all the way through her
shoulder. A strangled cry pulled from her throat, and then a great plug of packed soil, as long as her longest finger. Dusty air flooded into her lungs and it had never tasted so good.

She tried to stand up and found her legs refused to work. Dust weighed on them but even more than that, they ached so much even attempting to move them brought tears. Valuable moisture slid down her cheeks. A bolt of anxiety made her yank her arms up, swiping at her face, gathering the salt tears and forcing them to her tongue, back into her body—except the movement never manifested as more than a thought. Her arms, like her legs, had given up on her.

Basil lay there, brown and red sands forming a blanket over her and her little girl. She tried to prevent more precious tears from escaping, though they seeped out from beneath her lids despite all her efforts. Her chest felt cold and tight with an emotion she had never felt before. Hate. She hated the people who had done this to her. Not her family group. They had only been doing their best to survive in this world that had been left to them.

She hated her ancestors, the careless fools who had destroyed all the wonderful things that were now myths. Trees. They had cut down all the trees and burned them, destroying green and red and golden treasures for their own gain. Basil knew, from the old tales, trees were like big shrubs, but her mind couldn’t conceive of a shrub taller than a person, much less many times taller.

Grass. Her ancestors destroyed the grass and other strange things called weeds and ferns, tearing the ground to shreds to plant food for more and more people. With the ground shredded and the trees gone, and with the ancestors working their strange machines to turn the world hotter, the parched soil wore away. Immense floods followed the drought, like night followed day.

They had done this and had known they were doing it, unmindful of the consequences for their descendants.

Basil hated.

The dust cleared for a moment, the wind dropping. The watcher stumbled forward, out from the settling clouds.

Basil rolled onto her side, the most she could manage. “Why are you following us?” she croaked. “What do you want?”

The watcher approached, standing over Basil. Her lips were thin, twin smears of cracked blood. Her eyes were hollow, desiccated, devoid of anything significant. “I want.”

“What?” Basil hissed.
The watcher pointed at Basil’s daughter, lying still and small in her ragged clothes.

Basil forced herself up to her hands, a cry of pain lurching from her, torn away by the wind.

“You can’t have her!”

“The clothes,” the woman murmured. Scabs on her lips cracked with her laborious speech, trickles of blood dripping down her chin.

“I need them.”

Basil pulled her daughter closer to her, hunching over her to protect her. “Is there nothing but dust in your head? They won’t fit you.”

The watcher shrugged. “Better than nothing.” Grunting, bracing herself on her crutch, the woman bent, grabbing for Basil’s prone daughter, still sleeping, sheltered by the innocence of youth.

“No!” Basil shrieked, spittle flying from her mouth. She clawed at the woman’s hand with her nails.

The woman clutched the ragged child-sized shirt and yanked.

With a clatter of bones, Basil’s daughter tumbled apart.

Red pulsed in Basil’s vision. For a moment, she saw the pile of bones in the powdery earth, the skull with its gaping maw, the gangly twin arm bones, the heart shape of her hip bone and the many curves of her ribs; wavering in and out of the macabre spill of ivory, she saw her daughter, a thin slip of a girl with pale golden hair, like the sunlight glimpsed so rarely through dust storms and rain clouds. A truth and a lie, inlaid atop each other, blurring until she could no longer tell which was which.

Basil clutched her face and dug her nails in and screamed.

The watcher paid her no mind, calmly untangling clothes from the cluster of bones, still held together in most places by sinew and tendon—connective tissues which the starving animal had had no use for, when it came in the night.

Basil screamed and clawed at her face until her blood painted the soil, until her throat went raw, until she had no voice, and then still she wailed in silence, howling in the voice of the wind.

Her strength gave way and she collapsed, blood and tears seeping into the dry earth. The watcher had gone, having stripped Basil’s daughter of clothes and face mask to use for herself. She had taken far more than that, though.

She had taken everything.

Basil didn’t hate her. As much as her mind ached at the sheer unfairness of it all, she
knew she would have done the same. It was simply the world they had been left with.

Basil dragged her exhausted, battered body over the sand. The sores on her skin, created by constant rubbing of trapped sand, burst and bled and seeped with fluid, leaving a red trail. She curled her arms around her daughter’s skull and pulled it to her, kissed the smooth cranium.

“Acacia,” she murmured, whispering her daughter’s name. A name, like hers, with a meaning lost to time. A tradition, left to them to remember. Whatever an acacia was, Basil hoped it was nice.

She closed her eyes.

A warm droplet touched her cheek, like a tear. And still she kept her eyes closed, hugging Acacia’s bones, while the unseen rain clouds unburdened themselves over the plains, turning the dust to a treacherous mud into which she sank.
My love and I went to build the ziggurat. The call came via the radio waves to the station at our home town. The king was building a ziggurat, more glorious than any before, to outdo the towers of his ancestors, and every artisan in the land was called to work on the grandeur.

I was the best brick maker in the valley, and Leta, the one love of my life, a master carver. It was an honour to go to build the ziggurat. It was the end of the driest time of year, and there would be no better time to travel. We set off in the afternoon, the great mass of the sun behind us, and began our journey deep into the centre of the desert, to the plain of the ziggurats.

We travelled only during the coolness of the morning and afternoon. At night, the wind was cold and fierce and we huddled together in our tent. In the middle of the day, we burrowed deep under the sand, to escape the scorching heat from the sun that filled the sky. Our sun was huge then, massive and red in the sky, and at midday you could see almost nothing else by the smoky halo of it. The village astrologer said we were one of many planets circling our red star, and we were the closest. The stories said we were a desert born of a mother desert, that the first sand had fallen from the surface of the sun to our planet. Just myths to tell children now, but it was easy to believe when you were digging your burrow at the end of the morning, each moment growing hotter, animals scurrying past you to find their own hiding places from the deadly scorch of the noon.

Sometimes, buried under the sand, wrapped in our tent, the silver ants would tickle across our skin, rushing to hunt the unfortunates caught in the heat. They were the only living things that ventured above the earth in the height of the day, and we had both been taught from a young age to fear their appearance above ground as a sign you had not found shelter from the sun.

We were a month into our journey, halfway to our destination, when it became clear to me that I was pregnant.

“We can go back,” Leta said that night, her mouth against my neck, lying close to the fire.

I shook my head. “Better to keep going. It would just be another month back with nothing to show for it,” I said.
“We’d have a baby to show for it,” she said, but that morning, before the sun rose, she put her pack high on her shoulders and pointed herself west, deeper into the desert.

By the time we reached the plain of the ziggurats, I was visibly pregnant. We had travelled more slowly than we had expected, and the work had already begun. All over the massive building site, people swarmed like ants. The foundation alone was our village ten times over. From the ridge at the edge of the plain we could see it all, the steady row of past ziggurats, stretching out towards the horizon, each one larger and grander than the next. Each king sought to outdo the work of the one who had come before, to build a reminder of his power greater than the last, to beat death in infamy and grandeur. Each structure reached closer to the sky, to the first desert, the sun, where those who had done great deeds went after death. We were not kings, but it was part of a great deed, at least, to build a ziggurat so tall it might graze the surface of the sun, might touch the land of the gods.

The clerk took our names and occupations, and assigned us to the camp of brick workers, in the shadow of the great mound of clay. We staked the tent in an open space, between a family and a young man alone, and a runner brought us water and flatbread, to break our fast and welcome us to the great project.

Every day a bell rang before sunrise, to signal the start of work, and I would work alongside the other brick makers, people who had come from every corner of the desert, some even beyond. A small army of us laboured to form up the bricks and lay them in neat pallets, to bake in the deadly heat of the midday. A second bell would ring, and we would retreat back to the shade of the camp’s central tent. When the third bell rang, the sun had retreated and we would take the fired bricks to the engravers, to have the message of the king etched into the surface. Leta worked there, with the other carvers, sitting in the shadow of a large white tent, sharpened stylus in hand.

No expense was spared. When the foundations were completed, we held a celebration with every worker on the site. We were in the middle of the desert, distant from any village or town, but huge baggage trains brought lush cucumber and sweet pomegranates, rosewater syrup and candied almonds, soft vine leaves and fresh, clear spring water. Every one of us, from the lowest runner to the highest official, dined as a king might. Strings of tiny bells hung from the edges of the tents, and the waves of desert air
made them sing, music following us whenever we worked.

It was hard work, harder as my pregnancy progressed, but no drudgery. Those with voices sang while we worked. We would dance at night, and everyone was like a family, far from our villages and blood-relations. Around us rose the ziggurat, each day climbing higher as thousands, hundreds of thousands, of bricks were consumed by its walls. We were within view of the other ziggurats built by previous kings, and we knew how ours compared. Every brick was carved with the king’s message of his greatness, instead of only the outer layer. The foundation could fit a whole city, rather than a town, and the eventual tower would be taller by the height of a person many times over.

In the evenings, we froze rather than baked. The wind cut through everything, bitingly cold and vicious, and we would lie next to the oven of warm coals, Leta holding me in her arms. I would massage her wrists, sore from long hours of work, and she would hold a hot blanket to my aching back.

One night, lying inside the thick lining of our tent, listening to the sound of the bells in the wind, the mother of the high desert family singing her child to sleep, Leta kissed the back of my neck. I pressed my fingers against the tense muscles of her hands, trying to push away the pain. I had fallen in love with Leta’s hands first. She had long beautiful fingers, and skin the colour of loose sand at dawn, the kind my mother called *zarafnet*. The six fingers of her hands moved freely at each of the four joints, and she could make a common rock or brick a work of art with just her stylus and some time.

“Do you think the baby will be born here?” she asked, the breath of her words stirring the hair at the back of my neck.

“Hmm,” I hummed thoughtfully. When I let Leta’s hand go, she held my hip, curling our bodies together. The warmth of my back was different from the warmth of the fire, but I felt none of the cold. Outside, the bells rattled in the harsh night wind. I was perhaps three months along. We had been at the building site five weeks. “They say it will be another six months at least,” I said. “A lucky birth, at the ziggurat.”

“A good omen,” Leta said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. My eyes closed slowly, the tiredness of the day catching up with me. We would be working again in only a few hours.

Perhaps Leta said something else, but I was already too deep into sleep to hear.
The rhythm of the building site was easy to sink into, but sometimes I would pause and look up at the structure of the ziggurat and realise it had grown in the blink of the eye. It seemed to change the landscape around it. No more did we work on a flat plain, but on an ever-growing mountain of our own creation.

At night, we listened to the bells, and watched the stars. They moved slowly through the sky, but remained the stars Leta and I knew well. We had navigated by them through the hottest part of the desert, where few lived. We had lived under them in our village, and I knew each constellation by heart.

Gradually, Leta started bringing bricks back to our tent, to continue working long into the night. I would wake sometimes to see her bent over, stylus in hand, the only sound the rasp of carving. It was a mystery to me. We had no quotas. There was no allotment of work to fall behind on. We worked for the money put in our purses and the food in our bellies. It was true we also worked for the love of it, for the honour of our hands building the greatest temple of our way of life, but neither of us were fanatics. We could love the work and still be glad for the end of the day.

I was maybe halfway through my pregnancy, perhaps a few weeks more, when I woke in the middle of the night, the small greenish moon casting no light, to see Leta working by the dim light of the coals.

I groaned, rolling onto my side. I was bigger now, and it would wake me in the night, feeling crushed by my own body. I had been pregnant before, when I was much younger, and I had forgotten many of its frustrations and pains.

“What are you doing?” I said, propping my head up on my hand. Leta jerked in surprise, looking over her shoulder.

“I didn’t know you were awake,” she said. “Don’t trouble yourself, you need your sleep.”

I rolled myself onto my knees. I felt huge, but I would only get bigger.

“Too late,” I said. “Already awake.”

I stumbled over, still feeling the dregs of sleep pulling at me, and put a hand on her shoulder. She was sitting cross-legged at the edge of the fire, her stylus balanced in the crook of one of her arms, a brick settled in her lap.

“What are you working on?” I asked, leaning over. I could smell the scent of her skin, the oil she used in her hair, the animal smell of her sweat. It was a familiar smell, comforting in the still of the late night.
Leta turned a little so I could see her face, shifting in place.

“Just something to remember this by,” she said softly. The air was so still our instinct was to speak as quietly as possible. Only at the very dead of night did the wind quiet. It was hard to tell the time from my little glimpse of the moon through the open door of the tent, but nothing outside stirred, as if we were a few hours from the pre-dawn bell.

“The bricks?” I said. “We can’t take them with us.”

“I wasn’t going to take it with me,” Leta said, turning the brick in her hands. There were carving marks on more than one side. “Here,” she said, lifting it up so I could take it. “Have a look.”

I rolled off my knees to sit next to her, feeling the familiar rub of the baked clay against my fingers. I worked with hundreds of other brick makers, but I felt like I knew each brick of this ziggurat as well as I knew the ravines and gullies around our home, or as well as the square centres of Leta’s eyes. The grit of the baked earth, the faintly red tint, the heft of each brick, made perfectly alike. My mother had made bricks, and her mother. Our family had built our village, so much so my mother had had a story for every house, the memories of the work that had built a home.

The face of each brick of the ziggurat was carved with the message of the king, his declaration of the purpose of the structure and his magnificence. It was a familiar formula. The same message was read on the radio airwaves and appeared in the keystone over the village council building. Leta carved it a thousand times a day, she probably knew it better than I did.

I turned the brick over in my hands, confused. There was more than one carving. The bed of the brick, the top surface that would be mortared, had another message, shaped in Leta’s careful calligraphic hand.

“What’s this?” I asked, looking up at Leta. Her face coloured with embarrassment.

“It’s for you,” she said. “For you and the child.”

I could read, but it was not a common habit, and I was not used to the calligraphy used on official buildings. I had to turn the brick over, when I realised I was holding it upside down, and I knew my mouth moved as I sounded out the words.

“I am Leta, and I have loved Ourani. We came to this place together with our child. Remember our names,” I read aloud. I looked up,
Leta meeting my gaze, deep emotion in her eyes. “Oh Leta,” I said, and then didn’t know how to go on.

Leta reached over, and took my hand, twining our fingers together, twelve points of connection.

“Why should only kings have their names remembered?” she asked. “I wanted to leave a mark that was mine, not someone else’s words.”

She gripped my hand tightly, and I leaned over to rest my head on her shoulder, feeling the shape of her collarbone support the round of my skull.

“I understand,” I said. “It’s beautiful Leta.”

We sat in silence for a moment, looking over the fire out the tent door. The moon had made more progress across the sky, and we could see it in full now, a distant disc, faintly green against the dark sky. I listened to our breathing as it synchronised, and felt the gentle stirring of my body, my own heart pumping, the flutter of our child inside me.

“Do you think,” I asked, still looking at the distant pinpricks of the stars. “That there are other people out there, beyond our planet?”

Leta turned her head to press a kiss against my hair.

“Maybe,” she said. I could hear the smile in her voice. “But all the stars are far away. It would take hundreds of years to get here.”

“The ziggurat will be here long after we are,” I said. “Maybe aliens will find your carvings.”

“I’d like that,” Leta said, with humour. “I wonder what they’d think.”

My eyes were fluttering closed. The wind outside was picking up, the stillness of the night fading, and the familiar sound of desert breezes were putting me to sleep.

“You wrote it down, didn’t you?” I murmured. “You love me.”

“I do,” Leta said warmly. “Come on, let’s sleep.”

She had to help me to stand, and I lay down on our sleeping mat to watch her bank the fire, and fell asleep as she kissed the back of my neck.

In the hours before the dawn, the bell rang and we separated sleepily, to our work. Like every day, we ate sparingly in the morning, to maximise the hours before the heat made it impossible to do anything. I worked alongside two women who had come from the dry forest south of the desert, also from brickmaking families. We worked in a common rhythm, taking clay from a runner,
shaping it with flat paddles, hands working to form it into bricks. We worked fast, because even in the morning the moisture we used to shape the clay would dry quickly. Each brick was left where we formed it, to bake in the afternoon, and we stooped over to work our way down the line, bricks falling behind us like dust in the wind.

My hands worked, but my mind wandered, thinking about what Leta had said, the messages she had left on the bricks that passed through her hands, that were pressed into the mortar of the ziggurat, that made up its body.

The late morning bell rang, to tell us the sun’s heat was rising, and we should retreat to the shade. I and my fellow brickmakers unbent from our stoops in unison, and stretched, our spines crunching. We were sweating, as the temperature steadily climbed. The great red round of the sun, larger than any mountain, bigger even than the greatest ziggurat, was visible over the horizon. I shaded my eyes to look at it. They said those who did great deeds, whose names were remembered, would go to the surface of the sun when they died, to join the mother desert we had all been born from. Perhaps they were stories, but Leta had reached out towards that infinity of memory with her love for me, for our child.

One of my hands rested on my stomach, where our child was growing. Love built many things.

A bead of sweat worked its way down the back of my neck, between my shoulder blades. I sighed, tasting the grit of the sand the wind carried, and turned away, towards the tents, in the shade of the great ziggurat, where Leta was waiting for me.
Always Finds a Way
by Sadie Maskery

It flowers once, at a planet’s death,
blooms like bruises on the sand.
Contamination sounds so negative—
the world’s carcass is suffused with
filaments of molecular mystery,
a shame the scientists are dust,
no witness ever to its elegance.
Life based on what? And why?
A lichen older than this universe
waits inexorably for that tipping point;
a satellite consumed by its dying star,
the heat of hell to spark reincarnation.
Its spores blast across galaxies
to drift on time’s tide and settle
on a new formed earth. Then bide.
A Daughter’s Aim
by Anna Madden

A south Texas breeze stirred the desert’s sands. Emma lifted a hand to shield her face. Light glared off the twelve-foot-tall perimeter fence. Beyond, the parched Chisos Mountains stood, their feet dusted by chipped rocks and little-leaf sumac.

Promise or no promise, Emma berated herself for leaving the northwest coast, the wet air and lush green shades, spending her last dime flying out to nothingness. The wind bit into her cheeks as she caught sight of Jim. He never called Emma by her name, so she made a point of using his. A rangy man, her father, with a mountain rifle slung over his back. He was Emma’s opposite—stony, grizzled. She was petite as a songbird.

“Hurry up,” Jim said, standing in the shade of his jeep as he tugged on dragonhide tactical gloves. “We’re wasting daylight.”

“Relax, okay?” Emma said, hearing a familiar irritation in her voice. “I’m ready to go.”

Jim didn’t respond, but his brown irises pushed past hers before breaking away. There was so much emptiness between them. More than sand or grit or unspoken words. A wild, barren place that stretched for miles.

“This isn’t a hunting trip, remember?” Emma said. “Lose the gun.”

“No choice, kid,” Jim said. “We can’t go unarmed. Besides, I’ve got to earn my supper. Client from New Jersey bloodied a she-dragon in my territory. Dirty business and unprofessional. Any real hunter would finish their own kill.”

Emma groaned at talk of big spenders rich enough to hunt for trophies. After Mom’s death, she had been unable to focus, to push through the grief, or even hold her job. Her savings were threadbare thanks to this useless trip. Jim hadn’t offered to help out either. Still, she had promised to scatter the ashes alongside him even if her heart wasn’t in it.

“I have a spare rifle,” Jim said, his eyes glancing off hers again.

“There’s enough death in this world,” Emma said. “No need to seek it out.”

As his offering was rebuffed, Jim scowled. “Fine.” He bent down and grabbed supplies off the ground—things gathered from the outpost shed near the gate—then thrust a white container and two water packs into Emma’s hands. “Make yourself useful at least.”
The water sloshed. Emma balanced the packs atop the white container. The metal slid against her sweaty fingers. Spare shells, perhaps? The weight felt off, but she didn’t trust her instincts anymore. She didn’t want to touch bullets or guns or dead things. Those were Jim’s things, always had been.

“Jim,” Emma said. “What’s in here?”

His jaw clamped, the muscles rigid beneath the skin. “Worse than a—” Jim pulled a worn map out of his pocket and studied its inked lines. “It’s a burn kit, in case we find trouble,” he said, brisker than ever. “We’ve some ground to cover. Let’s go.”

Emma approached the jeep. She flung the water packs into the back and the burn kit under the front seat. She felt child-like pulling herself up. Inside, the seat cushion was covered in scarlet-red dragonhide, and it was wet, soaking her thin clothes.

As she twisted in her seat, she rearranged her backpack to rest in her lap. “Did you wash the interior? The dust is on the outside, you know.”

“I sprayed everything down with flame repellant,” Jim said. He secured his rifle into the backseat rack. “It’s standard procedure for this kind of thing.”

Emma gritted her teeth. Seems he understood what rules and procedures were, so why had she needed to constantly scold him about Mom’s illness? There were still outstanding medical bills, and what few signed checks he’d sent were weeks late. As Emma stared through the windshield toward the desolate landscape ahead, she tried not to think about air conditioners and ice and bad blood. The sky dominated here, the blue-gray out of scale without proper trees.

Emma unzipped a pocket and retrieved a half-melted candy bar. As she ate, she eyed the perimeter fence. It kept trespassing poachers out, but the dragons were free to come and go. It was important to maintain a healthy level of fear, wasn’t it? That was the purpose of the emotion: self-preservation. Emma had watched her mother conquer fear even as death embraced her. Still, there had been no closure in her end, no purpose, no great truth revealed. Mom was there, and then she wasn’t, a great searing hole in the world as big as the endless sky.

Emma buckled her seatbelt as Jim hauled himself into the driver’s seat. He turned the key, and the jeep growled. Jim hit the accelerator, and the jeep jerked through the gate, passed the sun-bleached Private Property—No Trespassing sign, and arrowed into the Chihuahuan Desert.
“You didn’t forget it, right?” Jim asked, his eyes on the lack-of-road.

“Of course not,” Emma said, hugging her backpack tighter.

Her father cleared his throat. “We live, we die,” he said. “You only make yourself miserable dwelling on it."

Emma wanted to ask if that’s what he’d told Mom when the stage four diagnosis was made, but she held her tongue. Emma was always doing that. Instead, she reached for the rabbit’s foot on a cord around her neck. She stroked the worn fur and took herself back to happier days. She remembered her parents dancing in the kitchen—thinking themselves alone—without music. None Emma could hear, anyway. Her father had been different back then. Never an involved father, perhaps, but a better man. Before he flew off to the desert.

“I heard they’ve gotten bigger—the dragons,” Emma offered, changing the subject to something safer. It wasn’t like her to break the silence first, but she was tired, and it wasn’t like anything worse could happen.

“Read that in the tabloids, did you?”

“No,” Emma said. “Just, you know, from friends.”

“The most credible of sources,” Jim said sarcastically, shaking his head.

Emma jammed the empty candy wrapper into her backpack. Her fingers brushed against her mother’s wooden urn in the process, jarring her. Emma pulled back fast, squeezing her eyes shut. Jim eyed her from the side.

Emma breathed deep, then exhaled. “Well, I’m asking a credible source now, aren’t I?”

“They’re the same size they’ve always been. The females are larger than the males, but that’s a fairly common phenomenon in nature.”

“Maybe that should be the new standard,” Emma said.

The land fanned out in a brown palette broken with green strokes of prickly pear cactus and weedy sagebrush. Emma rode alongside a man she barely understood, the minutes passing to the constant grind of tires eating rock.

When she was younger, her father had seemed god-like, infallible and all-knowing. The way he distanced himself heightened the effect. He was never interested in childrearing—that was Mom’s territory. Still, he’d loved Mom, at least Emma thought he had. Either way, Emma was capable of chiseling away the god of her childhood until his weaknesses were exposed. It
could have brought them closer, seeing that vulnerability, but it hadn’t.

Jim navigated, driving past eroding limestone mounds. Despite the rocks, the ground looked deceptively flat. The ridgeline of the Chisos grew in front of them, rising slowly. Emory Peak gained definition ahead—the color shifting from slate-gray to brushed walnut.

The jeep rocked side-to-side and Emma braced herself with the handhold above her door. The wheels lurched, and a black-tailed jack rabbit galloped for cover. She imagined herself in its place, running far, bolting from her father and the urn in her backpack. Emma clutched the rabbit’s foot around her neck.

She looked skyward, but nausea and vertigo made her shut her eyes. She wanted to ask Jim how he tracked dragons, but that meant having a conversation. It was Jim’s job to know where to go, where to look. He’d been assigned to this territory when the first egg clutch hatched. He carried a mountain rifle at his side, death inside every bullet. Even so, Jim couldn’t watch his own wife take her last breaths. Was it so different, then? Questions crowded her mind, but Emma wasn’t brave enough to ask what mattered.

Jim killed the engine beside a ravine. In the ensuing silence Emma heard the faint trickle of water. She leaned forward but didn’t see movement. Her tongue felt scaly inside her mouth, slightly swollen.

“Let’s look for tracks here,” Jim said. He slid the transmission into park before grabbing his rifle.

Emma tossed her head to clear it. She unbuckled herself, her backpack in tow as she scrambled after him. A few steps on the ground and her vision blurred as the Texas sun beat down. She settled onto her haunches and panted through cracked lips. Was this the end? A feverish heat smoldered from all sides. The heat of the desert would be her undoing. She could almost laugh. Must be getting delirious, but still, it was funny. After traveling here, every step a battle, she would wither, then turn to ash like her mother before her.

A water pack landed in the dust next to her.

“Get a drink,” Jim said. “Heat exhaustion will kill you a heck of a lot more often than a dragon out here.”

He picked up her backpack, throwing it roughly across his shoulder. The urn rattled inside, and Emma cringed.

“Just leave it in the jeep for now,” Jim said. “It’ll slow us down.”
“Hey—give that back,” Emma said, jumping to her feet too fast. She braced her hands on her knees.

A roar resonated amid the rocks, echoing across the boulders. Jim put a finger to his lips, and they both tilted their heads up. No wings beat there. Emma rubbed her eyes, then swallowed dryly. He set her bag down and walked into the ravine.

Emma snatched the backpack, gripping the nylon against her chest. Unzipping the main compartment, shaking fingers checked the urn’s integrity. Its wood was well-sealed. It didn’t seem right that her mother had been reduced to handfuls of dust. She had been so large in life—so loving and present. Emma swiped at tears. Grabbing the water pack, she opened it and chugged the tepid water. Slowly, her senses returned to normal.

“Come over here,” Jim called, his voice muffled by distance.

She eyed the jeep, wary of moving from its protection. There were few places to hide out here, far from the larger boulders, sharing space with stunted creosote bushes, cenizo sages, and the overbearing sun. That dragon had not sounded welcoming.

Emma collected herself and walked into the ravine. Ahead, her father stood beside a creek bed. Jim grinned. His attention had been captured by his prey. He pointed to a row of tracks where sharp claws had cut deep slits into the softened earth. Beside them, pink stains covered the ground like wet flower petals. She pressed her palm into one and lifted it to her face, smelling the iron of the dragon’s blood.

“How did you know where to find her?” Emma asked.

“Always return home if they can,” Jim said. “Their water sources are limited, too, so these little creeks are the best spots to pick up the trail.”

Seeing his smile and hearing him talk warmly toward the dragons, these modern-day freaks of nature, struck a match.

“Mom wanted to come home,” Emma said, her chin thrust out. “She wanted to be with you even after you walked out.”

His grin withered and died. “Look, it’s complicated with your mother. I—”

Emma closed her eyes. She should have turned back the moment she saw Jim’s rifle and realized that, to him, this day was no different than any other. She blinked hard and started back for the jeep.

He reached out and grabbed her shoulder. “Hold up.”
Emma shrugged free but turned and looked at him, waiting for the apology that would never pass his lips. She stared at him in a silent dare.

Jim cleared his throat. “Listen, you can’t just run off, kid. We’ve got to stick together. Come on then.”

Her father took off uphill. Watching him, Emma balled her hands into fists. Running was his trick. Something he had taught her. He had some audacity to lecture about keeping close. He climbed, his back stooped, his feet stumbling over smaller rocks. Emma tilted her head to the side. His stride was usually so strong and steady. She saw herself in his uncertain bearing—the falter of his gait. She was cut of the same stone.

She exhaled, uncurled her hands, and followed. Her toes and calves burned. The pain felt good. It overtook her doubts. Emma focused on the rocks, on the increasing elevation. The surroundings distracted her from their argument, from her poor finances, from the task she needed to be complete before blessed escape was possible. Emma would have a lot of blisters tonight. She preferred them to the raw ache deep inside. Another step, and she gained purchase atop the limestone cliff. Emma stopped in Jim’s shadow.

He raised a finger and pointed ahead. Emma traced the motion. She gasped.

The dragon crouched atop the overlook. She was beautiful even with blood slickening her scaly wine-colored hide, pooling in a red bouquet beneath her bulk. Her wings were fine and glossy, and her scales shined against the brown earth. Embers glowed down her throat as she tried to fling fire at them, unconquered even in her dying breaths.

“Get down!” Jim shouted, shoving Emma to the rocks and stepping into the dragon’s path.

The fire died in the she-dragon’s throat, too weak to release. Even so, the dragon held her head high, poised, not even swatting her tail.

Emma stood shakily with her father shielding her. He had done it without a thought. She gulped air, sweat gluing escaped wisps of hair from her braid to her cheeks. She swung her backpack off, no longer able to support it. Ahead, Jim took his rifle from his back.

The dragon watched without blinking. Her face was too fierce to express something as mundane as fear. The beast’s gaze looked familiar: present, full of agony, aware and piercing. Emma had witnessed this same emotion, this acceptance, beneath the lights at the hospital. Only then, she had been forced to watch day after
day without the power to help, useless even as she stood guard beside her mother’s deathbed. This time it would be different.

“Let me do it,” Emma said, holding out her hand.

Jim handed over his rifle. Emma hesitated, realizing he believed her capable of this task. Jim nodded sharply and stepped back.

She took up her father’s rifle, fixing the butt to her shoulder, leaning into it. It was intimate, this feeling, stirring memories of when they had gone hunting together long ago. Back before she had decided it wrong to take a life so effortlessly. She looked down the muzzle—a view her father often shared, raising this gun and taking aim. Jim wasn’t afraid of death, she realized. Only the hurt that surrounded it. This creature had been brought into existence by geneticists and, before that, storytellers whose appreciation for wings and claws rivaled common sense. It deserved a clean, pain-free passage. Jim hadn’t been able to give that to Mom. Neither of them had.

His was a festered wound, and he carried it—alone.

Emma took careful aim at the broadside, taking her time. She placed her sight just behind the front leg to ensure she hit the heart rather than the shoulder or the leg bone. She closed her eyes and held her breath. Squeezing, she tightened her finger until the trigger fired.

The bullet impacted, ringing distinctly. A heart shot, she thought, releasing her breath. The earth shivered under her feet when the dragon’s great skull landed. Emma opened her eyes. There was a quiet dignity in the folded wings and the bowed head.

Emma felt Jim staring at her. She lowered the gun, slung it across her shoulder, and stared back. The wind gusted, catching the cord around her neck.

Jim reached up to catch it, but the rabbit’s foot slipped through his fingertips. It belonged to Mom first—an anniversary present. Jim’s hand trembled. “You look like your mother, you know,” Jim said, his voice soft. “I see her in you. Your eyes, your hair, the shape of your cheeks.” He lightly traced Emma’s jawline. “Watching her fall apart, a little less herself each day.” He shrugged. “It was always out of my hands.”

Emma grasped his palm in her own, gently, before letting go. What could she say? There weren’t words for this. They didn’t exist.

Her father squared his shoulders. He took his hunting knife from his boot and walked to the dragon, cutting into the softer underbelly. The skin parted, revealing a modest layer of yellowish fat
above lean muscle. Behind him, Emma shuffled from one foot to another, stirring the dirt and the loose rocks.

Jim glanced up. “I’m checking for eggs.” He put both his arms inside the carcass and pulled out a massive pearl. “Look at that,” he said. “We’ll have to build up a nest.”

“Jim,” she said, crossing her arms, then forcing them to her sides. She stepped closer. “We didn’t come out here for this.”

“All the same, these eggs need to be incubated if they’re going to survive the cold nights.”

“What do you mean?” Pressing her shoulder against his, she peered around him and saw the opaque white of another shell peeking through the dragon’s side. Emma freed it from its mother, bringing it into the light.

Jim knelt and built a basin from hand-sized stones.

Emma grabbed her backpack off the ground. She lifted her mother’s wooden urn out, opening it before she lost her resolve. Inside, the chalky filling wasn’t a fine dusting of ash as one might expect. There were small chunks mixed in where bone hadn’t fully broken down.

Jim claimed a handful of Mom’s ashes, scattering them around the eggs. Looking at him, Emma saw a bit of the old glow return, a bit of the god reborn. She poured ashes around the fallen she-dragon. Puffs blew into the valley below, carried by the wind’s strong breath.

The orphaned eggs were well-insulated, protected by all but a mother’s love. Emma reached for the cord that hung around her neck. She set the rabbit foot inside the nest. Her father’s hand fell onto her shoulder, comforting, closing the distance between them with Mom’s ashes dusting their hands. Jim patted her elbow, then reclaimed his rifle.

Emma slung her bag onto her back. She inhaled a breath like she hadn’t done so in days. The air was dry as cracked lips. In this desert, there was a heat not easily put out. As strong as dragon’s fire, and the ashes twirling in the wind reminded her that nothing was fully erased, even by flame.
You’ve been driving for hours, plunging ever deeper into the desert, past the point of no return. You’re wondering for the hundredth time if you’ve been sent on a fool’s errand, when there it is, looming in front of you like a neon-trimmed mountain.

The Changing Fortune.

A casino like no other, where you are the currency, where you can change anything or everything about yourself, so long as you’re willing to take a few risks.

You’re willing to risk it. You have been, ever since you were thirteen and dreamed of the inescapable tragedy lurking in your future. You’ve spent a decade and more since looking for ways to avert your destiny, and at last, it’s all come to this.

The inside is much larger than it has any right to be, an endless sprawl of tables and slot machines and couches and people, stretching off into the distance. It’s a cacophony of bells and whistles and voices—some jubilant, others despondent, many desperate. A keening wail from one table rises and breaks off, but you don’t see what happens next.

A passing tuxedo-clad server offers you a drink—on the house, he says. Food and drinks are free at the Changing Fortune. They don’t care about your money. You shake your head; you want it clear for now.

You pass by the slot machines, where people pull the lever and pray for extra youth, paying with minutes, hours, days of their lives, growing older before your very eyes. An ancient woman dressed in an outfit meant for a much younger person tries again, muttering that it’s bound to pay out soon, rheumy eyes fixated on the jackpot.

You pass by the blackjack tables, where people gamble for beauty, their bodies constantly shifting, staring down into the mirrors in front of them to see if they’ve reached their desired state. The dealers could all be supermodels.

You pass by the roulette wheels, where red and black stand for love and hate, and people risk their hearts for the relationship of their dreams.

At the poker tables, they play for wealth and power and privilege, and every card represents a level of influence gained or lost, and to the victor go the spoils.
At last, you find the craps tables, where every destiny can be decided on the roll of the dice. This is why you’ve come here. You step up to one table, and the dealer offers a welcoming smile. He tells you the rules.

You don’t even blink. You just nod, and the dealer takes your future away from you. He strips away everything you might, could, will be, leaving behind an aching void in your chest.

It’s a welcome change from the dread which has consumed you for so many years. You accept this absence, knowing it will be filled with something better soon.

If you’re lucky.

You’re willing to risk it.

The dealer places your destiny, now a small black chip, on the table, along with those of your fellow players. In its glossy depths, you can see hints of sickness, of suffering, of that which you’d do anything to avoid.

The game begins in earnest. The shooters take their turns. And though you don’t know what they’re playing for, you can tell by their reactions when things go well . . . or not.

Your destiny fluctuates with each roll, as you replace the void in your heart with possibilities. Success, failure. Triumph, tragedy. Family, loneliness. You almost settle for one future which sees you happy, successful, yet bored. The dealer asks if you’re satisfied, and you decide one more roll can’t hurt. And after that, one more. You continue playing, caught up in the endless possibilities until . . .

. . . a man next to you collapses, weeping. He’s risked everything and lost it all on one roll too many. Casino staff materialize to take him away, silently, efficiently.

A chill seeps into your bones as you realize that could have been you.

Unfortunately, your chip is still in play, your destiny undecided. You must follow through.

You shoot one last time, tense with anticipation.

The void inside you is replaced by a glowing warmth representing everything you’ve secretly dreamed of accomplishing. Your future, should you accept it, is grand and glorious, with no hint of tragedy or anguish or suffering.

Oh yes.

You’re done here.

You leave the table before you can change your mind.

A shadowy man appears by your side, and introduces himself as the manager. He tells you that these aren’t the only games available. That the casino has better games for big winners.
Games in penthouse rooms where they play all or nothing, for the powers of a god or utter oblivion.

You’re invited to play these games.

If you feel lucky.

He slips a pair of dice into your hand.

They’re made from bone, and look very, very old indeed. They’re cold to the touch, and they seem to whisper encouragement. Your future, which seemed so clear a moment ago, is nebulous and hazy, open to renegotiation.

The choice is yours.

How lucky do you feel?

Elles franchirent les Portes Ouest, le ciel était encore clair. Le vent soulevait de petites nuées de sable en sifflant dans les crevasses. Les rues étaient calmes. La grande saison du pèlerinage était finie et la foule était beaucoup moins dense qu’au cœur de l’été, lorsque les processions d’orants se succédaient, venant de loin pour adorer la tunique de la Déesse Elle-même. Quand les cavalières s’engagèrent dans l’artère principale, les gens s’écartèrent en leur jetant des regards emplis de curiosité. On ne voyait pas souvent des prêtresses-guerrières dans cette ville éloignée. Alors qu’elles traversaient une grande place, elles croisèrent un groupe de pèlerins. L’un d’eux fixa le visage de leur supérieure, comme frappé par la foudre. Il lança quelque chose à son voisin à voix basse, puis ils la suivirent à distance sur une
vingtaine de pas en chuchotant avec animation.

Ernalba, ne leur prêta pas d’attention particulière. Elle avait l’habitude d’être dévisagée. Une tache lie-de-vin couvrait la moitié droite de sa face, alors que l’autre était barrée d’une cicatrice dentelée, le souvenir d’une rencontre avec des pilleurs de reliques dans sa jeunesse. En ce moment, ses pensées coulaient dans une toute autre direction, loin de cette cité desséchée et poussiéreuse. Encore quelques mois et son service auprès du Temple de Tous les Dieux serait fini. Elle retournerait dans son village, dans les collines brumeuses de l’Est et s’achèterait une petite ferme avec ses économies. Elle avait perdu ses illusions sur la nature humaine depuis longtemps et n’aspirait plus qu’à une vie paisible et solitaire. Aussi, en chevauchant entre les maisons aux murs lézardés, n’espérerait-elle qu’une chose : que cette dernière mission se passe le plus simplement possible.

Son regard distrait parcourut les alentours. Elles avançaient sur ce qui avait été un quai, le long d’un canal vide, à l’exception d’un peu d’eau stagnante au fond. Le vent venu du désert froissait sa surface de quelques rides. La rue tourna et monta vers le Temple, une pyramide à degrés taillée d’un bloc dans le rocher qui jadis formait le socle d’une colline. Les arêtes du monument étaient émoussées par le temps et le vent, les bas-reliefs qui le recouvraient presque effacés. Il sentait la vieillesse et la décrépitude. Alors qu’elles passaient sous un arc couvert d’inscriptions érodées, Thémis, la cadette des prêtresses, résuma ces pensées d’une phrase :

— Supérieure, cet endroit tombe en ruine !

— Peut-être. Cependant, ce n’est pas une chose à dire devant nos hôtes.

— Loin de moi cette idée, Supérieure. Mais regardez : ce temple n’a pas été entretenue depuis longtemps ! J’ai vu des fissures dans les murailles lorsque nous avons franchi les portes. Et le niveau d’eau
du lac ne doit pas être de plus de trois coudées !

La vérité sortait de la bouche des jeunes innocents, songea Ernalba. Cette ville était une ruine en effet. Formidable, mais une ruine. Combien de temps allait-elle tenir à présent que le lac qui l’alimentait en eau s’asséchait ? Cela lui rappelait la Cité Mère. Après trois mille ans, elle aussi montrait des signes de vieillesse. Bien sûr, les monuments étaient mieux entretenus. Mais personne n’avait l’expertise ou la foi pour construire quelque chose de nouveau, capable de rivaliser avec les chefs-d’œuvre des Anciens. Oui, tout vieillissait, même les Cités Divines...


— Bienvenue à vous, sages guerrières.

Ernalba s’avança devant sa petite troupe et inclina la tête en signe de respect. Une prêtresse, quelque fut son rang, ne courbait son dos que devant les Dieux. En levant les yeux, elle croisa le regard de la jeune fille : celle-ci, pâle comme la mort, la fixait avec une expression de terreur intense qui la prit par surprise. Cela ne dura qu’un battement de cœur : l’instant suivant, la Hiérophantine arborait un sourire aimable :

— Nous sommes ravis que vous soyez arrivées aussi vite. Avez-vous fait bon voyage ?

Ernalba poussa un imperceptible soupir. Et bien, si même la personne qui
allait être sous sa protection la regardait avec horreur...

— Nous avons fait au mieux. Le Très Sage Archiprêtre avait l’impression que votre requête était assez urgente.

— En effet, répondit Yslan.

D’ailleurs, depuis que je lui ai envoyé ma missive, il y a eu des évènements... très alarmants. Je ne peux faire confiance à quiconque dans ma propre cité... C’est pour cela que j’ai absolument besoin de votre aide.

— Quel est exactement le problème ?

— La sédition et la révolte grondent contre la Déesse... Et on a tenté de d’empoisonner ma fille.

— Par les Dieux, en effet ! Savez-vous qui ?

— Malheureusement, j’ai l’embarras du choix : les adorateurs du Dieu-Brouillard, son rival éternel dans le Panthéon, des espions à la solde des nations voisines qui aimereraient s’emparer de la cité... qui elle-même grouille d’agitateurs et d’hérétiques.

— J’enverrai un rapport détaillé à l’Archiprêtre une fois que je me serai faite une idée de la situation. Peut-être pourrai-je vous aider, avec mes faibles moyens...

— Je l’espère... En attendant, veillez sur la Hiérophantine jour et nuit, ne la lâchez pas d’une semelle. C’est pour cela que j’ai demandé au Très Sage une garde entièrement composée de femmes : ainsi, vous pourrez la suivre partout, même là où la décence interdirait à un homme d’entrer.

— Certes... Comment s’est déroulée cette tentative d’empoisonnement au juste ?

— Quels sont exactement les individus séditieux auxquels vous avez affaire ?

Le Hiérophant haussa les épaules :
— Les mêmes refont surface régulièrement. Les tenants des Vieilles Croyances, tout d’abord. Ceux qui déclarent que la Déesse est blonde plutôt que brune, et tentent de détruire toutes ses représentations. Je soupçonne que certains sont à la solde du roi Enzil. Il y a aussi des lettrés qui proclament que les Dieux n’ont que faire de nos offrandes et exigent que l’or amené par les pèlerins au cours des siècles soit remis aux pauvres. Enfin, il y a quelques individus qui affirment que les Dieux n’existent pas.

Ernalba leva un sourcil :

La jeune fille acquiesça en silence. Il sembla à la supérieure qu’elle avait encore pâli. Si elle n’avait l’habitude de garder un visage de pierre, elle aurait fait la grimace : en plus de tout ce que venait de révéler le Hiérophant, elle sentait autre chose. Elle ne savait quoi. Elle n’avait aucun don de divination, ni de seconde vue, contrairement à nombre de ses compagnons, mais sa sagacité frôlait parfois la prescience. Quelles intrigues, quelles manigances se tramaient derrière les murs lézardés de cette cité ?

● ● ●

— Donc, il y a trois groupes d’hérétiques... Lequel croyez-vous est à la solde d’Enzil ?

Le Premier Acolyte haussa les épaules.

— Très certainement les tenants des Vieilles Croyances. Nombre d’entre eux se sont réfugiés dans son royaume autrefois. Mais qui sait... certains aurait des attaches chez les barbares.
— Vous n’avez pas cherché à vous renseigner davantage ?
— Comment ? Nous n’avons aucun contact chez eux. Aucun de nos espions n’est capable de parler leur langue. De toute façon, ils ne constituent pas une menace. Ils sont trop primitifs...
— Si vous le dites... Mais à long terme...
— Je m’en occuperai dès que j’aurais réglé les questions plus urgentes.
— Y a-t-il d’autres difficultés ?
— Pas vraiment... Les tracas habituels. Les pauvres qui grognent, quelques lettrés dont les discours excentriques enflamment les esprits sensibles...
— Vous n’avez pas de problèmes plus terre à terre ? Le manque d’eau par exemple ? Le niveau du lac me semble très bas.
— Ah, je ne l’ai pas mesuré depuis quelque temps... Mais je ne m’inquiéterai pas pour cela. La Déesse ne permettrait pas qu’il s’assèche.
— Les Dieux ont permis bien des catastrophes dans le passé, dit prudemment Ernalba. Elle n’avait pas la moindre envie de s’engager dans une longue discussion théologique.
— Certes, mais seulement lorsqu’on Les avait offensés. Et dans Leur mansuétude, Ils ont toujours envoyé des signes afin que les fidèles puissent se repentir et corriger leurs manières.
— Je n’ai pas la prétention d’être capable d’interpréter Leurs signes... Mais peut-être devriez-vous vous rendre au lac.
— Encore une chose dont je m’en occuperai dès que j’aurais réglé la question de ces maudits hérétiques. Ils me prennent tout mon temps. Ils ont presque réussi à empoisonner la Hiérophantine !
— Pouvez-vous me donner les détails de ce crime ?
— Ma foi, il n’y a pas grand-chose à en dire : une suivante l’a découverte inanimée sur le sol de sa chambre, un soir, après le repas. Elle montrait tous les signes d’une intoxication par l’aconit noir. Elle
avait été très mal pendant quelques jours, mais grâce à la Déesse, elle a miraculeusement survécu. Personne d’autre n’a montré de symptômes semblables.

— Qui aurait pu verser le poison ?
— N’importe qui ou presque !
C’était un banquet pour lequel un grand nombre de serviteurs supplémentaires avaient été embauchés. Nous ne pensions pas encore que la menace fût aussi sérieuse.

— Pourquoi auraient-ils tenté d’empoisonner Sa Grâce, plutôt que son père ?
— Cela aurait été beaucoup plus efficace de leur point de vue. Elle est la seule héritière. Outre qu’il en aurait été brisé, il n’y aurait eu personne pour lui succéder et parler à la Déesse. Ce serait la fin de la cité...

Le lendemain, les prêtresses-guerrières et un détachement de la garde accompagnèrent la Hiérophantine au Temple pour les rituels de l’Équinoxe d’Automne. Après avoir soigneusement fouillé le bâtiment, Ernalba avait posté ses prêtresses aux points stratégiques, habillées en pèlerins. Elle-même, s’était placée sous une arcade, près de l’autel, le visage dissimulé par une large capuche. La salle, une caverne à l’origine, était si vaste que le millier de cierges qu’elle contenait ne parvenait pas à l’éclairer en entier. Toute la population de la cité pouvait y tenir confortablement et le moindre bruit y résonnait aux échos, répercuté de voûte en voute. L’endroit idéal pour une attaque spectaculaire, de nature à frapper les esprits, se dit Ernalba. Mais il n’était pas possible de fouiller chaque fidèle entrant dans le temple. Aussi redoubla-t-elle d’attention.

Les chants enflèrent. Sa longue tunique flottant derrière elle, Goénor descendait la nef, tenant devant elle le calice de sel sacré. Une haute silhouette vêtue de guenilles lui barra soudain la voie. Elle lâcha le récipient de surprise. L’homme ressemblait à un de ces prédicateurs errants
qui parcouraient les routes. Deux guerrières bondirent de leurs cachettes pour lui saisir les bras. Il ne chercha pas à se débattre. Il fixa la jeune fille dans les yeux et cracha :

— Je ne viens pas te tuer. Je n’ai pas besoin de le faire. Je viens t’annoncer...

Ernalba s’approchait à travers la foule. Sa capuche était tombée, révélant son visage.

L’expression de l’homme passa de la solennité à la terreur :

— La mort ! Cette femme c’est la mort ! Aah !

Le capitaine de la garde arrivait à son tour avec des hommes d’arme :


Goénor reprenait ses esprits. Elle leva le calice et repartit sans un mot.

Pendant le reste de la cérémonie, la supérieure aurait juré qu’elle évitait de regarder dans sa direction.

À la sortie du Temple, elle s’approcha du capitaine et lui demanda à voix basse :

— Dites-moi... Savez-vous ce que cet individu a voulu dire tout à l’heure en affirmant que j’étais la mort ? Ce n’est pas la première fois que des passants dans cette cité semblent impressionnés par mon visage. Je sais qu’il n’est pas beau à voir, mais tout de même...

L’homme prit un air embarrassé.

— Ah, c’est à cause du Dernier Oracle...

— Qu’est-ce que c’est ?

— On dit que le premier Hiérophant reçut de la bouche même de la Déesse une série de prédictions sur le futur de la cité. Depuis, elles se sont transmises uniquement de Hiérophant à Hiérophant. Cependant, certains d’entre eux en révélèrent une partie à leur entourage. Aussi, se répandirent-elles parmi la population, plus ou moins déformées et sont entrées dans les superstitions de la ville.

— Se sont-elles jamais réalisées ?
— Mmm... Ça, je l’ignore. Seuls les Hiérophants connaissent leur formulation exacte.
— Et que dirait ce dernier oracle ?
— Qu’une femme dont une moitié du visage sera rouge comme le sang et l’autre pâle comme la mort viendra du couchant détruire la cité... Ce sont surtout les adorateurs du Dieu-Brouillard qui tiennent à ces idées. Et paradoxalement les adeptes des Vieilles Croyances, car ils veulent revenir à la pureté originelle des premiers dogmes... De plus, il y a quelques mois, un prédicateur ambulant, comme cet individu, a vu dans le ciel un nuage en forme de dragon et a décrété que la cité serait bientôt détruite à cause de l’impiété de ses habitants. Il y avait déjà de nombreuses tensions, alors...
— Je vois. dit Ernalba.
Il ne manquait plus que sa propre présence aggrave les choses. Peut-être devrait-elle quitter la cité au plus vite en passant le commandement à sa lieutenante ? En attendant, elle allait éviter de se montrer.

● ● ●

— Effectivement, il y a des agitateurs et des mécontents, mais ils sont rares, pour ce que j’ai pu en voir, conclut Thémis en lissant sa jupe.

Elle et deux autres prêtresses avaient été envoyées aux nouvelles déguisées en pèlerins pour prendre l’ambiance de la cité.
— Alors, la population est plus calme que ne le pense le Hiérophant,
— Je ne dirais pas cela. Plutôt que ces prédicateurs ont ravivé des vieux problèmes... La décrépitude de la cité, le manque d’avenir pour de jeunes ambitieux, depuis que la plupart des charges sont devenues héréditaires, l’incompétence, voire la malhonnêteté de certains Acolytes... Au vu de cela, les idées radicales prêchées par quelques excentriques apparaissent très séduisantes à certains... Cependant, il s’agit d’un fond de mécontentement, rien d’organisé pour l’instant...
— Pour l’instant, conclut Ernalba. Il suffit d’un incident pour que la situation devienne incontrôlable par qui que ce soit. Il faut que j’envoie un rapport à l’Archiprêtre de toute urgence. Tu partiras demain le porter à la Cité-Mère.

● ● ●

Le soir, il y eut un grand banquet. Fidèle à son plan, la supérieure n’y assista pas, se contentant de surveiller le repas du haut de la galerie qui surplombait la salle. Après le deuxième service, elle vit Goénor se lever, suivie de sa dame d’honneur et de Thémis qui était celle qui lui servait de garde rapprochée ce soir-là. Elle échangea quelques paroles avec des invités et les trois femmes quittèrent la salle sans se presser, par la porte située derrière la tribune d’honneur. Un magicien s’avança pour effectuer quelques tours, puis un troubadour entonna une chanson romantique qu’Ernalba aimait beaucoup du temps de sa jeunesse. Une bouffée de souvenirs lui revint en mémoire.

Une traction violente sur sa manche la tira de sa rêverie. C’était Thémis :
— Supérieure ! La Hiérophantine a disparu !

Si les Règles ne lui interdisaient pas d’utiliser de juron, elle en aurait lâché une bordée. Sa cadette l’entraîna dans les appartements princiers tout en expliquant :
— Sa Grâce a ressenti le besoin de se rendre dans ses cabinets privés. J’ai inspecté l’endroit et nous l’avons laissée seule à sa demande. Au bout de dix minutes, comme nous n’entendions aucun bruit et qu’elle ne répondait pas, j’ai forcé la serrure...

Ernalba entra en trombe dans la petite pièce : un siège de marbre, une vasque, une aiguière en argent, un panier de chiffons. Il n’y avait rien de plus. Pas de fenêtre et la chute, qui aboutissait loin, sous les murs en contrebas, était bien trop étroite pour laisser passer une jeune fille, même peu regardante à la crasse. Mais la supérieure avait trop l’expérience des palais. Le Premier Acolyte lui avait affirmé

— Elle s’est cachée ici, pendant que vous fouilliez la pièce. Et lorsque vous êtes parties me prévenir, elle est sortie pour aller quelque part !

— Mais où ? Pourquoi ?

Ernalba haussa les épaules :

— Que veux-tu que j’en sache ? Va me chercher Pisteur.

Le chien les emmena à travers les communs, les ateliers déserts, les jardins arrosés avec soin, jusqu’à un bosquet éloigné. Là, elles entendirent un murmure vêlément :

— O Déesse, pardonne-moi ! Je suis indigne de Te servir. Par ma faiblesse, la cité a été profanée. Permets-moi, cette fois, de payer pour ma faute ! Que mon sang lave mes erreurs ! Que la cité resplendisse encore dix mille ans !

La supérieure jeta un coup d’œil par-dessus le buisson qui la dissimulait : Goénor était agenouillée, le visage baigné de larmes. Devant elle, dans le sol, pointe vers le haut, était planté son couteau sacrificiel au manche de jade blanc. Les diamants qui constellaient une partie de la lame scintillaient faiblement à la lumière de la lune. Elle se redressa, se rapprocha du couteau et serait sans doute tombée dessus, si les deux femmes ne l’avaient pas ceinturée à ce moment.

— Laissez-moi, mais laissez-moi !

— Votre Grâce, je vous rappelle que ma mission est justement de vous empêcher d’être tuée. Si vous nous dites simplement quel est votre problème ?

La jeune fille se mordit les lèvres.

— Allons, il est trop tard pour vous esquiver. Comment allez-vous expliquer tout ceci à votre père ?
Il y eut un silence, puis Goénor soupira :
— Vous avez raison... D’autant plus qu’il découvrira tout dans quelques jours... Je... il y a quatre mois, j’ai rencontré un jeune pèlerin qui semblait particulièrement fervent. J’en suis tombée amoureuse. Un jour, il m’a demandé de l’emmener adorer la tunique de la Déesse, dans la crypte dont seul mon père et moi pouvons ouvrir la porte. J’ai accepté. Une fois entrés, il m’a frappée à la tête et j’ai perdu connaissance. Lorsque je me suis réveillée, la relique avait disparu. J’ai cherché ce chien en vain...
— Et qu’a fait votre père ?
— Je ne lui ai rien dit... Une telle infamie ! J’avais tellement honte ! J’ai tenté de me donner la mort, mais j’ai échoué lamentablement ! Peut-être la Déesse a-t-elle décidé que ce serait ma punition...
C’est moi qui m’occupe des rites quotidiens à la crypte... Mais dans trois jours, ce sera l’anniversaire de la fondation de la cité. Mon père viendra personnellement chercher la tunique avec tous les Acolytes pour la promener à travers les rues... et juste alors que la révolte gronde... ce sera la catastrophe !
— Raison de plus, pour qu’il soit au courant ! Venez, les invités sont en train de se demander où vous êtes passée. Vous ne voulez pas de ragots supplémentaires, n’est-ce pas ?

● ● ●
— ...Père, je n’ai aucune excuse, je mérite la mort !
— Cela ne servira pas à grand-chose, je le crains... murmura Yslan.
— Mais qu’allons-nous faire ? Lorsque le peuple apprendra que j’ai perdu la relique sacrée sous ma garde, ce sera la révolte ! Le déshonneur pour notre lignée, le...
— Calme-toi...
Il jeta un regard hésitant à Ernalba, puis reprit :
— Je comptais te l’apprendre plus tard, lors de ta dernière initiation, mais je n’ai pas le choix... Et vous, Supérieure, je
vaîs vous demander le secret le plus absolu : ce que je vais vous révéler ne pourra être répété qu’à l’Archiprêtre...

— Bien entendu, murmura-t-elle, pressentant un torrent d’ennuis supplémentaires.

— La tunique qu’a prise ce gredin était un faux... Oui... La vraie s’est effritée au cours du temps et est tombée en poussière il y a près d’un siècle... Le Hiérophant d’alors en a fait faire plusieurs copies dans le plus grand secret. Nous trois sommes les seuls à le savoir à présent. Je replacerai une autre copie à la crypte cette nuit.

Il y eut un long silence. Goénor parla la première :

— Mais Père, qu’en pense la Déesse ? Est-ce pour cela que depuis un siècle, le niveau du lac a décru, le nombre de pèlerins a diminué, alors que celui des hérétiques s’est multiplié ? Peut-être a-t-Elle réellement quitté la cité ? Peut-être avions-nous commis un sacrilège sans le savoir en remplaçant cette relique ?

— Mon enfant, les Dieux sont partout... Ici, ni plus, ni moins, qu’au milieu du désert. La Déesse nous avait laissé sa tunique, en effet, mais ne nous honorait pas plus de Sa présence que les barbares voisins. Il n’y a que le peuple et les pèlerins pour croire à ces fariboles. Le peuple a besoin de cette foi pour défendre la cité contre les envahisseurs qui viennent régulièrement sous nos murs. Quant aux pèlerins, ils sont notre seule source d’argent...

Goénor baissa la tête :

— Alors tout ce en quoi j’ai cru était un mensonge...

— Certes... Mais les mensonges sont nécessaires pour maintenir la cohésion de la cité, éviter les querelles ridicules entre diverses factions et motiver les habitants à résister à ces barbares, au lieu de faire alliance avec eux, comme le proposent certains hérétiques.

Il y eut un silence. Le Hiérophant soupira :
— Comme je le disais, il est dommage que j’aie eu à te révéler tout ceci alors que tu n’étais pas prête... Tu as appris la Base et la Foi, le dernier stage de ton éducation devait être le Pouvoir... Nous commencerons demain.

Il se tourna vers Ernalba, l’air embarrassé :

— Je crains que vous, Supérieure, ne m’ayez posé un problème beaucoup plus important : depuis votre arrivée, la ville s’agit encore plus qu’avant. De prédicateurs brandissent la menace du Dernier Oracle. Certains se sont même immolés par le feu, disant que la fin était proche...

— Quelle est cette prédiction, au juste ?

— Sa formulation exacte est :

La cité resplendira pendant plus de trois mille ans.

Mais une femme entrera par les portes du couchant.

La moitié de sa face sera rouge comme le sang,

L’autre sera blanche comme la mort.

Après elle, la cité vivra trois jours encore.

Est-ce pour cela que vous me regardez avec une telle... méfiance, lors de mon arrivée, Votre Grâce ?

Goénor hocha la tête en fixant le sol.

Ernalba se tourna vers Yslan :

— Mmm... Et vous y croyez ?

— Comme pour tous les autres oracles, il y a une explication mystique que nous n’avons sans doute pas encore trouvée... Plusieurs ont été avancées au cours des siècles mais nous n’avons pas déterminé laquelle était la bonne. Après tout, vous n’êtes pas la première femme avec une tache lie-de-vin sur le visage à franchir les Portes Ouest ! Simplement, vous l’avez fait à un moment fort inopportun. De toute façon, demain, vous serez là depuis trois jours, et les gens verront bien qu’il ne s’est rien passé !

— Je l’espère, dit la supérieure.

Toutefois, il reste un problème : qui a volé la tunique et pourquoi ?
— Sans doute quelque trafiquant de reliques audacieux, ou un sorcier cherchant à user de son pouvoir divin... Sinon, nous en aurions déjà entendu parler...
— J’espère que vous avez raison... J’étudierai la question et en informerai l’Archiprêtre. Il est de mon devoir de poursuivre un tel sacrilège.
— Je suppose qu’il ne sera pas très heureux de découvrir la disparition de la tunique...
— Il sera surtout fort mécontent que cela lui ait été caché.
— Je crois qu’il aura bien d’autres soucis. Je me suis laissé dire que la Mère-Cité manque de ferveur depuis quelque temps et le Temple de Tous les Dieux grouille d’intrigues qui n’ont rien à voir avec le service divin...

Avant d’entamer ses prières matinales, Ernalba repassa dans son esprit les événements de la veille. Pour un grand-prêtre, le Hiérophant manquait singulièrement de mysticisme ! Peut-être cela se ressentait-il lors de cérémonies. Si lui-même avait aussi peu de foi dans ses propres dogmes, que pouvait-on demander à ses sujets ? Elle allait devoir s’atteler à la rédaction d’un rapport pour l’Archiprêtre. Si cette tunique refaisait surface, ce serait un énorme scandale. Les hérétiques balaieraient la cité. Ou alors, quelque voisin aux dents longues comme le roi Enzil. Et il y avait aussi le manque d’eau à considérer. Le service divin consistait finalement à débrouiller des problèmes bien humains, se dit-elle en s’agenouillant. Peut-être Les Dieux daigneraient-ils insuffler une étincelle de bon sens dans le crâne d’Yslan ?

Elle en était au seizième verset lorsque Thémis tambourina à la porte.
— Supérieure ! Supérieure ! La ville est assiégée ! Il y a une grande armée sous les murailles !

Erfalba grimpa quatre à quatre l’escalier qui menait au chemin de ronde. Yslan et Goénor, entourés de leur suite et
des prêtresses-guerrières étaient déjà là. Les gardes prenaient fébrilement position sur les créneaux. En contrebas, hors de portée de flèche, se tenait l’armée du chef barbare Tonnerre de Feu, mais pas seulement : il y avait aussi celle du roi Enzil que la supérieure reconnut au cimier de crins noirs sur son casque et celle du grand-prince Armétab dont le bouclier s’ornait d’un dragon bleu. Ces trois rivaux semblaient s’être unis pour venir à bout de la cité et s’emparer des trésors qui dormaient dans ses caves. Tonnerre de Feu s’avança, prenant soin toutefois à rester hors de portée de tir :

— Rendez-vous ! Nous voulons les richesses du temple, pas vos misérables vies ! Ouvrez les portes et nous vous laisserons partir !

— Jamais ! hurla le Hiérophant. La Déesse te punira pour ce sacrilège ! Sa tunique nous a protégés de nombreux assauts, elle nous protègera à nouveau !

— Ha ! Ne gaspille pas ta salive en fanfaronnades. Nous avons ta relique ! Ta catin de fille l’a donnée à mon frère, Orage, pour paiement d’une nuit d’amour effrénée ! Regarde !

Un jeune homme s’approcha du chef barbare et tendit à bout de bras une pièce de tissus diaphane aux reflets irisés. Un silence stupéfait se fit sur les créneaux. Goénor enfouit la tête entre ses mains.

— Mensonge ! tonna le Hiérophant. Blasphème ! Cette tunique est un faux ! Je vais le prouver immédiatement. Goénor, va chercher la très sainte relique ! Mécréant !

— Pervers décadent ! Hypocrite dégénéré !

Il s’en suivit un échange d’insultes rituel, pendant lequel les assaillants se préparaient. Derrière leurs boucliers plantés en terre, les archers barbares activaient leurs pots de charbon pour enflammer leurs projectiles, les artilleurs d’Enzil armaient leurs catapultes, tandis que les guerriers d’Armétab alignaient leurs bêliers, prêts à se ruer sur les portes. Entretemps, Ernalba examinait rêveusement Tonnerre de Feu. Ah, s’il
daignait ne faire que deux pas en avant, il
serait à portée de flèche de Daris, sa
meilleure tireuse. Elle lui fit signe de le
garder à l’œil. On ne savait jamais...

Des bruits de chants et de cymbales
se firent bientôt entendre : Goénor revenait
avec la relique. Elle la portait délicatement
devant elle, tendue sur un cadre et la leva
haut au-dessus des créneaux, afin que les
assaillants puissent bien la voir. Face au
soleil, ses replis ondoyants scintillaient
comme une rivière d’or.

Le chef barbare rugit :
— Ce n’est pas possible, c’est une
copie !

Mue par une inspiration soudaine,
Ernalba bondit en avant et cria :
— Blasphémateur impie ! C’est le
torchon que tu as amené qui est un faux
grossier ! Vois sur l’encolure de la vraie
tunique la marque de la Déesse, l’empreinte
de son cœur de feu !

Tonnerre fit deux pas en avant,
tentant de distinguer ce qu’elle montrait du
doigt.

— Je ne...

Il n’eut pas le temps d’en dire plus.
La flèche de Daris traversa sa gorge de part
en part et il s’écroula, s’étouffant dans son
sang. Aussitôt, ses archers répliquèrent par
une volée de traits. Ernalba s’aplatit sur le
sol. Yslan tomba, touché en pleine poitrine.
Goénor se précipita auprès de lui pour
tamponner la plaie, en vain. Les tirs
désordonnés s’arrêtèrent assez vite. La
supérieure jeta un regard prudent en
contrebas.

— Trève de bavardages, disait Enzil,
voilà à quoi cela nous a menés. Archers,
prenez position !

— Quoi ? Tu donnes des ordres à
mes hommes, maintenant ? protesta Orage.

— Bien sûr, Tonnerre est mort.

— Nous nous étions mis d’accord
pour suivre ses ordres, mais maintenant
qu’il n’est plus là, je ne vois pas de quel
droit tu t’arroges le commandement !
intervint Armétab. Je suis le plus âgé, c’est à
moi de diriger les opérations.
— Pourquoi ? Je te rappelle que j’ai la plus grande armée !
— Et moi, j’ai payé pour les catapultes. C’est moi, l’expert en stratégie militaire !
— Quoi ? Tu n’y connais rien ! C’est comme ça que je t’ai pris deux cités !
— Taisez-vous tous les deux ! En tant que frère du défunt, c’est à moi de lui succéder.
— Toi ? Tu n’es même pas capable de voler un chiffon à une donzelle !

Ce n’était pas une chose à dire à un barbare. En un éclair, le jeune guerrier avait tiré son épée et faisait voler la tête d’Enzil quelques pas plus loin. Il y eut un instant de silence où tous se figèrent sous le choc, puis le camp des assaillants s’embrasa. Les hommes d’Enzil frappaient les barbares qui à leur tour attaquaient ceux d’Armétab qui rendaient coup pour coup et inversement sous le regard médusé des assiégés. Quelques flèches perdues volèrent par-dessus les murs. Un trait incandescent traversa la tunique sacrée qui prit feu. En quelques instants, il n’en resta qu’un tas de cendres.

La bataille aux pieds des murailles se termina quelques heures plus tard. Les survivants de chaque camp s’enfuirent dans toutes les directions. On ne savait qui avait gagné ou perdu et cela n’avait pas d’importance. Sans un mot, Goénor ramassa soigneusement les cendres de la relique jusqu’au dernier grain, pour les mettre dans une urne. Les larmes ruisselaient sur son visage. Elle prit le chemin du temple à travers des rues noires de monde. Parvenue sur le parvis, elle se tourna vers la foule silencieuse :
— Mes chers sujets ! La Déesse nous a bénis de sa présence pendant des siècles. Nous avons vécu heureux, prospères et justes sous sa direction. Ce jour, elle a encore une fois montré sa bienveillance : elle nous a protégés de nos ennemis en obscurcissant leur jugement. Cependant... elle a décidé d’honorer d’autres lieux désormais. Elle nous l’a clairement fait savoir en permettant à sa relique sacrée de

La longue colonne d’hommes, de bêtes et de chariots quittait la cité et s’étirait sur des centaines de pas jusqu’aux collines arides. Goénor poussa un soupir et se détourna de la fenêtre pour poser son regard sur la prêtresse-guerrière.

— Je suppose que votre mission est terminée.

— Sans doute... Vous êtes une femme pleine de courage. L’étoffe d’une grande prêtresse... Qu’allez-vous faire, à présent ?

— Je l’ignore. Pleurer mon père sans doute... et réfléchir.

— Puisse la Déesse vous inspirer...

La jeune fille hocha la tête, puis reprit :

— Ces éloges sont étranges venant de la part d’une femme au service de l’Archiprêtre. Ne sera-t-il pas furieux ? Il a perdu une cité... N’auriez-vous pas dû intervenir ?

— Peut-être... Cependant, je sais d’expérience qu’il n’est pas bon de se mettre en travers de la route des Dieux.

— Que voulez-vous dire ?

— Votre cité était condamnée de toute façon. Non pas par une prédiction, mais par le manque d’eau. J’ai trouvé paradoxal que tout le peuple se préoccupait d’oracles et votre père de sédition, alors qu’il y avait des signes beaucoup plus concrets. Les assaillants ne s’y sont pas trompés, ils savaient que vous ne résisterez pas à un long siège. Vous étiez la seule à y avoir pensé...
— Alors cet oracle ne signifiait rien, finalement ?
— Au contraire... Ce n’était pas une menace, mais une simple information. La femme au visage rouge et blanc n’apportait pas de maléfice, ni de pestilence, simplement, trois jours après son entrée, ce serait la fin de la cité. Et cela aurait été effectivement sa fin, quel qu’ait été mon rôle dans l’affaire.
— Comment cela ?
— Si vous vous étiez donnée la mort dans les jardins, les ennemis seraient quand même venus sous les murailles et si Daris n’avait pas abattu un de leurs chefs, il est probable qu’ils auraient réussi à semer le doute et prendre la cité. Elle était perdue d’une manière ou d’une autre. La question était de savoir ce qu’allaient devenir ses habitants.
— Alors peut-être, votre intervention a-t-elle amené la meilleure des fins possibles.
— Peut-être.
Lins and Jonesy did not often get lost on the plains, but there had been a bad storm, and then there had been the smoke coming in from a distant, raging wildfire, and maybe they’d gotten a bit turned around. Most of the plains that they traveled, at a mech’s mile-eating pace, did not vary in appearance very much: it was all variations of tall grass. It took a keen eye to spot landmarks and wayfind on the way. When the horizon cleared of smoke, however, they were faced with an unknown landmark: across the vast expanse of the plains stood the unmoving form of a titanic mech. Upon seeing that distant figure, the wind seemed to die away around them, the clouds dissipated and fled above them, and there was only silence and stillness in the grass below them; the world had narrowed down to only the shortening distance between them and that broken-down mech.

So there Lins and Jonesy were, weary and red-eyed in their own ramshackle mech, and there, finally, they had reached the titanic piece of rusted scrap standing proudly and inexplicably among the rough grass. The ground around its feet bristled with the vivid purple-pink blossoms of fireweed, and not even the tall-growing grass that so easily swallowed up the remnants of human towns had a hope of reaching high enough to ever hide the mech from view. This mech was a titan, and the entire skyline was altered by its hard lines of twisted metal against a hazy sky. Here was the evidence of an older world and unimaginable feats of engineering, while the mechs they built nowadays felt more like sticks-and-hope bundled together with twine.

Streamers of some sort of feathery, pale green grass were bursting out of the mech’s cockpit, where it had once been enclosed in glass. The cascades seemed to hiss and murmur in the gentle wind, swaying gently. Now that they were within calling distance of the mech, they could see the growth appeared to be emerging directly out of the mech’s metal, as if spilling forth from its guts. There was no sensible reason that would cause such a thing, but Lins was accustomed to insensible things being true, nonetheless.
Long-rangers like the two of them were trained to know these plains from the seeds to the predator cats to the birds that winged overhead. They did not recognize this kind of grass, but Lins knew the plains were vast and changing and that perhaps where this mech had originally come from, there grew soft plants like this, rather than the sharp, rough grass that had overtaken the plains.

Lins let their mech, the Nettle, stand idling while she and Jonesy quietly took in this sight. The two of them had grown up together, and both had grown up wild enough to choose long-ranging. Now they were both not quite young anymore, rawboned and run ragged from the dry season. Lins always held her thoughts closer to her chest than Jonesy did, but she could tell that they shared an unspoken awe. They were lost and the journey home might be hard, and who knew if they’d ever return to this mech again, on the vast plains? It was enough that they had found it even once, and felt these shivers crawling down their spines as the wind softly rustled the streaming blades of grass.

This was what long-rangers did, after all. They explored all the lonely places in the world, passing through them together or alone. How many other landscapes had Lins and Jonesy traveled together, how many infernos had they witnessed, how many carcasses of prey had they found, left behind by vicious tellurcats? How many times had Lins seen the vultures wing down, to clean up the mess left by the living?

There was a safety of sorts, in sitting in the Nettle’s cockpit, above the world. It was a flimsy safety. The Nettle’s cockpit was covered in canvas, and screaming wind or driving rain would catch them as surely as a swift tellurcat, which could scale the Nettle with ease.

That had always been the case, as far as Lins knew. Even when this old mech husk had been operational and the world had looked less like reclaimed ruins, safety had only been about likelihoods.

“If that’s a Rustfire-class under all that,” Jonesy said, “its designation would be on the left arm and the right leg.” Of course Jonesy wanted to know the name of this old mech. Jonesy wanted to find some connection, some bridge to an older world that had, in slow and uncertain ways, led to the two of them to be sitting here in a rickety mech stripped down to its barest parts. It was Jonesy’s way of paying respect, too, by learning the names that would otherwise go buried, even if he would never know more about them than what they sounded like, spoken aloud.
This mech had been retrofitted for the combat that had been its final mission; a chemical sprayer welded awkwardly to each arm made it look like a creature dressing up. The right arm was half-torn off and swung limply, connected only by the thick cable that would have provided power to the sprayer. The left arm and the right leg were scorched black, caked in mud and opportunistic lichen, all hidden under the unidentified grass that neither of them had acknowledged.

“You want to check the arm or the leg, then?” Lins asked.

“Leg seems easier,” Jonesy said.

The arm hung well above their heads, even from their position in the cockpit of the Nettle.

Around them, the world was calm, the skies open, no hint of smoke on the horizon. It seemed perfectly natural for this broken husk to stand here.

While Jonesy leaned out of the Nettle, pulling the hanging grass aside to scratch at the mud covering the leg, Lins glanced up at the cockpit, where the glass viewports had long since broken away, and then down at the ground around the mech’s feet.

She spotted the tracks while Jonesy was still focused on his task. The ground was trodden, as if something larger than tellurcats and human feet had gathered here. The tracks were like the Nettle’s, and Lins felt something hair-raising grip the back of her neck at that. She looked up again at the cockpit, narrowing her eyes to observe more closely, then tracked her attention down the pitted and stained chassis of the mech. After a moment, she hoisted herself out of the Nettle with a grunt, and called up a few words to Jonesy to tell him to keep going.

She bounced a little on the spongy ground when she landed, and when she trotted around to the other side of the mech, she saw that the access ladder to the cockpit’s hatch was extended. She scaled it quickly. The streaming grass was heaviest at the top of the mech, but the space around the hatch was clear, as if someone had taken the time to make sure it was accessible.

The hatch door opened easily, and the weight of the door was balanced to close automatically.

The cockpit inside was small, but it had more space to maneuver than was usually afforded in older class mechs. Two seats, side by side, rather than the old traditional designs she’d
learned about, with seats front and back and access from the top.

The walls seemed to pulse with that unknown growth, and moved with the breeze coming in through the broken glass. The grass was different up here, almost lacy, and Lins could see fronds of the same-colored leaves affixed to the walls like their roots were buried in the metal.

Someone had lodged a cooler between the seats. It was grimy and dusty on the outside, but she recognized the hard blue plastic, the rough texture of the material. She opened it, and felt a curious prickle run down the back of her neck. There was a can opener and two dusty, dented cans, a scattering of loose dried leaves, and a folded piece of paper. Not much at all, but Lins suspected that there had been times where what was cached here might have meant survival to someone who came stumbling through, lost and days away from assistance. The folded piece of paper, weighted down by the can opener, held a cursory log of names and dates. Her heart sunk a little as she reached the end of the log and realized how long ago the final entry had been written.

Linsey was not an optimistic person, when it came to thinking up reasons why a visited place became no longer visited, but she held on to the freshness of those tracks at the mech’s feet, the work that someone had kept doing to keep the mech’s hatch clear. This mech was, above all things, a safe place to sleep at night. A derelict, but not abandoned.

Jonesy called up to her, and she clambered over the cooler to perch on one of the seats and lean out the cockpit window so she could look down at Jonesy.

"Vulture," Jonesy called up, with satisfaction. "Its name is Vulture."

Lins smiled, even though her lips were dried and cracked and the motion stung a bit. But it was good news. It made something ease inside of her, to hear that this machine, relegated to standing here until it crumbled forever, had a name that had belonged to it before it had become landmark, sanctuary, and cache for the locals, who themselves seemed to have passed on.

And Lins liked vultures. They made her heart glad when she saw them winging their way on the horizon, and how they ate the world clean of carrion, scraped out the sicknesses that would swamp any other creature on the plains, and made the world ready to be used again.

She held the grimy piece of notebook paper out for Jonesy. "Wanna read some more names?"
“Oh!” The sound Jonesy made was surprised, and it was only a few minutes later that he was up in the cockpit with her, frowning over the log. When they departed the Vulture, Lins knew, they’d bring the names: Jonesy would remember them.

They’d leave everything as they’d found it. They suspected the food in the cans was too old to be anything but wretched to eat, and probably contaminated anyways. But they’d have a new waypoint on their map of the known world: an old titan in their sea of grass.

From their perch up in Vulture, the world seemed expansive, their field of vision unending. When Lins peered through their telescope, it truly felt so. She’d never been this high before, and she wanted, fiercely for a moment, to feel Vulture moving under her feet, eating up the miles in its fast pace. They could throw their caution to the wind and race across the plains because they’d be truly safe so far above the ground. Her gut swooped with the imagined, exciting recklessness of it. And then her imagination circled back to the Vulture as it was: aged into rust, no longer with sprightly joints. The Vulture would walk, in a stately, measured manner. The image of the Vulture walking the plains long after its pilots had passed away, its impossible grass streaming behind it in the wind...it made her feel expansive, somehow, like the memory of endless summer days. She held on to the feeling while she scanned the horizon, looking for anything familiar.

Between their vantage point and their compass, she had a sense of where they were. If they went west, they’d end up at the Fire River, and from there, they’d figure it out.

In any case, it was time to move on.

They left the Vulture, each of them contemplative in their own ways. Behind them, the Vulture stood twisted and tall, a herald of an older age come to ground, limned by the last of the late afternoon sun.
Born Unto Trouble
by K. A. Sutherland

A lizard lounged on a rock, drinking up the sun. Boots thudded against hard-packed earth. The lizard lifted its head at the foreign sound. Harsh breath echoed against the slot canyon’s walls. The lizard scuttled under an outcropping as the running woman darted past. A boot slammed close to its hiding place and it flinched back, licking dust particles from its eyes.

Elly darted through the twisting canyon and knew she made too much noise. She couldn’t stop, couldn’t slow. She remembered the beast in the cave, how it stirred. It would wake fully soon enough.

When it did, it would come for her.

The canyon’s winding branches would confuse the creature for a time, carrying noise disorienting ways. Sands willing, the beast didn’t have her scent.

She clutched a leather satchel under one arm. Her shoulder muscles burned with tension. She shifted the burden to her other arm and shook out her free hand, which tingled as blood returned to her fingers.

The leather rippled as the satchel’s occupant squirmed in protest at the sudden change. "Settle," Elly gasped, afraid she would lose her grip. A weight pressed against her ribcage and remained still.

Elly darted around a bend in the canyon and spotted the exit. Past the worn limestone, flat white stretched forever under relentless blue. Elly risked coming to a stop. Scuffed dust swirled around her legs.

She squinted against the hard light. Not much cover on the plains. She scanned the horizon, the uncertain place where desert and mountain range met. She almost missed the little smudge hiding in the undulating heat. She shielded her eyes to get a better look. A fortress town, by the looks of it. Her only chance of getting out of this alive.

A deep rumble shivered sand off of the canyon walls and vibrated the earth under Elly’s shoes.

Elly swore, tugged her bandanna over her nose and mouth, and ran into the desert.
Little Ursa didn’t have much going for it. The promised railroad had passed it by. Crops couldn’t grow in the hard earth and constant sun. And the mine ran out of ore a couple of winters ago.

There hadn’t been bandit raids in years. A town with nothing but sand and unmet dreams didn’t have anything to offer thieves. Regardless, the fortress town’s wall remained manned. It beat counting how many flies landed on your nose before lunch.

Jeb and Orville walked the wall today. It didn’t involve much walking, though. The watchmen hunkered under a bit of cloth that had been strung up in a corner to provide some shade.

“Hot one.”
“Always is.”
“How the turnips doing?”
“Lousy. Your carrots?”
“Lousy.”

Jeb grunted and Orville spat his tobacco into a spittoon to the side. They were quiet but the two men had enough years of friendship behind them that the silence held a note of contentment. Orville nudged Jeb, who dozed. “Ey, you see that?”

Jeb jerked to attention and followed Orville’s pointing finger. A speck scuttled over the plain.

“What the devil,” Jeb muttered and lifted his binoculars to his eyes. “Huh! It’s a person alright.” He passed the glass to Orville.

“Ain’t nobody ever come to Little Ursa that fast,” Orville chuckled.

Jeb squinted against the glare and nabbed the binoculars from Orville. He peered through the glass and sucked on his teeth. No mistaking the grey-yellow smudge growing over the canyon. “That’s why. Sandstorm.” He rose from his seat and thrust the binoculars at Orville.

“I’ll go down and warn everyone,” he grunted and clomped down the walkway.

Orville clucked his tongue, eyeing the gathering storm before returning his eyes to the tiny figure.

“Sure hope you got some luck, friend.”

In minutes, all the shutters in Little Ursa were fastened. Townsfolk herded children into homes even as the main gate opened and two riders galloped onto the plain.
Elly saw none of this. Little Ursa was little more than a square blob in her vision. Blood pounded in her head and the walls of her dry esophagus stuck together. Her grip slackened on her satchel and her legs faltered. She couldn’t run anymore.

Elly wobbled and put one foot in front of the other in a weak, slow walk. A high-pitched giggle scoured her parched diaphragm. She was already dead, part of her knew. At least she’d die under a blue sky.

The town blurred. Elly grit her teeth and blinked. Surely she wasn’t that far gone?

No. A dust cloud!

Two figures resolved out of the dust cloud, riders and horses. Hoofbeats grew from taps to loud thunder. Elly slid the satchel’s strap over her body. She raised a hand in greeting while her other lingered by the revolver strapped to her hip.

The riders pulled up short, belts naked of guns. “Care for a lift to town, stranger?” one asked. The other kept an eye on the horizon, a worried look on her face.

“Decide quick. That storm’s coming like the devil’s driving it.”

No words could come out of her dried throat. Elly nodded. The horses wheeled around and the woman offered a hand. Elly took it and sat behind her, wedging the satchel between their bodies and quickly grabbing hold as the horses shifted from a trot to a gallop.

“I’d offer water, stranger, but we didn’t have time to grab any,” the rider said over the sound of the galloping horses.

“You’re just lucky the watchmen spotted you when they did,” the other rider called. “If they hadn’t we’d have shut up the town to weather the storm.”

Elly couldn’t speak with her parched throat. She peered over the rider’s shoulder as they neared the town. Little Ursa, in spite of its shit luck, still had its iron bones in place. Patches of dried-out wood siding clung to the strong metal, an original detail of the town to make it look more hospitable. If they were lucky, the buildings inside would be made of the same stuff. If they were even luckier, there would be a bunker.

The riders thundered into the square and the folks manning the gate shut and locked it. The horses snorted and stamped their hooves as the riders wheeled them around and slowed them to a walk.

“Let’s get that sand generator going,” a middle-aged woman yelled. Workers swarmed over the machines set into the town’s wall at
regular intervals. The generators would activate a sonic shield to stop the sand from burying the town.

The rider swung off the horse and offered Elly a hand down. She accepted the help, clutching her bag against her chest. Someone offered her a canteen and she gulped down the water, a small bit dribbled down her chin.

She wiped her mouth with her hand and said, “This town have a bunker?”

One of the riders laughed. “The generator will do us just fine. No need to fret.”

“Yes or no.”

“There’s no reason to—hey!” the rider exclaimed as Elly walked past, ignoring her words. She crossed the square to the woman supervising the generator work.

“You the mayor?” Elly asked.

The woman turned to have an eye on Elly and an eye on the work. “Nearest we got.” She offered a hand, “Albright.”

She took it. “Elly. This town have a bunker, Ms. Albright?”

“Just Albright. All fortress towns have bunkers.”

“You need to get your people down there.”

“Little Ursa can handle a sandstorm,” Albright said and returned her attention to her people, a clear dismissal.

Elly kept her voice level despite her mounting frustration, “This ain’t—isn’t a normal storm.”

Albright finished hollering an order and shifted her gaze back to Elly. She studied the stranger for a beat. “How do you know that?”

Above, on the town’s guard post, Orville and Jeb peered at the storm, both with binoculars glued to their eyes.

“Moving awfully fast,” Jeb said.

“Reckon so,” Orville spat to the side. “I’d say about twenty minutes away.”

The dark storm rose above the mountains, lit from within by a strange, sickly green light. What little moisture remained in the air had been sucked dry.

Orville squinted through the glass. Something moved in the storm’s shifting sands.

Sullen lighting crackled, slow, in the storm. Before Orville’s binoculars slipped from surprised fingers, a massive shadow that dwarfed mountains rose from the canyon, curled horns arched from a spiked face, and two wings unfurled like blooming flowers.
When he found his voice, his shriek carried through town.

“Dragon!”

Albright’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second before bellowing new orders to open the bunker. Townsfolk swarmed past, arms full of possessions and food. Some even herded animals to the thick doors embedded into the town square.

Relieved, thinking she’d been overlooked, Elly moved to join the crowd only to have a hard hand clamp on her shoulder.

Albright’s scowl loomed inches from Elly’s face.

“You’re coming with me.”

Elly and Albright sat in a shabby saloon rather than the safety promised by the bunker. A long, dusty table separated the two women, Elly in a rickety chair while Albright claimed the single comfortable seat in the establishment for herself.

Albright glowered at her from the other end of the table. A huge revolver sat by her hand with its barrel pointed at Elly.

“You’re coming with me.”

Albright leaned back in her chair and regarded Elly with a look reserved for imbeciles.

“Study it?” That your way of saying you got a death wish?”

“I’m a zoologist,” Elly replied with the strained patience of someone who’s had to explain something multiple times. “I study animals.”

Albright waved her hand in dismissal.

“Anyone who studies those creatures is insane.”
“Not so. We know so little about them but they’re vital to our ecosystem. More knowledge can only be a good thing.”

“So the leviathan was waking up before you reached its den. Sure the beastie didn’t just smell you coming?”

Elly studied the mayor. Albright knew more than she should. Only one other profession would know about dragon size classes and the animals’ keen sense of smell: a rustler.

“I applied a tonic to conceal my scent before entering the canyon. Somebody had been there before me.” The corner of Elly’s eye caught movement from her bag. A small, welcome face peered at her from a gap between bag and flap.

Albright let a breath through her nose.

“Then you must’ve run into this person on your way in. Care to tell me who?”

Elly shook her head. “I didn’t run into anyone. A dragon of that size takes a long time to wake up during nesting so the other intrusion could’ve happened days or weeks before I arrived.”

Albright didn’t say anything, only stared at her. Elly didn’t volunteer conversation or look away, afraid to draw attention to the satchel.

The animal crept out of the open flap and skittered under the table on silent claws just as Albright said, “Nesting.”

“That’s right,” she said as needle-claws dug into her pants leg. The creature made its way to her lap, still hidden by the table. The mayor leaned forward. Her fingers curled around the gun handle, index resting on the trigger.

“Did you steal an egg?” Albright said. The wind whistled outside.

Claws dug into Elly’s thigh. The creature recognized the threatening tone. Elly kept her breathing steady so her heart wouldn’t race. She smiled and leaned back in her chair. “Did you?”

She never saw Albright raise the gun. The gunshot filled the saloon with its irrefutable rapport. Smoke drifted above the table before mounting winds swirled it aside.

The bullet hung, suspended in mid-air between the women. It trembled, the dust around the projectile distorted into concentric rings as kinetic energy bled off.

After Albright’s ears stopped ringing, she heard the humming. A small reptile the size of a house cat clawed its way up Elly’s shirt and sat on her shoulder. Its scales glittered like polished bronze. The creature’s narrow, fox-like face stretched forward, intent on the bullet. The tail
wrapped around the back of Elly’s head for extra balance.

“It hatched,” Albright gasped.

“No,” Elly said. “He’s a five-year-old dra. I call him Sandy.”

Albright frowned. “Dra. Those pygmy lizards?”

Sandy stopped humming and the bullet clattered to the table. He sprung down from his perch and pounced on the bullet. He chattered and gulped down the metal. His gizzard distended as the bullet made its way down.

“They’re a dragon sub-species,” Elly said. Sandy made a distinct burping noise and his throat returned to its normal size. The scent of molten metal filled the room.

Albright’s eyes narrowed. “Telekinetic?”

“Nope. He can negate velocities and kinetic energy. Nice to have in a gunfight. Speaking of,” Elly glanced at Albright’s pistol. Sandy crept forward and his tone flicked over his snout, eyes wide and greedy. “You might want to put that away.”

Albright slid the weapon off the table, scowling at Sandy. “Where’s the leviathan’s egg?”

She laughed and leaned back in her chair, arms folded over her chest. “Hold up, trigger finger. You shot me. I think I’m entitled to know why.”

Albright’s lips pulled away from her teeth. She eyed Sandy, who kept sniffing the place on the table where the gun had been and casting curious, bird-like looks at the mayor. “You stole an egg. You brought it to my town. Now a leviathan-class dragon is on its way. You’ve as good as killed everyone here.”

“I didn’t. And from where I’m sitting, it looks like it could’ve been you, rustler.”

She winced. “I left that behind a long time ago.” She shook her head as though to clear the cobwebs of memory. “Let’s back up. I know enough to know that dragons of that class only stir during nesting season when the egg is about to hatch. She wouldn’t leave her den if the egg was present.”

“That’s right.” Sandy huffed and scampered back to Elly. She held out an arm and the dra climbed up to rest on her shoulder again. “I checked the nest before I escaped. No dragon egg. I did find a dra egg from a cuckold species.”

She nodded to her satchel, “I managed to snag it. If it hatched while the dragon was awake, it would’ve been eaten.”

Albright drummed her fingers. “At any rate, neither you nor I stole the dragon egg.”
“Any out-of-town guests recently?” Sandy nuzzled against her cheek, tiny claws tightening against her shirt.

She snorted. “Barely anybody knows this town exists. I can’t remember the last time we had visitors.”

“Then it’s one of the townsfolk.”

Albright’s fingers stopped mid-tap. The temperature dropped ten degrees and a high-pitched shriek began somewhere in her brain and grew in volume. Her mind spiraled downward, into numb shock. She never considered any of her people would be stupid enough to wake a dragon, no matter how much coin an egg fetched. She bit the inside of her cheek, grounding herself back to her body.

Elly sighed and rubbed Sandy’s back.

“Anybody have money trouble?”

Albright rubbed her eyes. “The whole town has money trouble.”

“That narrows it down,” Elly said. “Look. We got to recover the egg and give it back to its mama. That’s our best shot at keeping this town from getting ground into the dirt.”

Albright shoved away from the table, chair legs grating against untreated floorboards. She tucked the gun back into her holster. “Let’s go to the bunker. I’ll suss out our thief.”

Elly went to her satchel. She moved the flap aside and gazed at the egg. No cracks or any other damage. Sandy scampered down her arm and slid inside the bag, curling around the egg and cooing.

“You coming?” Albright said.

Elly twisted to peer out of the window. The horizon had darkened, thick with clouds and flashes of lightning. “She’s coming on fast. Somebody needs to distract her.”

Albright tilted her hat up and scratched her hairline. “Sure you don’t got a death wish?”

“Nah,” Elly stood and picked up her bag. She twisted the straps over her torso so the bag would rest securely on her upper back without flapping around. “Just born unto trouble.”

The mayor shrugged and settled her hat back to its rightful place. “When I find the egg, I’ll take it outside of town.”

Elly buckled her belt and took out her revolver. She flipped it open. All six cylinders were full. “Well. If I’m not dragon food by then, I’ll keep an eye out.” She nodded once to Albright and strode across the saloon. She passed through the door and into the town square.

The light outside shone a sickly yellow-green. She smelled ozone and her teeth itched at the prospect of lightning burning the atmosphere.
A handwheel had been set into the side of the wall, next to the gate. Elly seized the spokes and began to turn it. The townsfolk kept the mechanism in good repair and the gears turned easily. Sandy wriggled out of the bag and scuttled up her arm to perch on her shoulder and look at the widening gap. He made a deep noise in his belly.

“I’m not excited about it either,” Elly said. “You think you can help me not get killed?”

Sandy snorted and flicked the tip of his tail against her neck. Elly chuckled and peered at the gate. The gate had opened enough for her to slip through. She shook out her hands before she pulled her bandanna over her nose and mouth.

“I’ll need you to let me know if the egg starts hatching. We can’t have the baby imprint on the big girl out there.” Sandy nibbled her ear in acknowledgment. The dra settled over the back of her neck, talons knotted in her jacket and tail curled around the base of her throat.

Elly slipped through the opening and into hell.

Flying sand obscured the wasteland. Purple-black clouds hung low, pulsing with lightning. The wind screamed and whistled like a thousand voices of the damned. Elly screwed her eyes against the stinging grains and struggled to walk away from the town.

Sandy tensed against her neck and began to vibrate as he hummed. The dra extended his kinetic nullifying field so it surrounded Elly in a dome. The sand and wind could no longer touch her. She gave Sandy’s head a little scratch and ran forward, leaving Little Ursa behind. It wouldn’t really matter, given the size of the dragon, but Elly didn’t want to get smashed against the fortress town’s walls if she could help it.

She plucked her revolver from its holster. Bullets wouldn’t do much against the dragon but they would get her attention.

A massive shadow finished uncoiling from the canyon. Wings extended and flapped down. The dragon took to the sky. Air pressure strengthened, like a hand pressing against the landscape.

Sandy tensed and tightened his claws. He let out a low, warning hiss. Ten beats of the leviathan’s wings ferried it from its nest to Little Ursa. She seemed to hover in the air, surveying the fortress town.

Elly raised her revolver—knowing she had to give Albright some time and knowing that what she did was very, very stupid. She sighted along the gun’s length, picked her target—a scale
protrusion on the dragon’s neck—and pulled the trigger.

The rapport sounded like a cough compared to the howling storm. The bullet struck sparks when it hit the scale. The dragon’s long neck arched in Elly’s direction. A backbeat of wings ripped shingles off of roofs. Hairline cracks ran across nearby stones before the fractures deepened and shattered the rocks. The dragon landed and the ground quaked.

Elly lost her balance on the shivering earth but kept her feet. She hobbled further away from town and shot again. The dragon kept its horrible attention on her. Sandy screamed in warning as the massive animal twirled. Her long tail barreled over a vast distance, cutting through the air as it gained momentum. Elly stared at the tail, growing larger and larger as it neared until she could pick out details in the scales, and knew she couldn’t avoid it just seconds before a blast wave slammed against her torso and sent her flying.

Massive booms from the surface shivered the bunker and brought down streams of sand from the rafters. Folks flinched with every impact. Albright shouldered her way through the townspeople huddled in the bunker. It didn’t take long for her to be noticed. Questions and demands were thrown at her from half-seen, desperate faces.

“What’s going on?”

“Are we going to die?”

“Can’t you do anything, mayor?”

She found a table that had been shoved against a wall. The people leaning against it shifted to attention. "Help me," she said and they offered steadying hands as Albright climbed onto the table. She turned and saw the town of Little Ursa staring up at her, hushed. She scanned those faces, drawn and tired from years of rough living. She couldn’t blame them for the theft. Not after all the bad luck. But she did blame them for lack of foresight. For bringing hell to the town. Now she had to clean up their mess.

She stated, voice rough and flat, “Which of you stole the dragon egg?” The crowd shifted, murmured, cast suspicious looks at neighbors.

“Nobody’s in trouble,” Albright said so her voice would carry over the murmurs. “But we gotta get it outta town before there’s no town left.”

“There’s barely a town out there now. Let it burn,” a voice cracked from the crowd like a whip. Like a dam breaking, the folk of Little Ursa
began to voice their grievances. Mutterings and grumbles grew to angry shouts and accusations. Years of desperation and rage flooded out like a torrent. Their cries and shouts drowned out the destruction above and no one flinched when the bunker trembled.

Albright shut her eyes. She counted to ten. And she yelled, “If the buildings collapse, we won’t get out of the bunker!” The prospect of their imminent demise shocked the crowd to silence. “You wanna die down here?” she demanded. “You wanna starve to death? Or, hell, maybe the ventilation will give out and we’ll all suffocate.”

Widened eyes stared at their appointed mayor. No one had heard her speak like that before. She scowled at each in turn. Albright dug down, to the old rustler bastard that could shoot, spit, curse, and kill with the best of them.

“Where’s the egg?” Her voice was deep, like a snarl from an animal on a moonless night in the wilderness. She would allow no disagreements or arguments. The tone implied violence to any who opposed her.

The people of Little Ursa remained silent and afraid.

“Macready’s cellar,” a brittle voice said somewhere in the crowd. “Behind some barrels.”

Albright dropped from the table and didn’t have to shove anyone aside as she ran for the bunker’s entrance. They were afraid of her and would never look at her the same way again. Albright found that she didn’t much care. The town had been doomed for years anyway. Albright would move on if she managed to survive through the day.

She passed through the hatch and into a darkened world. The blotted sky cast Little Ursa in shades of purple. Albright ran to Macready’s house, a shack towards the edge of town. She scuttled around the building until she found the cellar doors. A padlock had been added. She drew her gun and blew away the rotting wood around the padlock with a single shot. She yanked the doors open and hurried down the worn stone steps.

The cellar was darker than night. Albright hissed a litany of curses and groped around the dark. Earthen walls met her probing fingers and she ran into a creaky set of shelves. Her boot hit something and she reached down and felt a barrel at about the height of her hips. She ran her fingers over the barrel’s surface and froze.

A noise, just at the edge of hearing pulsed against her eardrums. It happened again, louder, like a struck bell.
She knew that sound.

As she stood, frozen in the dark, the cellar began to lighten. The absolute dark became a starlight night. She could make out the shelves she ran into a moment ago and the irregular dirt walls. The squat shapes of the barrels resolved in her vision and behind them, brightening with every breath, an amethyst egg lit from within by sullen, glowing magma.

Somewhere between flying through the air and hurtling against the ground, Elly considered the possibility that she miscalculated. She twisted around as she flew to yank the bag across her back and over her belly. She curled around it to protect the egg inside.

Sandy screamed. The kinetic field around Elly warped into a sphere. The ground came, fast and hard, and Sandy’s field absorbed most of the impact. Elly bounced a couple of times until she bled off enough energy to come to a stop. Blood trickled out of her nose and her entire body screamed in agony.

Elly groaned she uncurled—each movement brought varying degrees of sharp and dull pain—and stared at her satchel. Her mouth moved but she had no breath to use for words. Sandy unwound from his perch and made his trembling way over Elly’s shoulders and chest to the bag. The dra stuck his head inside and then jerked away. He whistled, high and undulating.

The egg had begun to hatch. Elly stuttered upright, unsteady on her hands as she struggled into a sitting position. She’d been knocked in the direction of Little Ursa, the wall close to her back. She flipped the bag open and pulled out the warm egg. It was dark purple, just like the leviathan’s, though smaller. Gold flecks spattered its surface. The egg jerked in her grasp in response to a small body moving inside the shell.

A wheezing laugh sent sharp needles of pain through her diaphragm. “You got good timing,” she rasped. Sandy climbed into her lap and reached small paws up to the egg. Elly gently passed the egg to Sandy and leaned against the fortress’s wall. Her watering eyes blinked against the wind.

The dragon’s shadow lurked out there, taking slow and ponderous steps to Little Ursa. The earth trembled with every footfall. Elly wasn’t going to make it out alive. Not once the leviathan turned her fury on the town. She was too battered and tired to escape the blast zone in time.
If she had a horse, it’d be a different story. But she didn’t.

“Sandy.”

The vulpine head peered up at her. The flecks on the egg had begun to glow. An hour, perhaps, until the baby made its way out.

“Take the egg and run.”

This suggestion prompted a series of annoyed clicks and whistles. The dra’s brow furrowed and its head bobbed in agitation.

“It’s an endangered species. If you don’t get it out . . .” Elly griped at the fortress wall and hauled herself upward. Sandy leaped from her lap, paws clutching the egg. He whistled and chittered at her. His bronze eyes were liquid with worry.

“Extending your field to cover me won’t work against whatever that big mama’s got. And you’re faster on your own.” The leviathan’s limbs ate up distance faster than Elly liked. “Look, if the town is still standing in the next half-hour, come back. If I’m not alive, find Albright. She’s an okay sort. I think.”

Sandy stared at her. Elly smiled under her dusty bandanna and bent down to pull out her smaller revolver from her ankle holster. By the time she stood up again, Sandy had vanished. She checked the chamber and staggered away from the town.

The fortress’s door groaned. She stopped and turned. Albright ducked out of Little Ursa, She had wrapped a cloth around the large egg, which she held in both hands. Elly smelled the scorched-earth and magma scent of a hatching. So did the mother.

A horrible scream like thousands of swords clashing erupted from the dragon. It began to trot, the ground shaking continuously in response. Albright’s eyes widened but she launched into a sprint, her strong legs eating up ground. Elly followed after her.

If they returned the egg to its mother before it hatched, they might have a chance.

“Has it breached the shell?” Elly screamed over the wind.

“Almost!” Albright responded. Even with the cloth thrown over it, the egg scalded her fingers. Her joints screamed every minute she ran. Her body, broken from her years of rustling, wouldn’t be able to keep up the pace. Of course, the younger woman didn’t look much better.

The dragon’s trot gained speed. The mother dragon galloped across the wasteland, her body liquid and sinuous. Never had Albright seen a creature of such size and grace.

And then her ankle turned. Albright howled in agony but kept her feet. She thrust the
bundle at Elly. The younger woman snatched it without another word and plowed into the maelstrom. Behind her, Albright fell to her knees.

The cloth fibers began to singe and smoke curled around her. The dragon would be upon her soon. Elly had to make her move and it had to be now.

She ripped the cloth from the egg. The egg glowed fiercely, a beacon that shone through the storm. It burned her hands, blistered her skin, and tried to burrow down to her bones. The scent of cooking meat sickened her. She screamed as her nerves frayed and skidded to a stop. She set the egg on the ground and the layer of sand that dusted the wasteland vaporized into glass. The molten glass bonded to the egg and held it upright. She backed away, tears streamed down her dusty face, and she clutched wounded hands close to her chest.

The ground stopped shaking. The wind slowed and brought down the singing sands. The world brightened. Elly looked up. The clouds had cleared, leaving the hard blue of the sky and the blinding white of the wasteland.

The mother dragon stood barely one hundred feet from Elly. Her scales were the dark velvet that resided between the stars, her intelligent reptilian eyes glowed with the fire of the sun. She stood larger than the mountains, with a soul that would last through eternity.

She eyed Elly but made no move. Elly, in turn, was too terrified to flee. To turn her back on this magnificent creature would be an insult. Those ancient eyes softened, pleased. The thieves hadn’t disturbed her. Nor had Elly’s incursion. Her baby’s song before its birth had roused and called her. She’d waited an eon for this.

Elly didn’t know how or when the shape of the mother dragon’s thoughts touched her mind. But it pressed against the vaults of her brain, terrifying in its age and knowledge. An alien mind not of her world.

The egg’s molten glow brightened until it burned like a small sun that had landed in the desert. Elly could hear her blood flowing through her veins in the silence of the wasteland. This was a turning point.

A single egg born once a millennium.
The world held its breath.
A talon broke through the shell.
Author Biographies

Emily Blue
Emily Blue is a ghostwriter and top-rated freelancer on Upwork.com. She pens sickly-sweet romance novels so she can afford to buy food for her pets (and overlords). When not writing, she collects craft materials and occasionally uses them. She has stories published in *A Room is Locked: An Anthology*, Volume 1 of *The Monsters We Forgot* anthology, and *Clockwork Dragons*.

V. R. Collins
V. R. Collins writes speculative fiction. She’s usually wandering a city by a river, somewhere in the US.

Alex Evans
Alex Evans is a French author who juggles an absorbing job, a lively family and the craft of writing. She is the author of the *Sorcières Associées* series in French (Actusf publisher) and multiple short stories. The latest can be found in *Fudoki Magazine* (in English). She blogs in French and English at www.romansdefantasy.com.

Michael M. Jones
Michael M. Jones lives in southwest Virginia with too many books, just enough cats, and a wife who turned out to be the best gamble of his life. His work has appeared in places such as *Mad Scientist Journal*, *G is for Ghost*, *Unidentified Funny Objects 8*, and *MetaStellar*. He is the editor of several anthologies, including *Scheherazade’s Facade*, and *Schoolbooks & Sorcery*. For more, visit him at www.michaelmjones.com or on Twitter at @oneminutemonkey.

Isobel Mackenzie
Isobel is a Scottish writer living in London. She writes science-fiction and fantasy short stories, loves stories set on other worlds, and spends her time cycling and visiting bookshops. She is currently working on her first fantasy novel. You can find her on twitter @isobelmackwords.
**Anna Madden**
Anna Madden lives in Fort Worth, Texas. Her fiction has appeared in *DreamForge Magazine, Upon a Once Time* (anthology, Air and Nothingness Press), *DreamForge Anvil, Zooscape*, and *Apparition Literary Magazine*. She has a Bachelor of Arts: English degree with a creative writing emphasis from the University of Missouri—Kansas City. In her free time, she gardens, mountain bikes, and is a first reader for *DreamForge Magazine* and *Dark Matter Magazine*. Follow her on Twitter @anna_madden_ or visit her website at annamadden.com.

**Sadie Maskery**
Sadie Maskery lives in Scotland by the sea with her family. Her writing will be found in various publications both online and in print, and she is on Twitter as @saccharinequeen where she describes herself, optimistically, as “functioning adequately.”

**K. A. Sutherland**
K. A. Sutherland is a speculative fiction writer with a lifelong love of storytelling. Her work has appeared in *Coffin Bell Journal* and she participated in AWP’s Writer to Writer Spring 2018 mentorship program. She and her husband live in New York.
Read the complete first year of *Hexagon* for free on our website. 
www.hexagonmagazine.ca

Issue 6 of *Hexagon SF Magazine* is coming Fall 2021!

Subscribe to *Hexagon* via Patreon to gain Early Access to future issues.

*Hexagon SF Magazine* is a quarterly publication, open for submissions year-round.
The copying, reselling, or editing of Hexagon or any of the stories contained within is strictly prohibited.

**HEXAGON MAGAZINE**
**ISSUE 5 - SUMMER 2021**

Follow us on social media @hexagonmagazine

The works contained within *Hexagon SF Magazine* are pure fiction. Any similarities to real life characters or events are strictly coincidental.

© J. Stebner 2021