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2900 words

manuscript disposable

Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground

The sun was getting low in the sky, and the shadows cast by the forest grew long and languid. A cool breeze played across the banks of the lake, just enough to make my skin pimple gently. I stretched my legs up into the air, bringing them down to either side of me while simultaneously issuing a loud and satisfying yawn. Splayed out in the grass, the unkempt blades tickling the backs of my hands, I watched Thule and Yyun rise behind the silhouette of the city of Loren on the far side of the water. I picked up my radsaan and tuned the strings, and settled the body of the small instrument between my shoulder and chin. The neck of it pointed up towards the sky, held gently in my left hand. I took a deep breath, and began to whistle the opening lines of *Thule and Her Daughter*:

*Sing to us Thule, sing us soft as the meadow
Sing us your sorrows, rah ta tehm, ta rah lae
Sing us of Yyun, of a mother's last longing
Sing us of she torn away, ta rah lae --*

“Yhastyeh! Yhaaaast!”

I stopped my fingers rapid vibration, and the resonant voice of my radsaan slowly died.

“Oi, Miinyeh! Over here.” I put down the instrument and got to my feet, waving my arms overhead.

Miin saw me and gave a high trill of recognition, its slow vibrato twisting and echoing over the lake. Her pale orange skin blended with the dusky light, and I smiled as she ran to meet me. With a fluid and flawless cartwheel, she came lightly to rest an impressively short distance from my face.

I stooped low and gave a falling whistle of polite deference.

“M’lord.”

“Greetings, o my vassal,” she answered, with regal import.

We both laughed and fell over in the grass. Looking up at the darkening sky, we could see just make out the earliest stars on the horizon. We touched the fingers of our right hands in the greeting of familiars, the tiny magnetic fields pulling our fingertips together.

“Impressive gymnastics,” I said. “Showoff,” I added.

“Why, thank you,” Miin responded, her voice brimming with mock humility. “Your raadsan is coming along beautifully, Yhast.” She gave a soft whistle which dipped lightly in the middle, indicating sincerity. Pride welled in my chest, although I did my best to tamp it down -- it would be a long time before I was anywhere as good as my mother. My intonation was still approximate, and I lacked the coordination to sing without adversely affecting my playing. Still, I returned a short trill of humble thanks.

Miin rolled onto her stomach, her head propped up in her hands. “Yeh’Mej is looking for you, Yhast. You were supposed to be back to the caravan a full quintile ago. She got fed up enough to send me, so you should probably not keep her waiting any longer.”

“Thule! I’m so completely pooched.”

Miin laughed at me. “You’ve been spending too much time with the d’saar. You’re starting to sound like him.”

“Mej says he’s still full of stories. She says it’s our duty to prevent them being lost.”

Miin gave a flat tone of agreement. The sun was almost below the tops of great ferns that made up the old-growth forest, and our travelling circus was on the far side of it. It wouldn’t take more than a half quintile to walk it, but it was growing dark quickly. I briefly registered that the late evening glow made Miin look even more painfully attractive than usual. I did my best to stop noticing her lithe form. I did poorly.

I was snapped from my reverie by her, waving a hand in my face.

“Yhast? Are you even listening to me? *We have to goooooo.*”

“Yeah, sorry, I heard you. Back before dark, and all that. We’ve got a show tonight, after all.” I gave one last look across the lake, and realized with a pang that it would likely be a rotation or more before I saw it again. I turned and followed Miin into the forest.

When we arrived, the camp was a familiar bustle of activity. Yeh’Nihm was doing the makeup of several performers at once, flitting between several faces, applying powders and paints at a dizzying pace. Performers hurried between tents in various states of undress between lavishly festooned and semi-nude. With a quick meeting of fingertips, I bid farewell to Miin, as

she and I both had preparations to do. She did a backwards cartwheel onto her hands and walked away from me, upside down. “Showoff!” I called after her, and she whistled amusement back to me.

On my way back to my tent, I ran my lines over in my head: *Hail, mortal!* and *Ready and Peaseblossom*. Easy enough. I shook my head. It was certainly a strange play. The d’saar had recounted it to the troupe as best as he could -- although he had a remarkable memory, it was possible there had been losses along the way. He had taken great lengths to seek out the troupe -- how could he not? The Yir’Saan were spoken of with renown the world over. Beyond the world, even. Last rotation, we had been invited to the Moot of Planets, where we had performed the great Yeh’Marah-Nim’s timeless *Maid of Traleh*, in support of the refugees of Jayn. Perhaps the d’saar had heard of us then? Regardless of how, he had found us, and he brought with him the only currency the Yir’Saan truly valued: stories and songs.

At the entrance of my tent, I found Orae waiting for me. I met his pastel blue fingers in greeting, when I noticed the smirk on his face and the hand hidden behind his back.

“Orayeh, please, no. Don’t tell me --”

He trilled insincere apology to me, and extracted the exact costume piece I had dreaded from behind his back.

“Sorry, Yhasteh. Yeh’Amen is fallen ill, and the d’saar said you’d been studying *everyone’s* lines.”

Orae handed me the headpiece -- it was dead-eyed and hairy, with a mouth full of horrifying teeth. It looked like a tahb, but about a thousand times uglier. The d’saar called it an “ass.” He laughed whenever he said it.

I pushed past Orae without saying goodbye, whistling irritation to myself. I wasn't ready for this part, I thought. You're going to make an *ass* of yourself, is what the d'saar would say. And then he would laugh, like a great set of bellows. The old fool. Like you're so smart. He could barely whistle.

Trying his best not to panic over the change of plans, I went through the motions to get dressed for the performance. I quietly hummed comfort to myself.

"I see you are nearly ready. That is good."

I turned quickly to see my mother standing in the tent. I stooped low, trilling deference.

"Yah'Mej. Please excuse my tardiness."

She laughed gently.

"'Mother' will do just fine, Yhast. It is only us after all. How are you feeling? You will be needed onstage soon. Many of the highest dignitaries of Loren will be here tonight -- I don't expect you'll be keeping them waiting? If so, I'll be sure to tell Orae; I hear he's been practicing his jokes. Although, I wouldn't think it prudent to assume he's improved at all." She whistled humor with a pair of quick rising tones.

As the leader of the Yir'Saan, my mother had a way of setting performers at ease. She picked up my radsaan from the chair where I had left it, and began to make it sing with otherworldly beauty. Effortlessly, she filled my unkempt performer's tent with music to bring tears to the eyes of every soul in Loren.

After executing a particularly tricky phrase with characteristic deftness, she handed me the radsaan.

"Repeat that back to me," she said with a wry smile. She hummed confidence.

I took a deep breath, shouldered the instrument, and attempted to follow my mother's wild runs. The melody soared high, then doubled back on itself, turning from triumphant to mournful in the space of a moment. Then it rose again, doubled in fury, before landing nimbly in a tender resolution.

“Good! You are getting better. Do not forget to *breathe*, my little dahnyeh. If you could follow the madness I concocted for you just now, you can follow the words of an old man for an evening.” She chirruped encouragement, and touched my forehead gently. With a smile, she turned and left the tent.

I finished putting on my costume, which, in truth, consisted of putting on a pair of rough sandals and a deep red sash in addition to the plain white robe I was already wearing. I hurried out to find Yeh’Nihm, who frantically made up my face whilst humming a threatening displeasure at my lateness. He shooed me off in record time.

Backstage was a portrait of pure chaos. Performers with gossamer wings fervently practiced their lines, while others stood in small circles, their hands in the center, whispering words of support. I peeked through the curtain to see a packed amphitheatre -- many had travelled from the city to see the famed Yin’Saad perform a long-lost play from amongst the stars.

Ducking back behind the curtain, I caught a glimpse of Miin from across the stage. She would play the part of a trickster; I, the tricked. We exchanged a trill of excitement, and then were silenced by the players around us. It was time to begin.

*“And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call;
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.”*

The crowd loved it. They'll be talking about tonight until next year, my mother had said with approval. I had to agree. I sought out Miin to congratulate her, and found her on the outskirts of the tent circle, speaking to the d'saar. From a distance, the old man spotted me, and waved me over.

“Yeh'Yaste! Or are you going by Nick Bottom these days? Tremendous performance, my boy, just tremendous. You've done your mother quite proud, you know.” He whistled what sounded like pride, but a careless listener could have mistaken it for simple joy. The d'saar's whistle was much like the man -- loud and substantial, but frequently lacking in subtlety. I grinned, and trilled a short thanks back to him.

“I was just telling Yeh'Miin here that she played the Puck to a tee. I feel like there may have been a certain amount of type casting, but what's the harm in that? I must say, I enjoyed watching you make an ass of Yeh'Yaste, as per usual.”

Miin laughed. “Please, d'saar, there's no need to be formal -- Miin is quite enough amongst friends.”

“Well then, I’ll have to insist that the two of you call me Ben for the evening -- none of this ‘d’saar’ business, if you please.”

“Whatever ‘floats your boat,’ d’saar Ben.”

I laughed at this -- it always amused me when Miin picked up the d’saar’s aphorisms. Float your boat? The differing densities of water and atmosphere floats boats. One has little choice in the matter.

I piped in:

“D’saar Ben -- thank you for teaching us the *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It is quite beautiful.” I whistled deep gratitude.

“It was truly my pleasure, Yhast. Seeing that play performed once again...” He trailed off. “Say, it won’t be long before a night this warm is a rare sight. How would the two of you like to take a walk with me? I’d like to visit the lake again before we depart tomorrow.”

We walked through the forest, chatting idly, instruments strapped to our backs, discussing the night’s performance. I had seen a fair number of aliens in my lifetime, but the d’saar always startled me in how like us he was -- and yet, not at all like us. He was a full head shorter than any ilir I had ever seen, including myself, and I was on the short side. He insisted that he was tall for a human -- I imagined a world full of tiny ilir, all colored a deep brown like the d’saar. He assured me that humans had come in a variety of colors as well, although none quite so vibrant as the ilir. Despite the darkness of his complexion, the d’saar grew a cloud of curly white hair from the top of his head, which even began to creep onto his face in the late afternoon.

“I was a particle physicist,” he had told me long ago. I had nodded, humming understanding, although I was not entirely sure what that meant. “And, if I do say so myself, a general scholar of the arts. I was chosen as a candidate for the Voyager 3 mission. Humans, you see, were in great danger, and at a point it became clear that there was a very real chance that humanity, as a whole, wouldn’t survive the century. We were waiting for so many things, so many scientific developments to solve our problems, but we feared they would be too late in coming.

“So we came up the Voyager 3 program. A sort of parting gift from humanity to the galaxy at large. I didn’t have any family to speak of, so I was quick to volunteer. I packed up a few belongings -- my guitar, for instance, although they didn’t let us take much -- and reported to the space station for launch. I was placed in low-energy stasis, and launched out into the stars. As luck would have it, they launched me on a collision course with your system. Thousands of years later, my beacon was picked up by an Ilirian freighter, and the rest is, as they said, history.”

We arrived at the lake to find it perfectly still, glassy beneath the night sky. The light of Thule and Yyun made seeing easy, as they were both in full wax. The complete lack of any wind made for an eerily beautiful silence, only broken by the faint lapping of tide on the shore of the lake. We sat by the water’s edge, and enjoyed the warmth and stillness of the night. After a few minutes, a low trill of contentment from Miin broke the silence.

“Yaste -- why don’t you play for Ben what I heard you working on earlier? I think Thule and Yyun deserve to hear the full song.” She added, “If you like, I can sing. I know the words.”

I looked to the d'saar, who nodded at me to continue. I shouldered my radsaan, and began the lilting tune. After I had played through the melody once, Miin joined in, her voice mixing ecstatically with the music:

*Sing to us Thule, sing us soft as the meadow
Sing us your sorrows, rah ta tehm, ta rah lae
Sing us of Yyun, of a mother's last longing
Sing us of she torn away, ta rah lae.*

*Sing to us, Yyun, sing us sweet as a sunrise
Sing us your sorrows, rah ta tehm, ta rah lae
Sing us of Thule, of a daughter's regrets
Sing us of she whom you flew from, trah lae.*

*Tirh-a-lirh-a-leh, ne'r again shall you touch her
Tirh-a-lirh-a-leh, though you share the same sky
No matter, Thule, how you stretch out to reach her
Forever in silence, Yyun can only pass by.*

The last notes died, and the lakeside was again steeped in silence. It was then that the d'saar was weeping.

“D'saar, I mean -- Ben, are you well?” Miin hummed comfort.

Drying his eyes, and taking a few deep breaths, he composed himself.

“You damn Ilirians have a certain way with words, that's for sure.” He grinned. “How about I play a song for the two of you, now that you've left me all weepy-eyed.” He turned to

unpack his guitar from its soft black bag. He also extracted a thin glass tube, which I realized was the neck of a bottle, the sharp edges of which had been carefully buffed away.

“You know, I made my journey with the Voyager 3 program. There was a pair of other Voyagers, that left the Sol system long before I did.” He looked up at the sky, as though searching. “You know... I’ve forgotten where it is. It’s been so many years since I bothered to look.

“Those first Voyagers, they weren’t so different from myself. They each carried with them a golden record. On it, were a hundred greetings in different Earth languages, sounds from our beaches, our jungles, our cities. And there was music, from so many times, so many places. You see, humanity was always lonely. We only ever wanted somebody to hear us.”

He put the bottleneck on the third finger from his thumb and started to play. On a warm night by a silent lake, I heard the song of a thousand ghosts. Glass met metal, and I tasted heartbreak, exile, longing, hope and hopelessness. The song had no words; the d’saar, the voyager, followed his instrument with a mournful drone, a funereal lament which shattered my heart. It rose expectant, almost joyful in places, fell into despair, then climbed again.

With tears in my eyes, I realized that Miin had joined her voice with Ben’s. I shouldered my radsaan and played. For what felt like forever, we mingled our songs, performing for none but the stars. When the music finally died, the last notes swallowed by the night, Ben looked at Miin and I with tears in his eyes and whistled joy.

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21W.759 Writing Science Fiction
Spring 2016

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