

kiel stuart  
authors guild . science fiction writers of america  
12 skylark . stony brook ny 11790  
516-751-7080

Ingrid A. Zierhut  
1616 Spruce Ave.  
Winter Park FL 32789

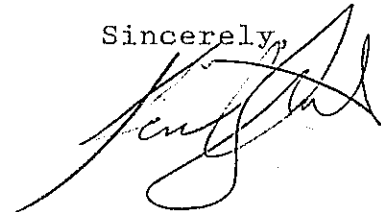
Dear Ms. Zierhut,

Enclosed is "Scorpio: From The Palm Of God," for your  
Star Anthology.

The poem "Jennifer's Box," by Karen Donovan, which plays an  
important part in the story, was first published in "Island  
Women," an anthology I edited. I have Karen's permission to use  
it here.

I'll look forward to hearing from you soon. Enclosed is  
also an envelope for reply.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Kiel Stuart', written over the word 'Sincerely,'.

February 17, 1989

Kiel Stuart  
12 Skylark Lane  
Stony Brook NY 11790  
516-751-7080

about 6185 words

SCORPIO:  
FROM THE PALM OF GOD  
by  
Kiel Stuart

Her father's things lay on the table, strange and beautiful and terrible.

Jennifer wiped her gritty eyes and moved across the floor, footsteps echoing through the empty house as she drew closer to the low table.

She stopped, letting her eyes wander. Over here was a polished wooden globe, palm-sized, configured with chased silver designs. Jennifer wondered. What was its meaning? She stroked it with a fingertip, feeling the change from smooth wood to cold, figured metal.

Next to it lay a bone flute, also carved and configured with twelve different signs. There were polished stones, an array of feathers, more. A legacy on a tabletop.

Jennifer didn't know what half of them were. She didn't know what her father's work had been. It was not permitted. Order, rule, ritual denied her the knowledge. She could only guess. Crafts? Maybe. Sorcery? Perhaps. The items on the table were like a puzzle---pieces of globe, of flute, of feather.

She wished she could learn, and wondered if she'd ever conquer her fear of them---or have time. The other, bigger puzzle loomed in her future. In everyone's.

She brushed back her curling hair, still damp from dreamtossed sleep. It was a sleep in which no rest could be found.

She had buried her father yesterday, consigning his soul to the sea.

Most men die, she realized. This is nothing new. And her father had been taken by the madness. She was prepared for the inevitable end, when the Wardsmeny had finally come to do what they did to madmen. He had been raving by then, broken chunks of meaningless babble cascading from his twisted mouth.

A martyr now, she thought. He, at least, had had the courage to look into the sky. Her nature would always stop her at the last moment.

Then why was she so restless? Could not bear to merely sit still and look at her father's legacy spread before her.

As if the thing outside were calling.

Jennifer shivered. No, she would not let it.

Instead Jennifer shook the last of her dream away. A hidden face. Powerful forces clashing. Floating into the sky. She gave a last shiver and forced her mind from those images.

Sighing, she reached across the table to something familiar, something comforting.

Her old leather-bound handbook of keepsakes, information, fancies. It contained pressed weeds of the sea, tiny and delicate drawings of birds and shells, pieces of fabric from

clothing she had long since outgrown. In it was also pasted a worn copy of a poem she'd found as a child, in that empty stone house near hers.

Those had been happier, innocent times. The poem had delighted her for its use of her own name and its pretty images.

She opened the old book and glanced over the poem again, looking more at the architecture of her then-childish scrawl than the words. She didn't need to. She knew its content by heart.

"JENNIFER'S BOX

You are Pandora  
Deft at the latch  
Raising the lid to look  
For treasures enclosed

Curled photos of those  
Whose eyes window secrets  
Of the unlocked past  
Lovers  
With smiles you walk through and disappear  
An Alice in her own Oz

Beneath shells, and beads of amber glass  
Polished stone and bluejay feathers  
Lie fragments of paper where ink curves  
In cuneiform runes known only to you  
And the Nile queens, your closest friends

Spilling it out  
Over this bed where we sleep as sisters  
Your fingers are candles that bring their light  
To linger now on an old button  
A scrap of fabric  
Conjuring up  
Dreamlike and fiery worlds

Shh! Listen:  
The long dead rise  
From the palm of God  
And sing  
And sing"

She closed the book, its hollow thump echoing the threads of her loneliness.

And it was true---the lights in the sky, which Portent had said heralded the end of the world, now hovered above them like cleansing fire. But Skyflame was more than mere fire, giving only light.

People looked into it, and tumbled to madness. The world, once precise, cool, functioning smoothly in order (some said rigidity) was in hysteria. Half the people succumbed to the madness, often committing unspeakable deeds---torture, mass slaughter, worse. The other half blustered that it did not exist.

The rulers were of the opinion it did exist, and that those who had been exposed to the naked Skyflame must be systematically eradicated.

How could Jennifer survive something as all-encompassing as the end of the world?

What could she do, with her own dreams haunting her, driving her back to the sanctuary of her rooms, each time she tried to leave?

In all her dreams was that face, that terrible face, which she could never look at. The face of madness.

The Book said that the lights in the sky stole souls.

She glanced across the table at another open book. "The Book Of Portent:"

"In the coming time of great upheaval, blood shall run in rivers. The souls of the rebellious shall be snatched away, and on the Deathway, they shall pass."

Well, it was coming to pass. A person looking unprotected into Skyflame would be sucked into a maelstrom of insanity.

Some seized on the lights as the catalyst of judgement. But who was being judged?

She rubbed her eyes and remembered the day she found the poem. The day unusually warm, the sea thundering at her right as she moved closer to the empty stone house. Why was she drawn to that place? Not minding the loneliness or the crumbling stonework.

The poem had been on a roll of skinpaper, hand-lettered. And beautiful lettering, too, in a fine lavender ink. She'd come back to read it again and again until the day she brought her book, and written it down herself, trying to copy the elegant line. Then it was hers, almost a secret.

Because of Skyflame prophecy, Jennifer had always been fearful of looking up into the sky, even in the days when nothing showed but the clear and innocent stars. After reading the poem, she felt better, more secure for a while. She knew it didn't make sense, and sometimes had tantalizing half-remembered dreams about Skyflame, the poem, and strange visitors, jumbled together as dreams have a habit of doing.

With an effort, she returned her thoughts to the present. Children have strange ideas. Nothing to do with her life now.

She looked around the room. Its stone walls throbbed with a broad band of silence, pressing on her eardrums. She had to get up, pace the room, anything, to banish the vacuum.

Outside, in the walkway connecting house to house, she could hear the Wardsmen making their rounds, in their hooded safety gear, to assure that all citizens were inside, that no unusual

activity took place, that no one stared into Skyflame. Sometimes they stopped people from looking, sometimes not. Hadn't worked with her father. They were empowered by the rulers, and within their rights, to mete out ritual knifedeath to anyone suspicious.

That too, was from The Book:

"Once on the Deathway, only by sword purges shall we be cleansed. To bestow death shall we empower those who follow the right path."

...to bestow death, she thought.

Yet their presence outside, the noises they made, was comforting. On a quiet, tense night like this, a faint voice within her tempted to race outside without her hood, race toward what fate was in store.

Jennifer also heard the sea crashing in her ears. Underneath its rhythmic music was a whisper of something else---something that sent her blood to ice.

How could she want to run out, and yet be afraid to? Inside, she was safe. Inside she had her books and lamps and shells, all her collected things of beauty. She could lose herself in them for many hours, studying, cataloging. Sweet oblivion.

But she reached toward the bone flute. Her hand trembled, and she drew it back.

No peace. The crescent shaped window, cut into the stone walls of her living room, commanded. The light arrowing in now was different. The light held components of fire that were alien to this watery land.

Conjuring up dreamlike and fiery worlds...

She closed her eyes for a moment. Dreams rose, like simmering mists, to play before her.

Beautiful swirling mists, orange, red, amber. Mysterious strangers, whose knowledge and power was both thrilling and frightening. An eerie sense of impending danger. As the face, its features obscured, loomed into view. The face she would not see. Must not.

She opened her eyes abruptly and reached for her protective hood.

Once it was on, she was fairly safe. The hood that blocked the terror of the night sky, for it was at its most potent in the mysterious dark between sun and sun.

She did not want to. She had to.

Her step was slow and heavy as she adjusted the protective covering about her, walking from her hallway to the door. She lingered in the front vestibule. She was always drawn to do this, and always she hesitated. The attraction and danger, in an equal mix, daring the madness to take her. Somewhere in this stream of opposites, lay the answer. Her father had found the courage.

Spark. Bloom. Explosion.

She turned the doorlatch, and stepped outside.

Eyes upward, past the clawlike trees and empty homes surrounding them, past the blue band of night sky. She quailed, clutched the top of her stone railing for support, and closed her eyes, tightening the hood around her.

Not yet.



Jennifer bowed her head, remembering the first time Skyflame had appeared. Her father still alive. Everything as it should have been.

In the cool damp of the mountain retreat, nine-year-old Jennifer moved from light sleep to full alertness, disturbed by a change in the rhythm of the voices. The grown-ups were talking, their conversation drifting in from another room.

"Be quiet! You'll wake the child." The voice of Bethenia, her kinswoman.

She pulled the covers up around her chin and listened. What fun! Secrets, maybe, that she was not meant to hear. Instantly Jennifer sat up, rubbed sleep from her eyes.

"Can you be sure?" Her father, his voice deep and slow. "Perhaps the report was wrong, and it's some other natural phenomenon. An effect of being so high in the mountains?"

He sounded uncertain. Jennifer kept very still. What were they talking about?

She heard Bethenia sigh. "It is the great upheaval spoken of in The Book."

Her eyes rounded in shock.

Jennifer clutched the nightwrap tightly around her.

Her father finally spoke again. "Well." Voice was measured. "Then we will see if the prophecy is false." The adults fell silent a while.

Then, sudden movement. "Would you go out?" Bethenia.

Shuffling feet, the sound of a body sitting heavily back into a wooden chair.

"Maybe," her father said, "it would be the best to die now. Not to linger." Then, "But not yet."

She could never be so brave. She would quail, when the time came. Jennifer huddled into a little ball, squeezing her eyes shut.

That meant the world was coming to an end, that they were all going to die. But not if she could hide well enough.

All night she tried to stay awake, straining to hear the sounds of a great explosion, as she had always imagined the world would end.

But by morning, they were still there. And so was Skyflame, as they named it later. And something else besides the mere display of color---something silent, invisible, and sinister. Something that pressed down like the weight of a malevolent giant's hand trying to crush a helpless animal.

And nothing was ever the same again.

Leaning back against her front door, Jennifer examined the stitching on the sleeve of her robe and smiled bitterly. No, the world had not ended in a satisfying explosion, those ten years ago. It was being bled to death, slowly.

The rulers denied it. Then warned against it, ordering the protective clothing, yet at the same time empowering the Wardsmen, just as The Book had said. And blood ran, just as The Book had stated.

Her hand closed around the amberglass beads at her throat, the ones which matched the color of her hair and eyes. After

finding the poem, she had to have them.

Judgement. She took a deep breath and tilted her head straight back to look at Skyflame through the protective glass in her hood.

Dreamlike...fiery....

It hovered and swirled in the night sky, a living band of flame. Seen through the glass, it was beautiful. How could something so grim be that lovely?

She bore it only a second, until demons of fear surged into her mind, shutting her eyes, sending uncontrollable shudders through her body.

Shh! Listen...

"Alice," she said. "Pandora," and "Oz." What did they mean?

She tried to turn her body back toward the door. But an inner burning forced her to stay. What was happening? Was it the madness, already? Did the veiled stars sing her name?

Now a growing urgency filled her. A tiny humming gathered in her mind. Tonight was different. Instead of turning back, going indoors to safety, tonight she must move.

...unlock the past...cuneiform runes known only to you...

And she felt herself, incredibly, begin to put one foot in front of the other, to walk, head still bowed. After a while she raised her head. There was only one place that would make her feel safe now. She went down to the beach, using this way to walk toward the old stone house where she had first found the poem. The humming in her mind became as voices calling her there.

In those ten intervening years between the first great upheaval and today, the world on its Deathway had been drastically reduced in population. It would be rare indeed to meet another person on this beach. Her sense of aloneness, heightened by the eyeslit in the hood, closed oppressive arms around her.

Human contact would be welcome. The Wardsmen might be by again soon, and though they might question her roughly, they would see she was not mad, then escort her back home. It would at least be contact.

Jennifer looked over the water, its halfhearted waves capped by streaks of orange, reflection of Skyflame.

She turned her head toward the woods. A sudden movement directly ahead caused her to jump. Then she made out a strange figure, moving back into the shelter of the trees.

She tracked its progress silently. Unable to tell yet if it were man or woman, she saw it wore a long cloak similar to hers. And it was heading straight to her stone fortress. Jennifer moved quickly, following.

She shadowed the figure along the path through the trees until the house was in sight. Something was odd. It was too dark to know exactly what.

The figure entered the stone house of her childhood discovery. Yellow lamplight shone through crescent-shaped windows.

How unusual, thought Jennifer, for someone to take a house standing empty so long.

Ten years ago the homes surrounding her land had been occupied, nearly every one. Not so any longer.

What did this newcomer's arrival mean? With a last shivery glance backward at Skyflame's reflection on the waves---the ocean could still be seen from there---she went silently down the path to approach the house more closely. Trees brushed her robes, releasing their pungent scent.

The building, a two-story stonework rectangle punctuated at both ends by three-story turrets, looked as if age could not do much more to it than salt water and wind. It had been old in her childhood, and had hardly changed.

She reached its broad sides. Standing in the thick growth around the house, she hesitated. Again, the same sense of dread as appeared in her dreams. Should she call at the door? Or just sneak around the perimeter, almost as if she knew what she was doing was wrong?

She gnawed at her lip, toying with the beads. Something in her advised caution. She stole through the bushes and went stealthily alongside the house, stopping to look in a window.

A man stood within, making spoken notes into a small device which she did not recognize. She peered at him, but could not see his face, turned away as it was.

He seemed to be intent on his task. She moved closer, almost touching the crescent-shaped window.

"Skyflame. It's a beautiful sight, isn't it?"

The voice behind her made Jennifer jump. She whirled to see a woman standing there. Even through the dark, the window cast enough light to see a regal face, soft oyster-colored eyes,

smiling in a sad way.

Shock. Sudden. The woman wore no protective hood.

Jennifer glanced fearfully about her.

But the woman only repeated: "A beautiful sight."

How eerie to hear someone talk of Skyflame that way. Was the woman mad already?

But in the windowlight, her dark eyes were steady, clear, even calm.

Jennifer took a breath, deep enough to make her dizzy. What might her father have done? She made the plunge. "Beautiful," she said boldly, for it was unusual to speak of Skyflame to a stranger, mad or not. "But deadly. A crisis."

The woman nodded. "Yet 'crisis' can mean a combination of danger and opportunity. The knife that cuts can also heal."

Jennifer narrowed her eyes. The woman did not speak like a madwoman.

In fact, she continued, in quite a conversational tone. "You know, my dear, there are so few people about now. I would welcome a visitor. Will you come in and spend a little time?" The woman beckoned, almost as if she had heard Jennifer's earlier thoughts.

"No." It was not Jennifer's voice, but the man's. He had come up behind them, silently. "I don't think this a good idea."

Now Jennifer could see his face. It was a face carved in stone, eyes glinting like cold steel.

Another one without protection!

How was it possible? Her head began to spin. As she stood

dumbstruck, the woman turned to the man. "But it isn't up to you. None of this is, any more. You and I are just here to watch."

The strange words sent a wriggle of fear coursing through her.

She shouldn't. She should go home. "Maybe this...man is right." She didn't know their names, wouldn't ask. "I'll leave now. It's just that I used to come here, long ago."

The woman smiled. "Did you? Then we have a common ground. Maybe more than you know. As for names...you can call us," the woman said, turning to lead the way, "Alpha and Omega. For lack of something better."

The man, Omega, grumbled.

Again, as if her thoughts were visible to them!

Alpha ignored Omega's grumbling. "Now, we could call you Pandora. Or Alice. But I think not. Jennifer, isn't it?"

This isn't happening. I must leave now.

But then, They could know who I am. Why not? Ask the Wardsmen. Or maybe they knew my father. Maybe tell me something about him. Find out.

"Are you coming?" Alpha had started down the path to the door.

Feeling greatly daring, Jennifer followed.

She paused inside. Had the place changed since she came last? The central room was huge, drafty, an uncompromising rectangle with the mimimum in chairs and other furnishings. There was little evidence of things arranged for comfort or beauty, of people living here. Still, they might have just come.

She wondered from what district. She took off her protective hood and placed it carefully on a wall-hook.

Alpha had vanished, leaving her to face Omega. His glare made her wriggle, shooting sparks of discomfort through her.

"Have you been in this place long?"

He looked away from her. "A very long time," he said, "and no time at all."

He wants to speak riddles. I won't play. "And how do you know me?"

Just then they were interrupted. "We will have tea," said Alpha, coming in from another room, bearing a service for three.

The service looked wonderful and strange, made of some sleek black metal, and the brew smelled exotic. Should she? She didn't know.

"Thank you, but I've already stayed too long. I---" She half-rose to go, and looked around.

Alpha had set the tea down. Omega looked at her, a look faintly challenging. Mocking her courage, perhaps? She sat, chin up. "Just one cup."

Alpha poured the tea and handed it around. A sharp aroma rose from Jennifer's black cup.

Omega leaned suddenly forward. "Why have you come at this time? What made you pick this moment to be here, risking exposure to the night sky?"

"I..." The tea was suddenly bitter on her tongue. Or was it only the memory of her father?

The dark man raised an eyebrow. "Are you afraid for your



soul? Or does fear call so strongly you cannot resist?" His eyes glittered coldly. Did he still mock her?

Who was he, anyway, to speak to her this way? Her tongue felt thick as she tried to answer. She must put the cup down. Her hand trembled. The cup turned over, its liquid spilling.

She tried to rise. But it made her woozy. Drugged, she thought, and felt the taste of panic, tried to claw her way around the table and flee. Her limbs would not work. They were without life or will, stupid rubber things that ignored her directives.

She should have gotten out while she had the chance. She should never have tried to come, to investigate.

She could see the pair, watching her. Vision blurred. Their contours thickened, grayed. Before her rounded eyes, they were turning to stone statues. Alpha's, hands raised in a graceful gesture. Omega's, head tilted, sardonic.

Alice...falling...

Statues that spoke between themselves, ignoring her for now. "They believe this glow is a sign of doom," said the Alpha statue.

"Why not?" The Omega statue was broadly cynical. "Since the legend says 'great upheaval' or some such vague thing, as all legends and seers do. They take it the way they please." The statue started to rotate, grow cracks.

Jennifer looked at her own frozen arms and legs. Frozen now because they too had turned to stone.

The Alpha statue sprouted young green shoots that curved, vinelike. "But upheaval can also mean good." Above her head,

the shoots twined to form words.

Crisis = Danger + Opportunity.

Omega's statue turned black and hard. Glowing lava flowed from its cracks. "Opportunity for what? To wallow on the Deathway?"

Jennifer opened her stone mouth to speak.

"Change," she said. It tinkled in the air, then broke, like glass.

Alpha: "The present state could be transformed into healing and growth if---" The words trailed, hung.

Alpha's green shoots vanished. Omega and Alpha became flesh again. Jennifer felt movement return to her limbs

But they began falling, falling upward, all of them.

Up into a crystal veil of gold and pink stars, held suspended by an unseen web of power.

...shells...beads of amber glass...

...secrets of the unlocked past...

And nightmare.

"Deathway, do you say? Then change the spell from death to a long sleep," said Alpha, now a white bird sailing by on a stream of stars.

"Me? Change the spell? How can I?" Then Jennifer felt herself also grow beautiful white wings. She spread them and flew, exulting in the power.

"Or---not." suggested Omega. "This too, has its rewards." He became smaller, dimmer. He floated near Jennifer, curling into a shapeless warm ball that might have been fur, feathers,

even weeds.

Her wings shrank, resorbing into her body. She thickened, furling in on herself. The power to fly was gone.

Then Alpha and Omega moved toward one another, spinning, their bodies stretching, becoming points of light, spinning into a magnificent wheel of stars. And as it turned, Jennifer sensed that in its inexorable movement, was the ebb and flow of life itself. She snatched frantically to hold the meaning still, to grasp its importance. It was quicksilver under her groping hands. She failed.

The web of stars whirled away, tumbling her far from Alpha and Omega.

The invisible net of power tensed imperceptibly, changing its resonance.

Her senses scrambled. Sound felt rough or smooth or cold. Colors rang with music. As Jennifer reached out her hand to touch something, flavors danced on her tongue.

One spark of light detached itself from the wheel, spinning closer. It congealed into human form.

Her father, falling, alive again.

She called his name. He floated toward her and called out. "The road of transformation winds through a river of nightmares." He reached out a hand. She touched it; energy crackled along the skin, a faint song of power growing.

A wind whipped up, sudden with storm intensity.

Her father: "Quickly! The energy empowers us to face---"  
His words were torn from the onrushing air in frozen chunks.

Jennifer wailed above the howling wind, her breath spilling

jewels in a wide arc. "What killed you?"

"Fear." His voice was a rough green bell. Then---he was gone.

"No!" She cried, into the wind.

"Skyflame---was mine." Omega plummeted, an encrustation of black jewels growing on him. "Conflict is necessary to life."

"The poem---I left it here." Alpha floated by, her silver robes turning to white fire burning clean without pain. "No matter where it came from. It was chosen for the hope it might bring. That, too, is essential."

"Hope? For who?" Jennifer cried out. They were all falling away from her. "To me?" Her words turned into a dazzling blue wail that swirled together with the onrushing stars, gathering, poised into a single, pulsing point of pure sound.

Then it roared, reversing itself, thundering outward, into nothing.

Jennifer opened her eyes to darkness.

Her head throbbed, and a thick evil taste clung to the roof of her mouth. A breeze stirred her hair. She put out a hand to steady herself, and discovered she was on her knees, on rough stone.

...an Alice in her own Oz...

She had a sudden vision in the blackness: her father's things, and the patterns they made on her table back home.

She strained her eyes, tried to pierce the darkness surrounding her, to push through weariness and discover where she

might be.

Alpha and Omega seemed to have gone.

Had all that transpired been a drugged dream, or real? She got up slowly, still unable to pierce the gloom surrounding her.

She heard distant sounds. A knock at a stone door. Voices clamoring. Steps rushing upward.

Upward? That could mean only that she was on the roof of the turret! And she had been seen from below.

Jennifer tried to move, but the strange tea still affected her. The ground swayed, and she grabbed the low stone railing.

Her hair whipped across her face. Salt-spray stung her eyes.

She struggled to her feet. With the salt stinging her eyes, what had ridden a tiny corner of her mind now raced to the front. Suddenly, the sick realization that, standing as she was on the flat roof of the turret, she was exposed under the night sky, hoodless, unprotected.

She opened her mouth to cry out.

Then saw Alpha and Omega across from her on the roof, no fear showing on their bare faces.

Had they brought her there, or did she wander by herself, with them following?

It was then that four hooded Wardsmen came rushing in, through the door that connected the winding stairs to the roof.

One grasped her arm. The others surrounded Alpha and Omega. Their forms were solid and real, menacing. The man's fingers biting into her arm could not be passed off as a dream.

Alpha and Omega were strangely quiet in their grip, not

pulling back, not protesting.

One of the Wardsmen spoke. "I knew something was wrong when this woman would not answer at her home. They were outside all this time, looking up. Willingly. You are all aware what that means."

Jennifer did know. More drops in the blood river, more souls racing along the Deathway.

"No," said Jennifer slowly. "I have something to say." They knew her a little, and might listen.

As they had known her father? She remembered. The one holding her made his voice hard. "Then you may talk as you please, all the way to your fate." His eyes, even behind the glass of the hood, looked red and eager.

The knife hung jeweled and glittering at her man's belt.

He drew it out, the clang of metal reaching her ears. When it brushed her sleeve, it burned with clean white fire.

"It is all up to you," said Omega. Had his voice lost its mocking edge?

"Let go," urged Alpha.

Jennifer closed her eyes. Her father, the memory of a ghost, beckoned. Voices gathered, singing, for her ears only.

Were the voices real? Were they the forces of evil?

The knife in her Wardsman's hand flashed as he raised it, throwing back the glint of Skyflame.

She cried out silently.. I have no way of knowing! She clutched the stone rail for support.

Silence answered her. And time seemed to grind more slowly,

coming to a halt, so that the knife in the Wardsman's hand stilled in mid-air. Then, very softly, her private voices:

Dreamlike and fiery worlds....

She thought that if she took one step forward, the sky would snatch up her soul, and she would be lost. She tightened her grip on the stone railing until her knuckles threatened to snap.

She stared at her feet. It seemed to her that they shot out roots, iron bands clutching the earth, seeking its core. It would be very easy not to move at all. Easier still to scream, to rave, to act out madness and let them kill her. Either way, she would die.

One by one, she released her fingers from the stone rail. Trembling shook her body. She couldn't. She had to. Slowly she shifted one foot off the ground. Lifted her head to the blazing colors above.

And floated face-up into Skyflame.

Daggers appeared, dripping blood, reaching to pierce her throat. They dropped from the clouds, bulleting around her, tearing shreds from her clothes. She passed through a maelstrom of color and light and sound, the singing of gods and demons, the eruptions of Hell and Heaven. Liquid metals swirled around her ascent.

Terror and beauty enveloped her. Sound--distant singing---throbbed in her ears.

It parted to let her through, flowing now, then turning to rills of hardened stone around her, yet she still moved through it, floating as if her breath was the engine of momentum.

Something---some tall monument---came into sight as she

sailed along. As she moved closer, Jennifer saw what it was.

On a promontory of rock, features veiled in mist, lay The Face, her icon of terror and madness.

It was enormous, the height of a mountain. She tried to turn her head away, could not, heard and felt voices. They pulled at her with lancing intensity. The features---veiled in heavy blue fog---held a hidden force so powerful that her stomach contracted as if under a blow.

Leave! Run! The voices sang. They rose in an eerie and celestial cadence.

Then, through a strange and rare kind of supra-vision, she saw the world below her, its souls marching on the Deathway. The ritual killings, the rivers of blood. And Jennifer could see now, with this same heightened vision, that even those who hid and obeyed---even they!---were on the Deathway, unknowing.

She turned her face away from this vision, and in turning, saw her father, suspended before the huge and hidden face.

His hands were folded in front of him, pressing against the white robes of martyrdom, face grave and still. Then suddenly, in flashes, he began to change. Now a clown, now a craven coward, now the empty staring features of a drooling idiot.

Then, back as he had been, in her childhood.

Just her father---and nothing more.

Shh! Listen:

The long dead rise

From the palm of God

And sing



And sing

Then his image faded slowly into the mist that surrounded the face.

Heart pounding, breath tearing from her in gasps, knowing she was to look into the eye of death, she put out a trembling hand. She touched the mist with a fingertip. It was searing cold, sizzling against the finger. Then the mist vanished.

For an instant, her blood froze.

A woman, amber hair curling around amber eyes, in an oval pale face.

Her own face.

Both mouths opened to scream.

In mid-scream, Jennifer felt the Wardsman's disembodied knife pierce to her heart. The eyes in both faces blazed, then clouded over as life essence streamed out into the Skyflame.

Strange...peace...

Then, gradually, her soul flowed back into her body.

She still floated in front of the giant face, her own face. She looked at it a long time. In the eyes were both questions and answers. The surface tension of fear, now softening, giving in to, embracing the dark parts of her soul. The Deathway, turned aside from its path of destruction, toward life.

"I am all these things, " she said. "And will live with them." The giant's face closed its eyes.

Without conscious effort, she floated away from it, down and back through the golden surf of Skyflame.

Opening her eyes again, Jennifer saw she remained on the edge of the turret roof, her Wardsman still brandishing his knife,

poised to strike, never having plunged it home.

No. Not dead. But immutably changed.

She found it easy to move away from his grasp, and he made no attempt to catch her.

The Wardsman slid his knife back into its sheath and stood, hands at his sides.

There was an expectant stillness in the night air. She looked at all the Wardsmen, their postures telegraphing their surprise.

She spoke. "Hear me. We will not hide from this thing any more. We will not let fear drive us to madness and death. We will acknowledge that it exists, that it is now a part of our lives. But we don't have to be its slaves."

The hooded Wardsmen backed off.

"Look at me. I have seen it, and I am not mad." Jennifer felt her new power growing, as she had grown wings in her vision. It surged from her, along with joy---could they not sense it?

"Take off your hoods, as I have. You are only as weak as your fears."

Her voice resonated with conviction. "Face the Skyflame. Don't hide from it. Don't kill for it, either, or you surrender to The Deathway."

The Wardsman with the knife was first, removing his hood in hesitant jerks. She watched as the others did the same, heard their cries as they raised their eyes to look at the sky.

Jennifer was bone-weary. She wondered what personal hells they each faced, as they floated toward their own visions. They

cried out, but not with the cries of madness. Soon, their own healing would begin.

Her body was tired, unbelievably tired, but her soul could not have been lighter. It still floated in golden surf. She breathed a sigh of pure satisfaction, wondering if Omega looked out from the shadows with his head tilted sardonically. Did Alpha gaze on the scene with a smile?

She looked around for Alpha and Omega, and could not find them. They were gone.

When the Wardsman had finally left, she went back down, through the stone house room by room, but there was no trace of the two strangers.

Jennifer wanted to thank them, for each of their gifts. She wondered if they had ever really been there.

She went back to the main hall to get her cloak. She could leave now.

On her way out, she saw it. On the table, next to the black tea set, lay a copy of the poem.

She picked it up. The skin cracked, fell into dust.

The original, old beyond measure. But that was all right; it had already served its purpose.

And outside, the Skyflame. It was possible to admire it for what it really was.

Freed, she walked back on the path to her own house.

Outside the night was as still and calm as her heart. The stars were just beginning to be visible through their veil of flame. She drank in its beauty, the sea breezes caressing her

face.

People were starting to emerge from their houses, one by one, removing their hoods. She stopped, throat lumping, tears on her cheeks. We have reclaimed the night, she thought.

She opened her door. Her father's things still lay on the table, still beautiful and terrible.

This time, the terror would not stop her.

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