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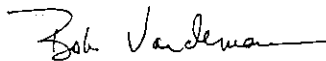
Dear Ingrid,

Enclosed please find my contribution to The Touchstone Stars, "Star Fall." I'm sorry it took so long getting done.

Many thanks for sending the copy of Esther Friesner's story. It went a long way toward showing me what you wanted in way of handling the two experimenters.

Best of luck with the anthology, and again thank you for the time and consideration shown.

Best,



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Star Fall

by

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The makeshift glider's brightly painted cloth wing caught a rising thermal and sent Serne into an unexpected downward spiral. He fought to keep the flimsy craft under control by swinging his tall, lithe body to the right and using his considerable strength to tug on the control bar. The glider left the column of hot air and leveled off high above the ground.

The thrill of possible death passed and Serne again enjoyed the serenity of cruising silently above the planet of Archer. He closed his green eyes for a moment and imagined himself shucking off the last bonds of gravity and soaring all the way past the sky. Serne's mind travelled that distance but left his body behind. He had no idea what he would find

above the bowl of the azure blue sky--but he wanted to find out and record it artistically for all to see.

There was so much he wanted to do, so many things he could capture on the film in his bulky camera. Serne rocked from side to side, kicking with his feet and fighting the rigid bar controlling the gossamer wing above him. The camera was a new design and much smaller than previous models. It still weighed the glider down and required him to leave much of the safety equipment behind.

"Safety equipment," he scoffed aloud, pleased at the feel of the air brushing across his lips like a soft, dry kiss. He didn't need "safety equipment." It was better this way, just him and the flimsy wing soaring high into the sky.

Serne gently banked and reached for the camera fastened to the bar. He had loaded a film into the chamber before launching himself from the small cliff outside the town of Murgane. The camera protested as it slid on the metal rod but his strength prevailed. Twice he had to correct the glider's flight to prevent sudden dangerous nosedives, but he was master of his craft--of his crafts.

Since the photographic process had been invented nine years earlier no real progress had been made in refining it. Serne considered himself a tinkerer and had worked to reduce the size of the lenses and lighten the burden. To some extent he had succeeded. Mostly, he had just tinkered, always being distracted by other, more interesting pursuits. And the bruises on his thumbs and the cuts on his hands from improperly used tools deterred him, too.

But the late afternoon flight was worth any number of smashed thumbs or sawed fingers. Serne tugged the camera into place and banked again, waiting until Murgane's Plaza of Arts slipped into the viewfinder. New statues and paintings had gone on display this morning and, from the air, looked irresistible to him. Serne strained to align the upside-down image, then pressed the shutter release. The huge wooden box and its mechanism seemed to sigh in relief that he had finally exposed the film.

Serne dipped and dived and caught another thermal, rising almost six thousand feet. As he soared upward, he struggled to put another film into the camera's chamber. He didn't want to lose the first exposure. It would easily take first prize in the spring exhibition--unless the second shot proved to be even finer. It took longer than he anticipated, but he did not leak any light into the exposed plate and succeeded in loading the new film. Clumsy at the best of times, Serne felt considerable satisfaction at this display of dexterity so high above the ground.

The bright blue-white sun dipped low over the horizon and Serne knew he had to hurry. After dusk, the air currents became treacherous and landing would tax even his skill. He smiled ruefully at the memory of a flight two ten-days earlier when he had twisted his ankle in the landing. This had been the first day since then he had ventured out. Teny had nagged him to rest and take care of himself, but the lure of even this pitiful form of flying proved too great. If only someone would invent real flight!

He adjusted the new film in the camera chamber and waited for a good shot to come by. Murgane's lights were being lit, tiny gas flares in the

street lamps along major avenues and occasional coal oil explosions from improperly trimmed wicks in the residential areas. He bided his time as he studied the city for a good shot. Something told him to look up.

A brilliant flare lit the twilight sky. It startled him, and his finger inadvertently pressed the shutter release. Serne cursed when the camera shutter stuck open. Then he forgot all about his balky equipment. A green fireball far larger than the first he had seen exploded in the sky, sending a fiery cascade of feathery prominences to the dark land below.

Serne whacked the wooden side of the camera. The dull click told him the mechanism had finally closed. He would have to find a non-sticking shutter mechanism--or make one. When he had time, he would do just that, he decided. But he had more important matters to tend to than planning camera shutters.

He had to land in the darkness, always a tricky maneuver. And he had two films to develop, even though the last exposure was probably wasted. Still, it never hurt to see what had been recorded. He might be able to enter a non-representational piece in the spring exhibits. Last year he had won only second prize. This year he would take first or know the reason.

Serne spilled air from under the gossamer surface of his glider wing and plunged downward for a hard landing.

"This will ruin our experiment," complained Omega. "We must do something about it. The fragments from the comet have introduced an unexpected variable into the society of the Archer."

"You overreact to the importance of the virus from the bursting cometary head," said Alpha.

"Observe." Omega spun atoms across half a light year of space and illuminated them with ionizing radiation. Symbols larger than planets glowed in the created plasma, then became smaller and more intense as his computations grew in complexity. "There. It is incontrovertible. The virus will destroy Archer unless we intervene."

"No!"

"You carry the guidelines for the experiment too far, Alpha," he warned. "They have not developed scientifically as have other worlds in the Wheel of Stars."

"Theirs is an artistic world and one filled with daring," admitted Alpha. "That does not mean they cannot deal with the virus."

"You are wrong!" Wisps of cosmic dust sailed away at Omega's agitation. "They have not developed along lines able to meet this danger. I have shown you, and you failed to understand."

"I understand your concern," Alpha said. "I share it. However, those of the Archer are clever. Let us wait and see how they cope with the virus."

"We must intervene. We will lose this spoke in our Wheel of Stars if we do not. All our experimental parameters will be throw askew."

"I am sure you will recalculate," Alpha said. "Along with the

prognostication I hope will come faith."

#

"Don't be ridiculous," Teny scoffed. "You scratched the film, nothing more. You were clumsy, as usual."

As if to prove the point, Serne turned. His elbow nudged the plate and sent it crashing to the floor. He glared at the mess on the floor as if it had jumped there to affront him personally.

"I was careful. This shows rocks falling from the sky in a constant stream. This is the trail they leave."

"Why don't we see them in the day?"

Serne thought hard. "The sun is too bright. Maybe they only fall when the sky cools off. Or the clouds hide their passage during the day."

"There are clouds at night. You're going off on a tangent, Serne, when you ought to be working. How is the new job coming along?" Her violet eyes flashed angrily again when she read the answer in his face. Serne averted his own green eyes and tried to think of something to say in his defense. He could never lie to her and seldom tried.

"I've been busy with this." He tried not to sound too contrite.

"You are playing when you should be working. We should never have bought that glider. You spend hours aloft and for what? To scratch your photographs."

"This isn't playing. It . . . it's important!"

"Rocks falling from the sky can never be important. Taking pictures

at the opera--and getting paid for it--is important."

"There's no challenge to setting up a tripod and shooting cast pictures," Serne complained.

"You can do your art prints after the opera job. Those you can sell for decent money."

"To Prigo and Pacher and their current woman? Or is it 'women?' I can't keep up with their sexual peccadilloes."

Teny snorted in disgust at his attitude. "They are honest men making an honest living, even if you don't like Pacher's poetry. Why shouldn't I live with them? Don't forget Sodorry and Diova offered me a marriage contract only last month. I'm very much in demand. You just don't appreciate me enough."

"Those two ought to get together with Prigo and Pacher and leave us--you--alone."

"You don't like Sodorry and Diova?"

"They're great fat cows. And Pacher's poetry is wretched. I fail to see why anyone would ever fawn over it. Most of the lines don't even rhyme."

"You can't stand it when someone else shows more artistic talent."

A mewling noise interrupted Teny's harangue. She pushed back from the table and looked at the mess where Serne's plate had landed on the floor. Their small creamy-furred pet lapped listlessly at the spilled food. Sharp blue eyes turned up and looked from Teny to Serne, then back to the unexpected treasure trove of food. Teny scooped up the animal before it had a chance to continue eating.

"You'll spoil your appetite," she said, staring straight into the hot blue eyes. Her argument with Serne was forgotten for the moment.

"I can see that the human food doesn't set well with Misa. Look at the way her coat is turning splotchy," Serne said. He plucked out patches of the fur and left bald pink spots. He obviously hadn't paid enough attention lately to the menagerie of pets roaming through their household.

"You're right. She might be sick. What can we do to help, hmm?" Teny lifted Misa and held her at arm's length, studying the small animal critically.

"I haven't seen her mate, either. Where is that little hellraiser?" Serne went hunting for Prone but failed to find him. Serne returned from his futile search, more upset than before.

"Misa's definitely sick. I don't like this, Serne. Has she gotten into your developing chemicals?"

"I keep the room sealed, but I'll check." He returned a few minutes later. Serne's brow furrowed even more as he thought. "The door is secured. I've noticed quite a few creatures sick lately. It might not be just ours."

"There wasn't a city-wide alert," Teny said. "I always watch for such things. Bentbug fever was so bad last year."

"It was wetter then and the bugs hatched in early spring," said Serne, still concerned about his pets. "I will see what can be done tomorrow. It's too late to bother the doctor tonight."

"It is not too late," Teny said. Serne had to agree. He hated to see any animal suffer. He scooped up Misa and cradled his shedding,

listless pet in the crook of his arm. She growled deep in her throat, a definite sign something was wrong. He and Teny went off in search of the veterinarian.

The activity along the cobblestone, gas-lit street was less than usual at this time of evening. People usually wandered the streets studying the new public murals and statues erected during the day. Most ended up in the Plaza of Arts to examine the city's best work. Not so this night.

Somehow, Serne wasn't surprised when he found an hour-long waiting line of anxious pet owners concerned about their animals.

#

Serne had unhappily accepted this commission because he needed a source of quick money. The veterinarian bill had been high--and still Misa had died a ten-day after being examined. Prone had been found outside their house the next morning, also dead. Serne tried to lose himself in the soft spring day and the survey team's work. He bent over, squinted into the camera's viewfinder and focused carefully. No matter how conscientiously the land surveyors worked, someone always disputed their results. Some bureaucrat had hit upon the idea of photographing them at work, showing prominent landmarks, to dispel any questioning of authority.

Serne knew it wouldn't work. Photographic evidence was too new and primitive to convince anyone. Serne lost almost half his films to light

leaking into his protective pouches. And who accepted authority without question? Even photos substantiating a claim had to be examined carefully and argued over.

"To your left. Move a few more feet!" Serne motioned to the rod man, but the surveyor either didn't hear or didn't want to obey someone he considered to be superfluous to his task.

Serne looked up from the camera sitting on its tripod and started to call once more. He hesitated when he saw a farmer in the dell below where they worked. The man stood, head bowed. Two large beeves lay on the ground. Serne didn't have to move closer to know the animals were dead.

He took another quick picture, then left his camera gear to walk down the hill.

The farmer looked at him, tears in his bloodshot eyes. "They're dead," the lean, almost emaciated man said. He pulled a dirty rag from his pocket and blew his nose loudly.

"Prize beeves?" asked Serne.

"Them? Yes, yes they were." The farmer turned to wander off. Serne stopped him.

"You're not crying for them?" He pointed at the animals.

"My three children. All died within the last ten-day. The small animals went first, then the beeves. Now it's my children dying!"

Serne didn't try to restrain the man as he ran into the wooded area on the far side of the secluded valley. Serne returned to the survey team and saw that one of the men wasn't looking well. By twilight Serne had his photographs and the surveyor had developed a persistent cough and a

high fever.

But it was what happened as Serne started to put up his equipment that demanded his full attention.

#

Serne waited impatiently for the tedious process to form pictures on the print paper. His mind raced. Too many fields were left untapped from lack of interest. He wondered at the few pursuing new technology, research in the sciences, even in such important fields as medicine, both human and veterinary. He sighed. There were too many exciting things to do in the arts.

He tapped his foot and paced, wanting to hurry the processing and knowing he couldn't. At last he reached into the shallow pan and pulled out the print. Serne didn't bother wiping it off. He knocked over the tray of chemicals as he hurried into the room and stared at the picture he had taken just after twilight the day before. A huge streak fully five times as large as the others he had taken while using his glider slashed from one side of the photo to the other.

"The stars are falling from the sky," he muttered. Serne turned the picture around and around, looking with practiced eye at just the right way to crop it for full effect. The sky flare he had captured showed feathery tendrils that created eye-pleasing patterns. He had not only a faithful replica of the event but also a minor work of art.

"Have you finally come up with something for the spring exhibit?"

asked Teny, peering over his shoulder. Serne jumped at her words. He had been so intent on studying the photograph he had not heard her enter the small room.

"I shot this after work yesterday," he said, excitement mounting. "This is proof, Teny. Things are falling from the sky. Star Fall," he said, rolling the words over his tongue like a fine wine.

"You need a better title," she said critically. "You know how the judges are in the early shows. You might wait until fall when there's not as much competition. This isn't good enough for the spring. But it is different."

Serne hardly heard her. Over and over in his mind he kept hearing the echo of the words "star fall."

"I'll be back later," he said, dropping the picture onto a couch. Teny protested the smelly chemicals getting on the furniture. Serne stopped to help clean it up but as he turned he knocked over a stool, then bumped in Teny, almost knocking her down.

"I'll do it," she said.

"There's more to this than a pretty picture," Serne said. "I want to find out what it is." He bundled up his camera equipment, found fresh film and stuffed it in his pocket and looked around for anything he might have forgotten.

"You couldn't find your--" Her words drifted after a hastily departing Serne already intent on his new search.

"We need to do more," insisted Omega. "The plague is spreading too rapidly for their pitiful medical science to contain."

"It is still isolated," Alpha pointed out. "The contaminated meteorites fell only in rural areas."

"But it is spreading! Every time a farmer goes into the city, he carries with him the seed of the entire world's destruction. And their animals roam freely. Once the cities become infected, Archer will die. We must act to stanch the plague."

"I have confidence in them," Alpha said. "You should, also. They have the drive needed to extricate themselves from this disaster."

"They are too naive to realize the true scope of the threat facing them." Omega formed into a human body.

"Do not intervene," Alpha warned.

"It is you who is naive," Omega answered, but the dissolved the body and his energy matrix was swept away by a gust of solar wind.

Alpha made intricate calculations, then contracted into a hard sphere of pure energy. Omega was not entirely wrong, either about the inhabitants of this spoke in their Wheel of Stars or of her naivete. Those below needed some small edge--but not direct intervention.

Alpha chose carefully, then reached out to immunize Serne against the deadly virus wracking his world.

#

Serne walked most of the night to return to the spot where he had photographed the Star Fall, wishing the entire trip that he had rented a wagon and draft animal to ease his burden. Even though he was strong, lithe and in good condition, the heavy camera equipment began to wear him down. He was glad when he slipped it off his shoulder and set it up on the hill. Serne tried to find the indentations in the ground where he had placed the camera tripod earlier and failed. He had to guess at the direction his camera had been pointing when the piece of star-stuff had plunged to the ground.

"There," he said with some satisfaction. Serne had the direction. He stretched, groaned softly as he heaved the camera equipment onto his shoulder again and trudged off in a straight line toward the spot where the Star Fall must have landed.

An additional hour of walking brought him to the edge of a large crater. Faint pink fingers of dawn stroked the sky and gave him a better view of the giant hole in the ground.

"Never seen anything like it," yelled a farmer on the far side of the crater. Serne jumped, startled. He had thought himself alone. He held down a moment's anger. He had wanted this discovery all to himself. The farmer--and four hired hands, from the cut of their rough work clothing--had reached this spot before him.

Serne decided to speak with them, even if he had to swallow his ire.

"It fell from the sky, I tell you," one worker said to another. His absurd claim fell on deaf ears. The others knew that the sky was the sky and rocks like the one at the bottom of the crater didn't fall from above.

"He's right," Serne said, winning a smile of thanks from the youth. "I took pictures of it as it fell just after twilight."

"Don't reckon there's any way of making a mistake on that, now is there?" said the farmer, still skeptical. "I seen ghosts in one picture at last year's spring exhibit. You believe in ghosts?"

"That was a photographic trick," admitted Serne. "Art work done with a camera."

"It ought to be even easier putting a smear across a photograph and claiming that it was real," the farmer said. He peered into the hole. Heat still radiated from the bottom of the pit. He wiped his forehead, then coughed. Trying to leave, his legs turned weak under him and he sank to the ground.

"Not him, too," whined a farmhand. "They're dropping all over. They start to cough, then they die."

Serne experienced a tingling along his spine. He shivered and looked up. He thought he saw a strangely shimmering rainbow in the morning sun, then forgot it. The others with him began to cough. One spat a gob of phlegm and blood, then collapsed. Serne didn't have to go to him to know he had died in the span of a few heartbeats.

The others were dying, too.

Serne did what he could for them, but they were weak. He went to the nearby farmhouse and informed the woman there what had happened. He and a young boy, hardly more than ten summers old, helped the workers back. Then Serne helped bury the farmer. Only then did he turn his attention to the pit, the burning rock at the bottom, and his picture-taking.

The sun was past zenith when he trudged back into town. His camera equipment had multiplied in weight a hundredfold and his feet hurt. Worse, his heart was heavy for what had happened. Men had died for no apparent reason.

Serne stopped and wanted to shriek in anger at the bright, festive banners going up along the street proclaiming the spring exhibition. Such frivolity after the death he had seen angered him.

"A moment, Serne," came a loud voice. He put down his camera gear and spun, wanting to take his anger out on someone---anyone. Vioslion, the town physician, hurried up, his stride long and powerful. The concern on his face robbed Serne of some of his ire.

"You came back from the countryside." The way Vioslion spoke made it a statement, not a question. "Tell me everything you saw."

"I have pictures," Serne said. "You can look at them after I develop them."

"The illness," pressed Vioslion. "It is spreading. Some in town are dying. I know that the disease is running wild in the country. Tell me what you saw!"

"It kills quickly," Serne said. "Very quickly. I have pictures of its cause." Serne stopped and wondered at his own words. He couldn't know the strange Star Fall--his Star Fall--was the cause. His thoughts circled one another and confused him.

"You must tell me. I have tried every known cure. I've failed." Vioslion almost sobbed. "They are coming to me in increasing numbers and I am failing them all!"

"The disease began fewer than two ten-days ago," Serne said, speaking as much to get his thoughts in order as to comfort Vioslion. "That's when the sky began filling with fire."

"What are you talking about?" Vioslion stopped and stared at Serne. "Fire in the sky is not the cause of disease."

"Star Fall," Serne said. "The stars are falling and bringing the disease on the pieces that reach the ground. The sickness began after the first shooting star. And the sickness is killing more rapidly now that the large star has fallen. I have pictures of it."

"No star is killing my friends and neighbors! You said you knew the cause of the disease. I have tried purgatives, herbs, all my medicines--nothing works. I've even tried injections, and you know how experimental that is! Now you're telling me a piece of the sky is responsible?" Vioslion rocked back as if he was going to hit Serne. The doctor regained control and ran off, tears flowing down his cheeks.

Serne knew how distraught the man was. He was no less so for his trip into the country. More than a few pets were dying now. People died quickly . . . because of the Star Fall.

Serne walked in silence to where Teny waited in front of their house. She was a beacon for him in the desolate night. The wind caught her simple silk dress, softly holding it against her and creating a deep yearning in Serne. He loved her. It wasn't until this moment that he knew how much. He didn't want to lose her, not to Pacher or Sodorry or to the damnable disease from the Star Fall.

When she saw him she almost spat out, "You left me last night! Where

did you go?"

Serne tried to tell her. The words jumbled in his haste to tell her everything he knew, everything he suspected, everything he had seen and photographed. He made matters worse when he tried to add how he felt about her.

"You're useless, Serne," she said, cutting him off.

"And you're needlessly upset. I think I know why people are dying. Misa and Prone have died, but that doesn't mean either of us--"

"You've got to start acting more responsibly."

"I am! I'm trying to find how the disease is brought to the ground by the shooting stars. I have pictures. You've seen them, Teny. There's no one else who knows this. We--"

"Sickness falling from the sky," she scoffed. "You're crazy, Serne. I'm going to leave you if you can't concentrate on your work. You'll have to do a better job of providing, especially now."

"Why now?" he asked.

"I'm pregnant."

#

"You made an unauthorized intervention," said Omega. Rainbows of energy flickered briefly as he made his accusation.

Alpha coalesced into a tight, hot ball of plasma before expanding slowly, cooling as she grew in diameter. "He can save our experiment. Serne is the one best able to make the least change while preserving the

society."

"Then you agree with me, at least in part?" demanded Omega. Energy surged across Archer's sky. Omega finished his newest computations. "It will not be enough. We must protect even more from the virus carried by the meteorite. My calculations show--"

"Only Serne," Alpha said. "We protect only him. Even this intervention on our part makes any experimental result questionable."

"If this is inadequate, the world dies. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," Alpha said softly, her voice the whisper of ions.

#

The rocker dodged and ducked, carrying two of the three balls down the playing field. Two blockers and a sideman sprinted after him.

Serne ignored the crowd's cheers as he peered through the viewfinder of his camera. He waited until the players raced across his field of vision. He snapped their picture, getting a good action shot of the rocker dwindling the ball and accepting a full point.

Play halted and the crowd's cries died down. Serne looked up from his viewfinder to see a player lying flat on his face. It wasn't unusual for a player in a major game to be injured, but Serne finally saw what the crowd had already realized. The felled player had been away from the main grapple.

Vioslion hurried to the player's side, motioning frantically for a stretcher. Four attendants carried the player off. Serne gathered his

camera and ran after them. Vioslion knelt beside the flushed player by the time Serne reached his side.

"The plague?" he asked, out of breath from his dash to the physician's side.

"In the middle of a championship game it strikes. There is no stopping it. Every day is worse."

Serne had thought long hours over his notion that the disease came from the Star Fall and had found nothing wrong with his conclusion.

"What causes the disease, if not the rocks from the sky? Do you deny I've found a half dozen stones?"

"No, Serne," Vioslion said tiredly. "I've seen the rocks, and they are just that, rocks. There is nothing to prove they've come from the sky. I asked several academicians and, they all agree with me. Rocks do not fall from the sky. Neither does disease."

"The pictures," Serne started. Vioslion wasn't listening. The physician had turned back to the fallen player. A single cough and the man died.

"There's nothing I can do." Vioslion was crying openly.

"Have you tried new treatments?"

Vioslion nodded, unable to speak.

"Has anyone come down with the disease and lived? It strikes quickly, but there are always a few who seem immune to any sickness."

"What are you saying, Serne?"

"I don't know. You don't believe that the disease came to the ground on shooting stars. I'm trying not to believe the disease is always

fatal."

Vioslion looked at him curiously, then said, "There are reports of a few people surviving. I have seen the swiftness of death and don't put much credence in such stories. They must be folk tales spun to give hope."

Serne did not press the physician to give him the names. A tide of helplessness rose and washed over him. The image of Teny and their unborn child dying haunted him.

#

"They cannot survive. The plague ravages every sector of their world," said Omega. "They have gone in the wrong directions to counter such a menace."

Alpha disliked having to agree with Omega. He had wanted to intervene quickly and stop the virus carried on the pieces of comet. She had thought the people of Archer would rise to the challenge. For the first time in more than a millennium, she had to admit error in her thinking.

"They are unparalleled in the arts," she said slowly. "Theirs is a special gift."

"They excel in athletics, too," said Omega, "but their physical prowess cannot save them from the smallest killer. There is no medical science to deal with the plague."

"There is little to boast of," Alpha agreed, thinking hard. She made

new projections. To intervene meant their experiment would fail--and not to meddle spelled the death of millions.

"Look at their character," Omega said heatedly. "They rely on luck rather than skill."

"Sometimes it is better to be lucky than skilful," Alpha said, still distracted by her complex projections.

Omega launched into a long mathematical treatise on her casual remark. "They need more logical thought," Omega concluded. "They are artisans, not deep thinkers. They rush off in all directions without purpose. They react to stimuli rather than carefully considered need."

"Is that so bad?" asked Alpha. "They have admirable qualities. They are loyal and brave, even if they tend to be risk takers without consideration of the consequences."

"They are hedonists."

"No," said Alpha. "They are not like those on other worlds around the Wheel of Stars."

"I stand corrected," Omega said. "But the issue is clear. The virus will destroy them unless we do something. Can we afford to lose the planet of Archer and continue a meaningful experiment?"

"No," said Alpha.

"Then you agree. We must act."

"No," she responded, startling Omega. "Let's wait another few rotations of Archer. If they have done nothing to correct the threat facing them, then we act."

Omega grumbled, then subsided, already making careful plans for

salvaging as many of the planet's natives as possible. Only in this way could they continue their research.

#

Serne stared at Teny as she slept. She hardly moved these days. It had been over a ten-day since she had told him of the quickening within her. And she had been so tired since then. Every small complaint produced more anxiety in Serne. Did she have more than a new life growing within her? She was so tired, and that was a symptom of the disease spreading inexorably throughout the city.

Serne had enforced a virtual quarantine on their home, but how could he protect against disease falling from the sky? The more he thought about it, the more convinced he had become he was correct. The Star Fall had brought with it beauty--and death. The beauty he had captured on film. How could he possibly bottle the death and keep it from his friends and loved ones?

"I'll be back soon," he said softly, even though the sleeping Teny did not hear. She murmured and rolled over onto her side. With one last, longing look, he slipped out and wandered deserted streets in his search of Vioslion. He found the physician in his surgery, slumped over his desk in exhaustion. Opened bottles of herbs and potions lay scattered, new failures in Vioslion's continued battle to find a cure for the plague ravaging Archer.

The physician jerked awake and looked up when Serne entered. It took

several seconds for him to rub the sleep from his dark-rimmed, bloodshot eyes. How unlike the physician who showed boundless energy and optimism before, Serne thought.

"It's you," Vioslion said, still groggy from his exhausted sleep. "There's nothing wrong, is there?"

"I feel fine." Serne did not voice his concern over Teny. "Are you making any progress?" He pointed to the bottles on the physician's desk.

"None," Vioslion said. "I have even taken to injecting my potions."

"The hollow needle?"

"Yes, that. My mixtures enter the bloodstream. There is some evidence this works more quickly." Vioslion shrugged. "I have not been any more successful with this than in more traditional ways."

"What of other physicians?"

Vioslion shook his head. "I wish there were more communication between cities. What little I have heard has been hearsay--and it hasn't been good. No one else has any luck."

"Luck has played out," Serne said, more to himself than to Vioslion. "I asked once about those who had come down with the disease and recovered. You put me off then. Tell me now."

"There aren't many. I can't see what good it will do you knowing their names. I have tried to find a common factor keeping them from the sickness. There isn't one. They have different professions, some isolated, some active and mingling with others."

"Can it hurt if I ask questions?" Serne moved to the physician's desk and deftly swept several implements off the desk. Vioslion never

noticed. Serne was not certain what he would do with the syringes and potions he took, but he knew he must do something.

Vioslion had turned to a small cabinet and riffled through sheets of paper inside. He gave Serne the name of the nearest Murgane resident who had contracted the disease and lived. Serne glanced at the name, made a face since the survivor was a poet and therefore ill-dispositioned at the best of times, and left without saying another word. Vioslion had work to do.

So did he.

All Serne needed to decide was the nature of his work. The Star Fall had brought the disease to Archer. He had no proof of it, but he knew.

#

"I have never heard of such an idiotic thing," Bleerin said. "Why should disease inhabit the bloodstream? Those who die cough. Look for the sickness in their lungs."

"There is some indication everything is hooked together," Serne said sarcastically. He was a photographer, an artist, but he knew of the work of physicians in tracing the circulatory system. He had even incorporated it in several double-exposure photos entered in the winter all-Murgane artfest. Reviews had been critical and he had failed to win even honorable recognition, but Serne had displayed new work, not old and hackneyed like those proclaimed the prize winners.

He put such defeat behind him. He felt that he had hit upon the

proper course and wasn't going to be deterred as he so often was. Teny was right; he flew off in wild, unexpected directions too easily.

For Teny, he had to be true to his convictions.

"You are not sticking that into my body," Bleerin said, glaring at the stolen syringe in Serne's hand. "Why not shove it into your own body? You haven't shown any sign of the disease."

"I need someone who has fallen ill, then recovered," Serne tried to explain. "I think there is something in your blood that will fight the disease in others."

"Go away. I am working on a sonnet." Bleerin slammed and barred the door in Serne's face, leaving him forlorn on the poet's wooden porch. Serne looked around and saw not a single mural or statue. He snorted in contempt at such lack of taste. Poetry was not the world, as Bleerin so obviously thought.

Serne walked the empty streets of Murgane and got a chance to study the fine art work he saw everywhere. The Plaza of Arts had several new statues from a promising talent. Serne's heart grew leaden when he saw a small plaque on one bust giving the sculptor's date of death--this had been his third and last work.

"So much talent and it is stolen away."

Serne sat and studied the bust and found the power in it he needed. Also came certainty. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the syringe. Serne pushed the plunger all the way home, then shoved the needle into his arm as he had seen Vioslion do on occasion. He ignored the biting pain as he drilled for the vessel carrying his blood.

Serne almost collapsed with gratitude at his luck when he found the vein and pulled forth an entire syringe of blood. In the dim light cast by the gas lamps circling the Plaza of Arts he stared at the dark, almost black fluid. How much did he need to inject into others? And would it even work? He had not contracted the sickness but had seemed immune. Was this good enough?

Serne didn't know the answers. He was a photographer, not a physician. A slow smile crossed his face. Vioslion was a physician and didn't know the answers, either. This buoyed his spirits.

He returned to his darkroom and meticulously cleaned ten jars. To each he added an equal portion of the blood he had drawn, then decided to put in nine parts of distilled water to bring the amount in the jars back to the original.

He loaded the syringe from the nearest jar and went to Teny's side. She moaned and thrashed about, the lethargy already turned into feverish sleep. She coughed several times, and Serne knew she had contracted the plague.

He grasped her arm and injected his solution. Serne wasn't sure what to expect; she seemed no better after the injection than she had before.

"Time," he said. "Photos require time for the chemicals to work. It might be similar to this." Serne fell asleep beside his lover as he waited for either death or life to triumph.

#

"She is well," Vioslion said in amazement. "Perhaps she did not really have the sickness."

"She did," Serne said. He looked lovingly at Teny. The fever had broken, and she no longer coughed her death rattle. "What of the child?"

Vioslion shrugged. "I cannot say, but the mother is well. So must the child."

Serne held up the syringe filled with the last of his ten charges. "I have given eight other doses to neighbors. Six who had not contracted the plague are still untouched. Two who had the disease . . ."

"Yes?" Vioslion demanded eagerly. "What of them?"

"One died. The other recovered."

"One died," said Vioslion, his eyes bright. "But one lived! No treatment has saved even one!" He reached for the syringe, then held back. "I am sorry. I meant to take it from you."

Serne handed over the syringe laden with his blood. "You need it. You are tending those already fallen. It will keep you from getting sick yourself."

Vioslion injected it. "We can take blood from those who survive and use it to inoculate others," he said, his words jumbling one atop the other in his eagerness.

"Inoculate?"

"That is a medical term I found in the literature. Such a procedure had been discredited. But this!"

"Yes, this works," Serne said, his green eyes bright as he stared at Teny. She stirred and came awake, life in her every movement.

#

"The toll is terrible," said Omega. "This many need not have died."

"True," said Alpha, "but they have solved their own problem. We did not vitiate our experiment."

"It was luck, not skill. If you had not immunized Serne, he could never have used his own blood serum to save the others."

"There were those naturally immune. He had the right idea--and he carried through with it."

Alpha expanded, her substance turning to plasma as she shot across space on her way to another world in the Wheel of Stars. She had been right and Omega wrong. The world of the Archer had hidden abilities--and had used them to survive.

Art and survival. They went together well, Alpha thought.

The End

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