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SACRIFICE

The hill wolf paused on the rise behind the thatched cottage, its grey, fanged muzzle pointing away across the long slopes. Its golden eyes shone with more than animal intelligence, but the demands of the brute creature could not be ignored. Carnivorous, it hungered.

The previous fish host had never experienced this urgent desire for food, the mindorm thought. The small lake had never lacked fry easily overtaken with a flurry of fins, but a few days had shown the habitat of the fish was too limited. Swimming close to the shore, the fish had evaluated all it could see. The decision had not been easy. There was always this difficulty, on a strange planet, when changing hosts might bring disaster. A rodent had come out of the herbage, creeping down to drink, and the fish moved closer, very slowly, tail driving it languidly. The mindorm estimated the distance, saw it was near enough, and rose from the fish like a small, brilliantly silver wasp. The rodent lacked time to run, even if it sensed danger.

The world changed, became a place of air-borne sounds and sharply seen pictures. On the lake a large fish floated dead. The rodent moved back into the herbage, listening judging the dangers and advantages of its new habitat.

The rodent had lived several days. Then, investigating on open ground, it heard a flurry of heavy paws. The mindorm had left the rodent before the jaws of the racing hill wolf had gathered up the tiny creature, and out of the hill wolf’s eyes it saw the small animal’s brown coat, and felt the warm blood.

The hill wolf was a useful host. The mindorm ranged for miles along the hills and through the straggly woodland. It soon found a small village, and its interest quickened. Clearly the planet had more advanced creatures than the hill wolf.

During many weeks the hill wolf tried to come near one of the village inhabitants, but always failed. By day, they shouted, waving sticks, brave because not alone. At night, they had guards, and fire. Some primitive, unquenched fear made the wolf keep clear of the flames.

The mindorm knew that the hill wolf must eventually be abandoned. But it would be fatal to leave until a new host was very near. The new host should also be a higher life form, if possible. For long weeks the wolf skulked round the village, or watched it from the slopes, a haunting shape seldom far by day or night.

Thick brush beyond the empty thatched cottage became its sleeping place. The few miles from the hut to the village were easily covered at a fast, loping trot. But extreme caution was essential. When the mindorm adopted a host, the host’s native intellect withered and died, and the mindorm was physically fragile, able to survive only for a few seconds outside the host’s protective environment. Thus there was always danger, when changing hosts. The new host must be near, easily caught or approached.

Bright afternoon sun was hot on the slopes near the little Rim village when Ruth bumped towards it in the wide wheeled runabout. Dust rose, suspended in a windless sky, and the suitcases at her side bounced, the road surface worsening.

The driver guided the vehicle across a narrow bridge, and the road sloped up. Ahead was the village. Five miles beyond it was the thatched cottage. There, she would paint detailed, wonderful pictures of indigenous flowers, grasses and plants.

This far out in the Pleiades abounded forms of life such as people on Earth never imagined.

The runabout slowed, bumping between houses made from some smooth, reddish stone. The driver stopped, looking back.

"I don’t go any farther, miss."

Ruth nodded. "My cottage is five miles on."

"So I gathered, Miss. Someone will take you."

He removed her cases, helping her down. She limped- had always limped, and moved slowly, with difficulty. He seemed to avoid her eyes.

"You’ve been here among the Outlanders before, miss?"

“No. A man in the village told someone I know about the cottage. It seemed perfect.”

He looked past her, over the hills. “Bit of a sacrifice, a bright young woman like you living there, miss? ”

"Not really. I paint ."

She watched him get in, and drive away. Near the bridge, the runabout slowed, as if its driver would return. But it started on again, vanishing.

Behind a house children sang. Four little girls came from a gate, grubby, carrying chains of flowers. They encircled Ruth, throwing the loops over her head, clapping.

She smiled, surprised, not knowing what to say, touched by their action and small, sad faces.

A cart came round the end of the tiny houses, pulled slowly by a shaggy type of horse. Five men stood in the cart, balancing to its motion. She moved aside, but the cart stopped and a man sprang over the swinging tailboard.

" We'll help you take your things to the cottage, miss," he said quietly,

She examined him. Tall, angular, thin, like all the men on this planet, and especially Outlanders. Almost a native, though having ancestry linked by a colonisation ship, long before, to Earth.

They were watching her carefully, as if a lot depended on her reply. All were strong, wiry muscled. There could not have been ten years between them. If selected for some physical marathon, the choice could not have been improved. All held thick, strong sticks.

"That's kind," she said

The men helped her up, not looking at her. " I'm Jim," one said. "We took your heavy things last week, when they arrived."

They lifted up the cases. Somehow, they all strove to avoid her eyes, gazing at the cottages, the horse, and each other. She took a board seat near one wheel.

"It'l1 need an hour to reach your place, miss," Jim stated.

The driver drew the horse round on a tight rein. Ruth tried to look more relaxed, less rigid. Not far now, she thought. It would be nice to examine the cottage, until night came.

As they passed along the narrow, short street, curtains moved at small windows. Once a young woman was visible, dark-haired, round-eyed, she seemed intent, as if watching some forbidden rite. The children followed a little way, throwing wild flowers up into the cart. Tears stood on the cheeks of one tiny girl.

Ruth moved awkwardly, facing ahead again. The men rode standing, moving easily to the motion, resting each on his stout stick. They looked everywhere except at her.

"Why has the cottage stayed empty? "

The men looked at each other, oppressed. They seemed unable to produce any explanation, and licked their lips, features heavy with thought.

Half a mile beyond the village four small animals resembling goats were tethered. A curious expectancy crept over the men. Beyond the four goats was a fifth peg, and a cord, now broken, stretching like a pointer the way they must go. An audible rustle of expelled breath sounded over the creak of harness.

“ One goat’s been taken,” a man in the corner of the cart said uneasily.

They exchanged glances. Their grips tightened on the sticks, and Ruth thought they looked pale. Evaluating them, she decided they had a level of culture and belief similar to that of the old Anglo Middle Ages.

Hill slopes moved slowly by. Ruth watched them, translating hues, light and shadow mentally into pigment. The men were studying her, while not appearing to look. Their eyes were veiled, their brows hooded. They seemed somehow helpless, yet determined, as if impelled by circumstances beyond control. One fingered a gold hued ring that could have been a lucky charm. Definitely not far removed from primitive culture levels! Ruth thought. It was odd how settlers often drifted temporarily back, then pressed on again, into a new, yet related, civilisation of their own.

The cottage was exactly as it had been described to her. Two downstairs rooms, two very tiny bedrooms under the thickly thatched roof. The straw was dull gold in the glancing sunlight. Beyond was a rising slope, wooded higher up. The front door was surrounded by strange flowers.

The man called Jim fiddled in his coat. “ I kept the key for you, miss.”

She took it. The five got down, moving warily, as if on dangerous or strange ground, carrying their sticks with them as they took her cases indoors. The horse was very restless, facing home, moving its head as if scenting danger. Its ears were low, its eyes red. Ruth found a tip, thanking them.

Jim hesitated. "It- it’s been nice meeting you, miss ."

“ You’ve all been kind.” She smiled. “ I may walk as far as the village the day after tomorrow.” She would take sandwiches, spending half the day on the way, liking it.

They all gazed at her, not speaking, then got up into the cart. They faced outwards, one in each direction, watching the hills.

“ We’ll be waiting to see you come, miss,” one man said gruffly.

They licked their lips. Their faces were worried- bleak with fear, yet anxious, as if they did something evil, yet wished to avoid danger for themselves.

“ What good will this be?” Jim demanded abruptly, vehemently. “ It’ll come back again. It’s crazy, but so clever! We’ll never be rid of it.”

The driver gripped his arm. “ We’ve got our own wives and kids to think of, haven’t we. We’ve been into it all. The thing now is to see it through-”

He flipped the reins, and the cart moved away. They all stood in it looking back at her. Once, while still in view, they stopped, and there was some argument. But the driver went on again, and the cart went down the slope, round a curve, and from sight.

Ruth went to her front door. She realised that the chains of flowers, now faded, still rested round her neck. The early evening was wonderfully quiet. Colours were clear, shapes sharply outlined, except where the remote slopes faded into blue haze. Coming from a busy Earth city, out here to this Rim village, had been something of a sacrifice, Ruth thought. She loved city life. But it would be worth it. Though never able to run, she loved to walk, and new flowers and plants would make every step wonderful with discovery.

She went in, unpacked, then sat on the red front stone step. Earlier, everything necessary had been brought. Her needs were not great. It would be nice, later, to walk up across the hills, she thought. With evening, the scent of strange flowers came to her.

There was a secondary task, one less pleasing, but perhaps fairly easy- to write a report on the customs and development of the villagers. She could begin in a few days, she thought, and probably get an initial outline ready to send back to be picked up by the spaceship Musa, which had brought her out here to the Pleiades. A more detailed report could follow later, to be examined and analysed back on Earth.

She left the cottage and walked up the slope towards the clumps of trees. She moved slowly, limping. Flowers with a scent like mignonette, but resembling small roses, crowded at her feet. She picked one. It was pink edged, fading to blue near the centre.

She rested on the slope, looking back at the tiny house, now far away and below. Many scents came on the evening wind. She turned, moving on, her steps mechanical on the soft turf. Near a stone outcrop was a piece of rope, attached to something that made her shudder. Once, that rope could have secured an animal like a small goat, one of those this side of the village. It was almost as if the goats had been tethered there to satisfy a predatory animal that might otherwise come into the village, she thought. There might be interesting side lines to discover, here, and put in her report. Not much was known of Outlander development, and this Rim village had been seldom visited.

She went on along the hill. It was interesting to observe the primitive mind, and the very primitive actions of peoples who had only become removed a few generations from a highly civilised Earth. There was slipping back towards magic, towards appeasing the unknown powers of darkness. Primitive peoples observed, feared, but did not understand. Forced to some action, their action was often strange, yet often had a deadly logic, hard to refute.

The cottage was gone from view when she heard the movement behind her, the scamper of heavy pads, the rapid breathing. She turned quickly, most weight on her better leg!

A wolf was within ten paces, slowing now, temporarily cautious. Its grey, fanged muzzle pointed at her. In its golden eyes was a strange, almost uncanny intelligence. Its sides were full, as if it had eaten. But something more than mere hunger seemed to drive it nearer.

It was examining her clothing, almost noting the obvious artificiality of the materials, as it crept closer. She shivered. Now, it could spring, reaching her with a bound.

Ruth felt primitive fear, impossible to quell, born of an ancestry when men had been hunted, weak, vulnerable. The wolf drew closer, closer, golden eyes shining, must now spring...

Its body grew rigid. Then there rose from it a tiny silver spark, like a quick, vividly brilliant wasp. It was a minute, exposed naked thing, but vitally quick, stabbing across because its life depended on speed-had always depended on speed, at this vital instant. The mindorm was triumphant. This being was so obviously from a civilised community. With this new host, the mindorm could seek out that community. then be concealed for ever in the multitude.

The rigid body of the hill wolf was collapsing, dead, a creature from which all life and purpose had been abruptly removed. Its eyes were closing, its mouth sagging. Already its extinguished brain was dark for ever to all consciousness.

The mindorm reached Ruth, a vivid, silvery wasp, diving towards her, longing for the enfolding comfort of this new host. The touch of air was as a terrible dryness on it, the glancing sun was a torment of radiation, but it knew it had judged well. The new host was obviously slow, and very near. The safety factor, before leaving the hill wolf, had been very large indeed.

Ruth was motionless, frozen as by panic, never knowing she could feel such terror. There was a deep, instinctive reaction against the sudden appearance of the mindorm, as it arrowed towards her. She would have run, if her feet could move; would have screamed, if horror had not also frozen her tongue.

The mindorm struck her forehead like a wasp flying against a window. Her consciousness went, submerged in fear.

The unconsciousness was momentary. It lasted seconds only, then Ruth was again fully aware. Around her was the hum of a great ship- comfort unspeakable, the Musa on her course, standing off the planet. Her heart pounded, sweat beaded her brow. She had never felt so keenly, feared so greatly, though any good simulacrum robot could put its controller through a tough time.

Her consciousness spread, including the slopes beyond the cottage. The mindorm was circling like a mad thing, recoiling from the cold, plasti-covered steel of the simulacrum. If it could gain entry, there was no mind there, only a complex of receptor and sensory transmission equipment offering it no refuge.

The tiny, silver wasp sped in a circle, back towards the hill wolf. It vanished, reappeared, more urgent still in its motion. Like a silver spark, it sped towards Ruth, faltered, visibly shrivelling. It circled her once, losing height, dropping like an insect shorn of wings.

Ruth was briefly aware of two worlds, overlapping, impinging one upon the other- the quiet hillside, and dead wolf; the hum and comfort of the Musa. That temporary retreat to the ship, to safety, had been needed. Here, a man was sitting very near her side.

"It was bad-- that bad?" he asked

“ Very bad.” Half her mind spoke, as beyond a veil. “ But it seems to be about the only way to get them. The moment the report came back from the Rim village we knew I’d have to go.”

“ We’ll be calling for you- for the simulacrum in a couple of weeks- "’

His voice faded, and the hillside was real. The odours of flowers were in Ruth’s nostrils. She walked a trifle stiffly down towards the hut, enjoying it, experiencing, feeling, motivated over thousands of miles of space. She did not look back towards the dead hill wolf.