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# The Justified - Lightspeed Magazine

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Het had eaten nothing for weeks but bony, gape-mawed fish—some of them full of neurotoxin. She'd had to alter herself so she could metabolize it safely, which had taken some doing. So when she ripped out the walsel's throat and its blood spurted red onto the twilit ice, she stared, salivary glands aching, stomach growling. She didn't wait to butcher her catch but sank her teeth into skin and fat and muscle, tearing a chunk away from its huge shoulder.

Movement caught her eye, and she sprang upright, walsel blood trickling along her jaw, to see Dihaut, black and silver, walking toward her across the ages-packed snow and ice. She'd have known her sib anywhere, but even if she hadn't recognized them, there was no mistaking their crescent-topped standard, Months and Years, tottering behind them on two thin, insectile legs.

But sib or not, familiar or not, Het growled, heart still racing, muscles poised for flight or attack. She had thought herself alone and unwatched. Had made sure of it before she began her hunt. Had Dihaut been watching her all this time? It would be like them.

For a brief moment she considered disemboweling Dihaut, leaving them dying on the ice, Months and Years in pieces beside them. But that would only put this off until her sib took a new body. Dihaut could be endlessly persistent when they wished, and the fact that they had come all the way to this frigid desert at the farthest reaches of Nu to find her suggested that the ordinary limits of that persistence—such as they were—could not be relied on. Besides, she and Dihaut had nearly always gotten along well. Still, she stayed on the alert, and did not shift into a more relaxed posture.

“This is the Eye of Merur, the Noble Dihaut!” announced Months and Years as Dihaut drew near. Its high, thready voice cut startlingly through the silence of the snowy waste.

“I know who they are,” snarled Het.

The standard made a noise almost like a sniff. “I only do my duty, Noble Het.”

Dihaut hunched their shoulders. Their face, arms, torso, and legs were covered with what looked like long, fine fur but, this being Dihaut, was likely feathers. Mostly black, but their left arm and leg, and part of their torso, were silver-white. “Hello, sib,” they said. “Sorry to interrupt your supper. Couldn’t you have fled someplace warmer?”

Het had no answer for this—she’d asked herself the same question many times in the past several years.

“I see you’ve changed your skin,” Dihaut continued. “It does look odd, but I suppose it keeps you warm. Would you mind sharing the specs?” They shivered.

“It’s clothes,” said Het. “A coat, and boots, and gloves.”

“Clothes!” Dihaut peered at her more closely. “I see. They must be very confining, but I suppose it’s worth it to be warm. Do you have any you could lend me? Or could whoever supplied you with yours give me some, too?”

“Sorry,” growled Het. “Not introducing you.” Actually, she hadn’t even introduced herself. She’d stolen the clothes, when the fur she’d grown hadn’t kept her as warm as she’d hoped.

Dihaut made a wry “huh,” their warm breath puffing from their mouth in a small cloud. “Well. I’m sorry to be so blunt.” They gave a regretful smile, all Dihaut in its acknowledgment of the pointlessness of small talk. “I’m very sorry to intrude on whatever it is you’re doing down here—I never was quite clear on why you left, no one was, except that you were angry about something. Which . . .” They shrugged. “If it were up to me”—they raised both finely feathered hands, gestured vaguely to the dead walsel with the silver one—“I’d leave you to it.”

“Would you.” She didn’t even try to sound as though she believed them.

“Truly, sib. But the ruler of Hehut, the Founder and Origin of Life on Nu, the One Sovereign of This World, wishes for you to return to Hehut.” At this, Months and Years waved its thin, sticklike arms as though underlining Dihaut’s words. “She’d have sent others before me, but I convinced her that if you were brought back against your wishes, your presence at court would not be as delightful as usual.” They shivered again. “Is there somewhere warmer we can talk?”

“Not really.”

"I don't mean any harm to the people you've been staying with," said Dihaut.

"I haven't been staying with anyone." She gestured vaguely around with one blood-matted hand, indicating the emptiness of the ice.

"You must have been staying with someone, sib. I know there are no approved habitations here, so they must be unauthorized, but that's no concern of mine unless they should come to Merur's attention. Or if they have Animas. Please tell me, sib, that they don't have unauthorized Animas here? Because you know we'll have to get rid of them if they do, and I'd really like to just go right back to Hehut, where it's actually warm."

Unbidden, her claws extended again, just a bit. She had never spoken to the people who lived here, but she owed them. It was by watching them that she'd learned about the poisonous fish. Otherwise the toxin might have caught her off guard, even killed her. And then she'd have found herself resurrected again in Hehut, in the middle of everything she'd fled.

"They don't have Animas," she told Dihaut. "How could they?" When their bodies died, they died.

"Thank all the stars for that!" Dihaut gave a relieved, shivery sigh. "As long as they stay up here in this freezing desert with their single, cold lives, we can all just go on pretending they don't exist. So surely we can pretend they don't exist in their presumably warmer home?"

"Your standard is right behind you," Het pointed out. "Listening."

"It is," Dihaut agreed. "It always is. There's nowhere in the world

we can really be away from Merur. We always have to deal with the One Ruler. Even, in the end, the benighted unauthorized souls in this forsaken place.” They were, by now, shivering steadily.

“Can’t she leave anyone even the smallest space?” asked Het.

“Some room to be apart, without her watching? For just a little while?”

“It’s usually us watching for her,” put in Dihaut.

Het waved that away. “Not a single life anywhere in the world that she doesn’t claim as hers. She makes *certain* there’s nowhere to go!”

“Order, sib,” said Dihaut. “Imagine what might happen if everyone went running around free to do whatever they liked with no consequences. And she *is* the Founder and Origin of Life on Nu.”

“Come on, Dihaut. I was born on *Aeons*, just before Merur left the ship and came down to Nu. There were already people living here. I remember it. And even now it depends who you ask. Either Merur arrived a thousand years ago in *Aeons* and set about pulling land from beneath the water and creating humans, or else she arrived and brought light and order to humans she found living in ignorance and chaos. I’ve heard both from her own mouth at different times. And you know better. You’re the historian.”

They tried that regretful half smile again, but they were too cold to manage it. “I tell whichever story is more politic at the moment. And there are, after all, different sorts of truth. But please.” They spread their hands, placatory. “I beg you. Come with me back to Hehut. Don’t make me freeze to death in front of you.”

“Noble Dihaut,” piped their standard, “Eye of Merur, I am here.

Your Anima is entirely safe.”

“Yes,” shivered Dihaut, “but there isn’t a new body ready for me yet, and I hate being out of things for very long. Please, sib, let’s go back to my flier. We can argue about all of this on the way back home.”

And, well, now that Dihaut had found her, it wasn’t as though she had much choice. She said, with ill grace, “Well, fine, then. Where’s your flier?”

“This way,” said Dihaut, shivering, and turned. They were either too cold or too wise to protest when Het bent to grab the dead walsel’s tusk and drag it along as she followed.

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It rained in Hehut barely more often than it snowed in the icy waste Het had left, but rivers and streams veined Hehut under the bright, uninterrupted blue of the sky, rivers and streams that pooled here and there into lotus-veiled lakes and papyrus marshes, and the land was lush and green.

The single-lived working in the fields looked up as the shadow of Dihaut’s flier passed over them. They made a quick sign with their left hands and turned back to the machines they followed. Small boats dotted the river that snaked through the fields, single-lived fishers hauling in nets, here and there the long, gilded barque of one of the Justified shining in the sun. The sight gave Het an odd pang—she had not ever been given much to nostalgia, or to dwelling on memories of her various childhoods, none of which to her recall had been particularly childish, but she was struck with a sudden, almost tangible memory of sunshine on her skin, and the sound of water lapping at the hull of a boat. Not, she was sure, a

single moment but a composite of all the times she'd fled to the river, to fish, or walk, or sit under a tree and stare at the water flowing by. To be by herself. As much as she could be, anyway.

"Almost there," said Dihaut, reclined in their seat beside her. "Are you going to change?" They had shed their feathers on the flight here and now showed black and silver skin, smooth and shining.

Het had shed her coat, boots, and gloves but left her thick and shaggy fur. It would likely be uncomfortable in the heat, but she was reluctant to let go of it; she couldn't say why. "I don't think I have time."

"Noble Eyes of Merur," said Months and Years, upright at Dihaut's elbow, "we will arrive at Tjenu in fifteen minutes. The One Sovereign will see you immediately."

Definitely no time to change. "So urgent?" asked Het. "Do you know what this is about?"

"I have my suspicions." Dihaut shrugged one silver shoulder. "It's probably better if Merur tells you herself."

So this was something that no one—not even Merur's own Eyes—could safely talk about. There were times when Merur was in no mood to be tolerant of any suggestion that her power and authority might be incomplete, and at those times even admitting knowledge of some problem could end with one's Anima deleted altogether.

Tjenu came into view, its gold-covered facade shining in the hot sun, a wide, dark avenue of smooth granite stretching from its huge main doors straight across the gardens to a broad entrance in the polished white walls. The Road of Souls, the single-lived called it, imagining that it was the route traveled by the Animas of

the dead on their way to judgment at Dihaut's hands. As large as the building was—a good kilometer on each of its four sides, and three stories high—most of Tjenu was underground. Or so Dihaut had told her. Het had only ever been in the building's sunlit upper reaches. At least while she was alive, and not merely an Anima awaiting resurrection.

Dihaut's flier set down within Tjenu's white walls, beside a willow-edged pond. Coming out, Het found Great Among Millions, her own standard, waiting, hopping from one tiny foot to the other, feathery fingers clenched into minuscule fists, stilled the next moment, its black pole pointing perfectly upright, the gold cow horns at its top polished and shining.

"Eye of Merur," it said, its voice high and thin. "Noble Het, the Justified, the Powerful, Servant of the One Sovereign of Nu. The Ruler of all, in her name of Self-Created, in her name of She Caused All to Be, in her name of She Listens to Prayers, in her name of Sustainer of the Justified, in her name of—"

"Stop," Het commanded. "Just tell me what she wants."

"Your presence, gracious Het," it said, with equanimity. Great Among Millions had been her standard for several lifetimes, and was used to her. "Immediately. Do forgive the appearance of impertinence, Noble Het. I only relay the words of the One Sovereign. I will escort you to your audience."

Months and Years, coming out of the flier, piped, "Great Among Millions, please do not forget the Noble Het's luggage."

"What luggage?" asked Het.

"Your walsel, Noble Eye," replied Months and Years, waving a tiny



hand. “What’s left of it. It’s starting to smell.”

“Just dispose of it,” said Het. “I’ve eaten as much of it as I’m going to.”

Great Among Millions gave a tiny almost-hop from one foot to the other, and stilled again. “Noble Het, you have been away from Tjenu, from Hehut itself, without me, for fifty-three years, two months, and three days.” It almost managed to sound as though it was merely stating a fact, and not making a complaint. But not quite.

“It’s good to see you again, too,” Het said. Her standard unclenched its little fists and gestured toward the golden mass of Tjenu. “Yes,” Het acknowledged. “Let’s go.”

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The vast audience chamber of the One Sovereign of Nu was black-ceilinged, inlaid with silver and copper stars that shone in the light of the lamps below. Courtiers, officials, and supplicants, alone or in small scattered groups, murmured as Het passed. Of course. There was no mistaking her identity, furred and unkempt as she was—Great Among Millions followed her.

She crossed the brown, gold-flecked floor to where it changed, brown shading to blue and green in Merur’s near presence, where one never set foot without direct invitation—unless, of course, one was an Eye, in which case one’s place in the bright-lit vicinity of Merur was merely assumed, a privilege of status.

Stepping into the green, Great Among Millions tottering behind her, Het cast a surreptitious glance—habitual, even after so long away!—at those so privileged. And stopped, and growled. Among

the officials standing near Merur, three bore her Eye. There were four Eyes; Het herself was one. Dihaut, who Het had left with their flier, was another. There should only have been two Eyes here.

“Don’t be jealous, Noble Het,” whispered Great Among Millions, its thready voice sounding in her ear alone. “You were gone so very long.” Almost accusing, that sounded.

“She *replaced* me,” Het snarled. She didn’t recognize whoever it was who, she saw now, held an unfamiliar standard, but the Justified changed bodies so frequently. If there was a new Eye, why should Merur call on Het? Why not leave her be?

“And you left *me* behind,” continued Great Among Millions. “Alone. They asked and asked me where you were and I did not know, though I wished to.” It made a tiny, barely perceptible stomp. “They put me in a storeroom. In a box.”

“Het, my Eye, approach!” Merur, calling from where she sat under her blue-canopied pavilion, alone but for those three Eyes, and the standards, and smaller lotus- and lily-shaped servants that always attended her.

And now, her attention turned from Merur’s other Eyes, Het looked fully at the One Sovereign herself. Armless, legless, her snaking body cased in scales of gold and lapis, Merur circled the base of her polished granite chair of state, her upper body leaning onto the seat, her head standard human, her hair in dozens of silver-plaited braids falling around her glittering gold face. Her dark eyes were slit-pupiled.

Het had seen Merur take such a shape before—as well as taking new bodies at need or at whim, the Justified could to some degree alter a currently held body at will. But there were limits to such

transformations, and it had been long, long centuries since Merur had taken this sort of body.

She should have concealed her surprise and prostrated herself, but instead she stood and stared as Great Among Millions announced, in a high, carrying voice, “The fair, the fierce, the Burning Eye of the One Sovereign of Nu, the Noble Het!”

“My own Eye!” said Merur. “I have need of you!”

Het could not restrain her anger, even in the face of the One Sovereign of Nu. “I count four Eyes in this court, Sovereign—those three over there, and the Noble Dihaut. There have always been four. Why should you need me to be a fifth?” Behind her, Great Among Millions made a tiny noise.

“I shed one body,” admonished Merur, her voice faintly querulous, “only to reawaken and find you gone. For decades you did not return. Why? No one accused you of any dereliction of duty, let alone disloyalty. You had suffered no disadvantage; your place as my favored Eye was secure. And now, returning, you question my having appointed someone to fill the office you left empty! You would do better to save your anger for the enemies of Nu!”

“I can’t account for my heart,” said Het crossly. “It is as it is.”

This seemed to mollify Merur. “Well, you always have had a temper. And it is this very honesty that I have so missed. Indeed, it is what I require of you!” Here Merur lowered her voice and looked fretfully from one side to the other, and the standards and flower-form servitors scuttled back a few feet. “Het, my Eye. This body is . . . imperfect. It will not obey me as it should, and it is dying, far sooner than it ought. I need to move to a new one.”

“Already?” Het’s skin prickled with unease.

“This is not the first time a body has grown imperfectly,” Merur said, her voice low. “But I should have seen the signs long before I entered it. Someone must have concealed them from me! It is impossible that this has happened through mere incompetence.

“I have dealt with the technicians. I have rooted out any disloyalty in Tjenu. But I cannot say the same of all Hehut, let alone all of Nu. And this body of mine will last only a few months longer, but no suitable replacement, one untampered with by traitors, will be ready for a year or more. And I cannot afford to leave Nu rulerless for so long! My Eyes I trust—you and Dihaut, certainly, after all this time. The Justified are for the most part reliable, and the single-lived know that Dihaut will judge them. But I have never been gone for more than a few days at a time. If this throne is empty longer, it may encourage the very few wayward to stir up the single-lived, and if, in my absence, enough among the Justified can be led astray—no. I cannot be gone so long unless I am certain of order.”

Dismayed, Het snarled. “Sovereign, what do you expect me to do about any of this?”

“What you’ve always done! Protect Nu. All trace of unrest, of disorder, must be prevented. You’ve rid Nu of rebellion before. I need you to do it again.”

That shining silver river, the fishers, the lilies and birds had all seemed so peaceful. So much as they should be, when Het and Dihaut had flown in. “Unrest? What’s the cause this time?”

“The cause!” Merur exclaimed, exasperated. “There is no *cause*. There never has been! The worthy I give eternal life and health; they need only reach out their hands for whatever they desire! The

unworthy are here and gone, and they have all they need and occupation enough, or if not, well, they seal their own fate. There has never been any *cause*, and yet it keeps happening—plots, rumors, mutterings of discontent. My newest Eye”—Merur did not notice, or affected not to notice, Het’s reaction to that—“is fierce and efficient. I do not doubt her loyalty. But I am afraid she doesn’t have your imagination. Your vision. Your *anger*. Two years ago I sent her out to deal with this, and she returned saying there was no trouble of any consequence! She doesn’t *understand*! Where does this keep coming from? Who is planting such ideas in the minds of my people? Root it out, Het. Root it out from among my people, trace it back to its origin, and destroy it so that Nu can rest secure while my next body grows. So that we can at last have the peace and security I have always striven for.”

“Sovereign of Nu,” growled Het. “I’ll do my best.”

What choice did she have, after all?

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She should have gone right to Dihaut. The first place to look for signs of trouble would be among the Animas of the recently dead. But she was still out of sorts with Dihaut, still resented their summoning her back here. They’d made her share their company on the long flight back to Hehut and never mentioned that Merur had *replaced* her. They might have warned her, and they hadn’t. She wasn’t certain she could keep her temper with her sib, just now. Which maybe was why they’d kept silent about it, but still.

Besides, that other Eye had doubtless done the obvious first thing, and gone to Dihaut herself. And to judge from what Merur had said, Dihaut must have found nothing, or nothing to speak of. They

would give Het the same answer. No point asking again.

She wanted time alone. Time that was hers. She didn't miss the cold—already her thick fur was thinning without any conscious direction on her part. But she did miss the solitude, and the white landscape stretching out seemingly forever, silent except for the wind and her own heart, the hiss of blood in her ears. There was nothing like that here.

She left Tjenu and walked down to the river in the warm early-evening sunlight. Willows shaded the banks, and the lilies in the occasional pool, red and purple and gold, were closing. The scent of water and flowers seized her, plucking at the edges of some memory. Small brown fishing boats sat in neat rows on the opposite bank, waiting for morning. The long, sleek shape of some Justified Noble's barque floated in the middle of the channel, leaf green, gilded, draped with hangings and banners of blue and yellow and white.

She startled two children chasing frogs in the shallows. "Noble," the larger of them said, bowing, pushing the smaller child beside them into some semblance of a bow. "How can we serve you?"

*Don't notice my presence*, she thought, but of course that was impossible. "Be as you were. I'm only out for a walk." And then, considering the time, "Shouldn't you be home having dinner?"

"We'll go right away," said the older child.

The smaller, voice trembling, said, "Please don't kill us, Noble Het."

Het frowned, and looked behind her, only to see Great Among Millions a short way off, peering at her from behind a screen of

willow leaves. "Why would I do such a thing?" Het asked the child. "Are you rebels, or criminals?"

The older child grabbed the younger one's arm, held it tight. "The Noble Het kills who she pleases," they said. The smaller child's eyes filled with tears. Then both children prostrated themselves. "How fair is your face, beautiful Het!" the older child cried into the mud. "The powerful, the wise and loving Eye of the One Sovereign! You see everything and strike where you wish! You were gone for a long time, but now you've returned and Hehut rejoices."

She wanted to reassure them that she hadn't come down to the river to kill them. That being late for dinner was hardly a capital offense. But the words wouldn't form in her mouth. "I don't strike where I wish," she said instead. "I strike the enemies of Nu."

"May we go, beautiful one?" asked the elder child, and now their voice was trembling too. "You commanded us to go home to dinner, and we only want to obey you!"

She opened her mouth to ask this child's name, seized as she was with a sudden inexplicable desire to mention it to Dihaut, to ask them to watch for this child when they passed through judgment, to let Dihaut know she'd been favorably impressed. So well-spoken, even if it was just a hasty assemblage of formulaic phrases, of songs and poetry they must have heard. But she feared asking would only terrify the child further. "I'm only out for a walk, child," she growled, uncomfortably resentful of this attention, even as she'd enjoyed the child's eloquence. "Go home to dinner."

"Thank you, beautiful one!" The elder child scrambled to their feet, pulled the smaller one up with them.

“Thank you!” piped the smaller child. And they both turned and fled. Het watched them go, and then resumed her walk along the riverside. But the evening had been soured, and soon she turned back to Tjenu.

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The Thirty-Six met her in their accustomed place, a chamber in Tjenu walled with malachite and lapis, white lily patterns laid into the floor. There were chairs and benches along the edge of the room, but the Thirty-Six stood stiff and straight in the center, six rows of six, white linen kilts perfectly pressed, a gold and silver star on each brow.

“Eye of Merur,” said the first of the Thirty-Six. “We’re glad you’re back.”

“They’re glad you’re back,” whispered Great Among Millions, just behind Het’s right shoulder. “*They* didn’t spend the time in a box.”

Each of the Thirty-Six had their own demesne to watch, to protect. Their own assistants and weapons to do the job with. They had been asked to do this sort of thing often enough. Over and over.

Het had used the walk here from the river to compose herself. To take control of her face and her voice. She said, her voice smooth and calm, “The One Ruler of Nu, Creator of All Life on Nu, wishes for us to remove all traces of rebellion, once and for all. To destroy any hint of corruption that makes even the thought of rebellion possible.” No word from the silent and still Thirty-Six. “Tell me, do you know where that lies?”

No reply. Either none of them knew, or they thought the answer so obvious that there was no need to say it. Or perhaps they were



suspicious of Het's outward calm.

Finally, the first of the Thirty-Six said, "Generally, problems begin among the single-lived, Noble Het. But we can't seem to find the person, or the thing, that sends their hearts astray time after time. The only way to accomplish what the One Sovereign has asked of us would be to kill every single-lived soul on Nu and let Dihaut sort them one from another."

"Are you recommending that?" asked Het.

"It would be a terrible disruption," said another of the Thirty-Six.

"There would be so many corpses to dispose of."

"We'd want more single-lived, wouldn't we?" asked yet another.

"Grown new, free of the influence that corrupts them now. It might . . ." She seemed doubtful. "It might take care of the problem, but, Eye of Merur, I don't know how many free tanks we have. And who would take care of the new children? It would be a terrible mess that would last for decades. And I'm not sure that . . . It just seems wrong." She cast a surreptitious glance toward the first of the Thirty-Six. "And forgive me, Noble Eye of Merur, but surely the present concern of the One Sovereign is to reduce chaos and disorder. At the current moment."

So that, at least, was well-enough known, or at least rumored.

"The newest Eye," said Het, closing her still-clawed hands into fists, willing herself to stand still. Willing her voice to stay clear and calm. Briefly she considered leaving here, going back to the river to catch fish and listen to the frogs. "Did she request your assistance? And did you suggest this to her, the eradication of the single-lived so that we could begin afresh?"

"She thought it was too extreme," said the first of the Thirty-Six.

Was that a note of disappointment in her voice? “It seems to me that the Sovereign of Nu found that Eye’s service in this instance to be less than satisfactory.”

“You think we should do it?” Het asked her.

“If it would rid us of the trouble that arises over and over,” the first of the Thirty-Six agreed.

“If I order this, then,” Het persisted, clenching her hands tighter, “you would do it?”

“Yes,” the foremost of the Thirty-Six agreed.

“Children, as well?” Het asked. Didn’t add, *Even polite, well-spoken children who maybe only wanted some time to themselves, in the quiet by the river?*

“Of course,” the first of the Thirty-Six replied. “If they’re worthy, they’ll be back. Eventually.”

With a growl Het sprang forward, hands open, claws flashing free of her fingertips, and slashed the throat of the first of the Thirty-Six. As she fell, blood splashed onto the torso and the spotless linen kilt of the Thirty-Six beside her. For a moment, Het watched the blood pump satisfyingly out of the severed artery to pool on the white-lilled floor, and thought of the walsel she’d killed the day before.

But this was no time to indulge herself. She looked up and around. “Anyone else?”

Great Among Millions skittered up beside her. “Noble Het! Eye of Merur! There is currently a backlog of Justified waiting for resurrection. And none of your Thirty-Six have bodies in the tanks.”

Het shrugged. The Thirty-Six were all among the Justified. “She’ll be back. Eventually.” At her feet the injured Thirty-Six breathed her choking last, and for the first time in decades Het felt a sure, gratifying satisfaction. She had been made for this duty, made to enjoy it, and she had nothing left to herself but that, it seemed. “The single-lived come and go,” she declared to the remaining Thirty-Six. “Who has remained the same all this time?”

Silence.

“Oh dear,” said Great Among Millions.

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The nurturing and protection of Nu had always required a good deal of death, and none of the Thirty-Six had ever been squeamish about it, but so often in recent centuries that death had been accomplished by impersonal, secondhand means—narrowly targeted poison, or engineered microbes let loose in the river. But Het—Het had spent the last several decades hunting huge, sharp-tusked walsel, two or three times the mass of a human, strong and surprisingly fast.

None of the remaining Thirty-Six would join her. Fifteen of them fled. The remaining twenty she left dead, dismembered, their blood pooling among the lilies, and then she went down to the riverbank.

The single-lived fled before her—or before Great Among Millions, not following discreetly now but close behind her, token and certification of who she was. The little fishing boats pulled hastily for the other bank, and their single-lived crews dropped nets and lines where they stood, ran from the river, or cowered in the bottom of their small craft.

Het ignored them all and swam for the blue-and-yellow barque.

The single-lived servants didn't try to stop her as she pulled herself aboard and strode across the deck. After all, where Het went the necessities of order followed. Opposing the Eye of Merur was not only futile, but suicidal in the most ultimate sense.

Streaming river water, claws extended, Het strode to where the barque's Justified owners sat at breakfast, a terrified servant standing beside the table, a tray holding figs, cheese, and a bowl of honey shaking in her trembling hands.

The three Justified stared at Het as she stood before them, soaking wet, teeth bared. Then they saw Great Among Millions close behind her. "Protector of Hehut," said one, a man, as all three rose. "It's an honor." There was, perhaps, the smallest hint of trepidation in his voice. "Of course we'll make all our resources available to you. I'll have the servants brought—"

Het sprang forward, sliced open his abdomen with her claws, then tore his head from his neck. She made a guttural, happy sound, dropped the body, and tossed the head away.

The servant dropped the tray and fled, the bowl of honey bouncing and rolling, fetching up against the corpse's spilled, sliced intestines.

Het sank her teeth into the second Justified's neck, felt him struggle and choke, the exquisite salt tang of his blood in her mouth. This was oh so much better than hunting walsel. She tore away a mouthful of flesh and trachea.

The third Justified turned to flee, but then stopped and cried, "I am loyal, Noble Eye! The Noble Dihaut will vindicate me!"

Het broke her neck and then stood a moment contemplating the feast before her, these three bodies, warm and bloody and deliciously fresh. She hadn't gotten to do this often enough, in recent centuries. She lifted her head and roared her satisfaction.

A breeze filled and lifted the barque's blue and yellow and white linen hangings. The servants had fled; there was no one alive on the deck but Het and Great Among Millions now. "Rejoice!" it piped. "The Protector of Hehut brings order to Nu!"

Het grinned, and then dove over the side, into the river, on her way to find more of the Justified.

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The day wore on, and more of the Justified met bloody, violent ends at Het's hands—and teeth. At first they submitted; after all, they were Justified, and their return was assured, so long as they were obedient subjects of the One Sovereign. But as evening closed in, the Justified began to try to defend themselves.

And more of the houses were empty, their owners and servants fled. But in this latest, on the outskirts of Hehut, all airy windowed corridors and courtyards, Het found two Justified huddled in the corner of a white-and-gold-painted room, a single-lived servant standing trembling between them and Het.

"Move," growled Het to the servant.

"Justification!" cried one of the Justified. Slurring a bit—was she drunk?

"We swear!" slurred the other. Drunk as well, then.

Neither of them had the authority to make such a promise. Even if they had, the numbers of Justified dead ensured that no newly

Justified would see resurrection for centuries, if ever. Despite all of this, the clearly terrified servant stayed.

Het roared her anger. Picked up the single-lived—they were strong, and large as single-lived went, but no match for Het. She set them aside, roughly, and sank her claws into one of the Justified, her teeth into the other. Screams filled her ears, and blood filled her mouth as she tore away a chunk of flesh.

All day her victims had provided her with more than her fill of blood, and so she had drunk sparingly so far. But now, enraged even further by the cowardice of these Justified—of their craven, empty promise to their servant—she drank deep, and still filled with rage, she tore the Justified into bloody fragments that spattered the floor and the wall.

She stopped a moment to appreciate her handiwork. With one furred hand she wiped blood and scraps of muscle off her tingling lips.

Her tingling lips.

The two Justified had barely moved, crouched in their corner. They had slurred their speech, as though they were drunk.

Or as though they were poisoned.

She knew what sort of poison made her lips tingle like this, and her fingertips, now she noticed. Though it would take far more neurotoxin to make her feel this much than even a few dozen skinny, gape-mawed fish would provide. How much had she drunk?

Het looked around the blood-spattered room. The single-lived servant was gone. Great Among Millions stood silent and

motionless, its tall, thin body crusted with dried blood. Nothing to what covered Het.

She went out into the garden, with its pools and fig trees and the red desert stretching beyond. And found two of Merur's lily standards—She Brings Life and Different Ages. Along with Months and Years. And Dihaut.

"Well, sib," they said, with their regretful smile. "They always send me after you. Everyone else is too afraid of you. I told the One Sovereign it was better not to send forces you'd only chew up. Poison is much easier, and much safer for us."

Het swayed, suddenly exhausted. Dihaut. She'd never expected them to actively take her side, when it came to defying Merur, but she hadn't expected them to poison her.

What *had* she expected? That Merur would approve her actions? No, she'd known someone would come after her, one way or another. And then?

"You can try to alter your metabolism," Dihaut continued, "but I doubt you can manage it quickly enough. The dose was quite high. We needed to be absolutely sure. Honestly, I'm surprised you're still on your feet."

"You," said Het, not certain what she had to say beyond that.

She Gives Life and Different Ages skittered up and stopped a meter or so apart, facing Het. Between them an image of Merur flickered into visibility. Not snakelike, as Het knew her current body to be, but as she appeared in images all over Nu: tall, golden, face and limbs smooth and symmetrical, as though cut from basalt and gilded.

“Het!” cried Merur. “My own Eye! What can possibly have made you so angry that you would take leave of your senses and betray the life and peace of Nu in this way?”

“I was carrying out your orders, Sovereign of Nu!” Het snarled.

“You wanted me to remove all possibility of rebellion in Hehut.”

“And all of Nu!” piped Great Among Millions, behind Het. Still covered in dried blood.

“I had not thought such sickness and treason possible from anyone Justified as long as you have been,” said Merur. “Dihaut.”

“Sovereign,” said Dihaut, and their smile grew slightly wider. Het growled.

Merur said, “You have said to me before today that I have been too generous. That I have allowed too many of the long-Justified to escape judgment. I did not believe you, but now, look! My Eyes have not been subject to judgment in centuries, and that, I think, has been a mistake. I would like it known that not even the highest of the Justified will be excused if they defy me. Het, before you die, hear Dihaut’s judgment.”

She was exhausted, and her lips had gone numb. But that was all.

Was she really poisoned? Well, she was, but only a little. Or so it seemed, so far. Maybe she could overpower Dihaut, rip out their throat, and flee. The standards wouldn’t stop her.

And then what? Where would she go, that Merur would not eventually follow?

“Sovereign of Nu,” said Dihaut, bowing toward Merur’s simulacrum. “I will do as you command.” They turned to Het. “Het, sib, your behavior this past day is extreme even for you. It calls for



judgment, as our Sovereign has said. It is that judgment that keeps order in Hehut, on all of Nu. And perhaps if everyone, every life, endured the same strict judgment as the single-lived pass through, these things would never have happened.”

Silence. Not a noise from Great Among Millions, behind Het. Over Dihaut’s shoulder, Months and Years was utterly still.

“The One Sovereign has given me the duty of making those judgments. And I must make them, no matter my personal feelings about each person I judge, for the good of Nu.”

“That is so,” agreed Merur’s simulacrum.

“Then from now on, everyone—single-lived or Justified, whoever they may be—every Anima that passes through Tjenu must meet the same judgment. No preference will be given to those who have been resurrected before, not in judgment, and not in the order of resurrection. From now on, everyone must meet judgment equally. Including the Sovereign of Nu.”

The simulacrum of Merur frowned. “I did not hear you correctly just now, Dihaut.”

They turned to Merur. “You’ve just said that it was a mistake not to subject your Eyes to judgment, and called on me to judge Het. But I can’t judge her without seeing that what she has done to the Justified this past day is only what you have always asked her to do to the single-lived. She has done precisely what you demanded of her. It wasn’t the fact that Het was unthreatened by judgment that led her to do these things—it was you, yourself.”

“You!” spat Merur’s simulacrum. “You dare to judge me!”

“You gave me that job,” said Dihaut, Months and Years still

motionless behind them. “And I will do it. You won’t be resurrected on Nu without passing my judgment. I have made certain of this, within the past hour.”

“Then it was you behind this conspiracy all along!” cried Merur.

“But you can’t prevent me returning. I will awake on *Aeons*.”

“*Aeons* is far, far overhead,” observed Het, no less astonished at what she’d just heard than by the fact that she was still alive.

“And there was no conspiracy,” said Dihaut. “Or there wasn’t until you imagined one into being. Your own Eyes told you as much. But this isn’t the first time you’ve demanded the slaughter of the innocent so that you can feel more secure. Het only gave me an opportunity, and an example. I will do as you command me. I will judge. Withdraw to *Aeons* if you like. The people who oversee your resurrection on Nu, who have the skills and the access, won’t be resurrected themselves until you pass my judgment.” They gave again that half-regretful smile. “You’ve already removed some of those who would have helped you, when you purged Tjenu of what you assumed was disloyalty to you, Sovereign.” The image of Merur flickered out of sight, and She Brings Life and Different Ages scuttled away.

“I’m not poisoned,” said Het.

“I should hope not!” exclaimed Dihaut. “No, you left your supper, or your breakfast, or whatever it was, on my flier. I couldn’t help being curious about it.” They shrugged. “There wasn’t much of that neurotoxin in the animal you left behind, but there was enough to suggest that something in that food chain was very toxic. And knowing you, you’d have changed your metabolism rather than just avoid eating whatever it was. Merur, of course, didn’t know

that. So when she said she wanted you stopped, I made the suggestion. . . .” They waved one silver hand.

“So all that business with the single-lived servant, promising her Justification if she would defend those two . . .”

“This late in the day, the Justified were already beginning to resist you—or try, anyway,” Dihaut confirmed, with equanimity. “If these had stood meekly as you slaughtered them, you might have suspected something. And you might not have drunk enough blood to feel the poison. I had to make you even more angry at the people you killed than you already were.”

Het growled. “So you *tricked* me.”

“You’re not the only one of Merur’s Eyes, sib, to find that if you truly served in the way you were meant to, you could no longer serve Merur’s aims. It’s been a long, long time since I realized that for all Merur says I’m to judge the dead with perfect, impartial wisdom, I can never do that so long as she rules here. She has always assumed that her personal good is the good of Nu. But those are not the same thing. Which I think you have recently realized.”

“And now *you’ll* be Sovereign over Nu,” Het said. “Instead of Merur.”

“I suppose so,” agreed Dihaut. “For the moment, anyway. But maybe not openly—it would be useful if Merur still called herself the One Sovereign but stayed above on *Aeons* and let us do our jobs without interference.” They shrugged again and gave that half smile of theirs. “Maybe she can salvage her pride by claiming credit for having tricked you into stopping your over-enthusiastic obedience, and saving everyone. In fact, it might be best if she can

pretend everything's going on as it was before. We'll still be her Eyes at least in name, and we can make what changes we like."

Het would have growled at them again, but she realized she was too tired. It had been a long, long day. "I don't want to be anyone's Eye. I want to be out of this." She didn't miss the cold, but she wanted that solitude. That silence. Or the illusion of it, which was all she'd really had. "I want to be somewhere that isn't here."

"Are you sure?" Dihaut asked. "You've become quite popular among the single-lived, today. They call you beautiful, and fierce, and full of mercy."

She thought of the children by the river. "It's meaningless. Just old poetry rearranged." Still she felt it, the gratification that Dihaut had surely meant her to feel. She was glad that she'd managed to spare those lives. That the single-lived of Hehut might remember her not for having slaughtered so many of them, but for having spared their lives. Or perhaps for both. "I want to go."

"Then go, sib." Dihaut waved one silver hand. "I'll make sure no one troubles you."

"And the unauthorized lives there? Or elsewhere on Nu?"

"No one will trouble them either," Dihaut confirmed equably. "So long as they don't pose a threat to Hehut. They never did pose a threat to Hehut, only to Merur's desire for power over every life on Nu."

"Thank you." Her skin itched, her fur growing thicker just at the thought of the cold. "I don't think I want you to come get me. When I die, I mean. Or at least, wait a while. A long time." Dihaut gestured assent, and Het continued, "I suppose you'll judge me,

then. Who'll judge you, when the time comes?"

"That's a good question," replied Dihaut. "I don't know. Maybe you, sib. Or maybe by then no one will have to pass my judgment just to be allowed to live. We'll see."

That idea was so utterly alien to Het that she wasn't sure how to respond to it. "I want some peace and quiet," she said. "Alone. Apart." Dihaut gestured assent.

"Don't leave me behind, Noble Het!" piped Great Among Millions. "Beautiful Het! Fierce Het! Het full of mercy! I don't want them to put me in a box in a storeroom again!"

"Come on, then," she said, impatiently, and her standard skittered happily after her as she went to find a flier to take her away from Hehut, back to the twilit ice, and to silence without judgment.