Snapshots From The Dzaqtlas

1. The Water Bearer (Kliazhnamachrnad)

Thirty-seven. I dump first one bucket and then the other into the trough. The sun is warm at the top of the stair, unlike the deep cold further down the well. I take a few deep breaths, gaze at the casing of the broken pump next to the trough, then shoulder the yoke again and head down the slippery stair towards the water level far below.

Seventy-three. That’s how many steps it is down to the water. It’s easier heading down, but it’s too easy to hurry and fall down the stairs. At best it’s a moment of terror and then a plunge into the icy water below. At worst, a broken leg- or neck- like Azo last five-day. It’s meant double shifts for me, since Tliakh’s twisted ankle hasn’t fully healed. She insists on taking at least a half-shift here, hauling water up from the well. It’s the last one with good water for the town. The other two have the bitter, poison water we use to flush the latrines and wash clothes and dishes and ourselves. Tliakh is working at hauling bad water up from one now, since we need less of it and it’s not as deep.

Not a lot of washing going on anyway. There isn’t much food left, so the people have little energy to wash their clothes, let alone themselves. The windmills still generate power, so some washing machines still work, but the bad water wells never had automatic pumps. The one electrical pump we had quit the five-day before last. It’s me and my sister Tliakh and cousin Batriz taking turns hauling the good water up from the deep water table. We used to have Azo and Qazy too, before Azo slipped and broke his neck and Qazy got the blotches and headed down the hill. I have no idea if she’s even still alive. Keiko and little Franzh miss their mother, and I miss my wife . . .I fill the buckets at the bottom of the well, wiping tears away with the ragged sleeve of my tunic, and begin the thirty-eighth climb of the shift. The people need water.