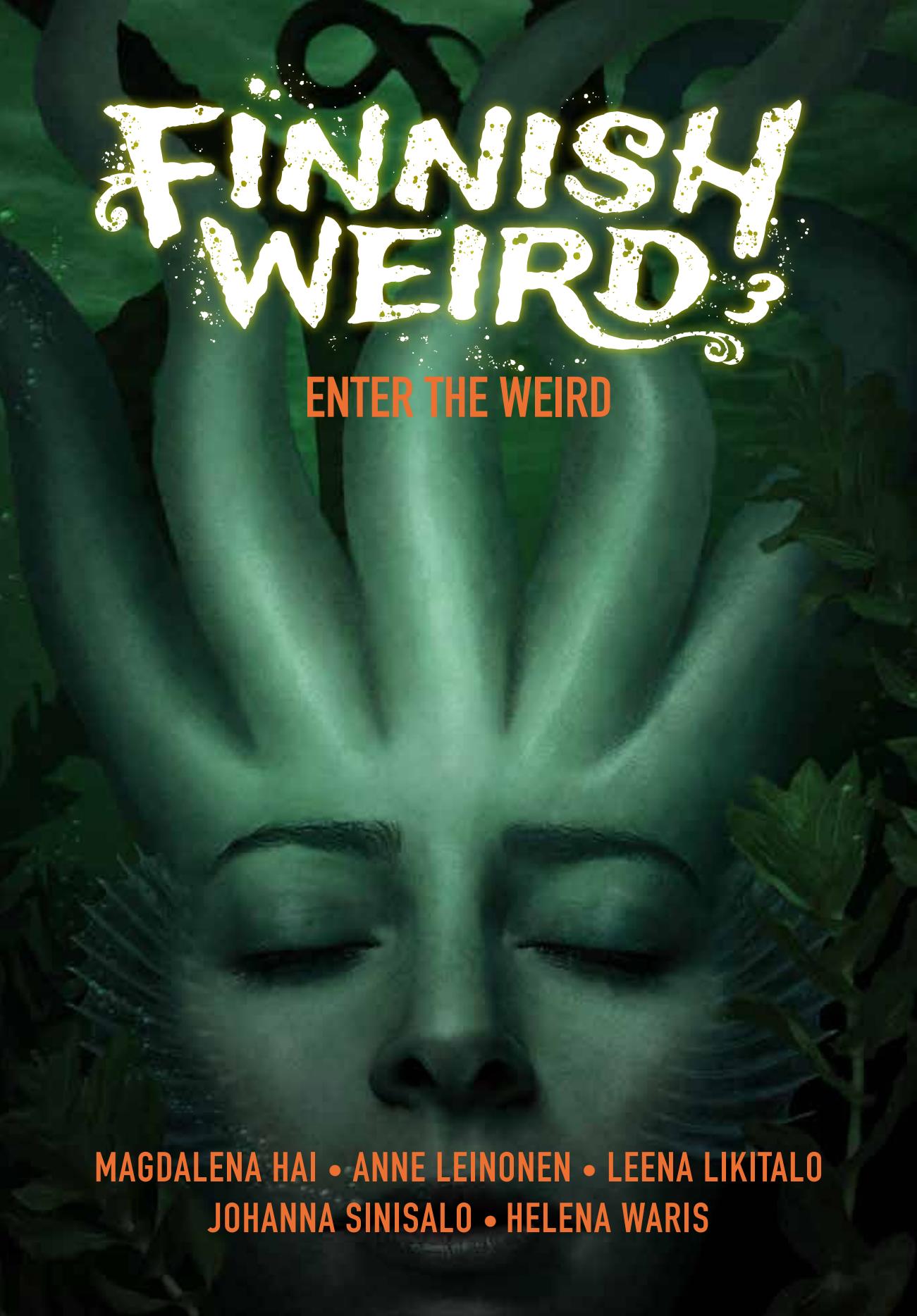


FINNISH WEIRD³



ENTER THE WEIRD

MAGDALENA HAI • ANNE LEINONEN • LEENA LIKITALO
JOHANNA SINISALO • HELENA WARIS

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You rule!

FROM THE SUB-EDITOR

My, it's bright up here, isn't it? Oh, hello there! Editor-in-Chief **Toni Jerrman** decided to let me out of the sub-editor basement this time around to get a little breath of fresh air and write a little bit about the current state of Finnish Weird – both the magazine and the movement.

Here in Finland, we've known for quite some time that we have a thriving speculative fiction scene. This magazine was started with the goal of helping the wider world discover our particular brand of weirdness. Now that we've reached our third issue, it's wonderful to see that the world has started to take notice.

Finnish authors of speculative fiction are being translated at an increasing rate, and based on the response, it seems that people are liking what they're reading. Particular highlights of the past year have included the publication of a massive retrospective collection of **Leena Krohn**'s fiction (full disclosure: I was a consulting editor in that particular project) and **Johanna Sinisalo**'s latest novel, *Core of the Sun*, to widespread critical acclaim. It has also been extremely gratifying to see other authors we Finnish weirdlings know and love, such as **Emmi Itäranta**, **Maria Turtschaninoff**, **Anne Leinonen**, and **Pasi Jääskeläinen** being published and finding audiences in English (among other languages) beyond the pages of this magazine. If you like what you read here, I strongly recommend that you seek out these authors' works to continue your journey down this particular rabbit hole.

Speaking of strange journeys, this issue yet again provides a great cross-section of weird stories from a number of talented Finnish voices. The stories take their characters from the familiar territory of their lives into stranger realms. From the Queen of Finnish Weird Johanna Sinisalo herself, we have the story of a survivor in a ruined world who discovers that new masters have taken over, and they have a plan. Anne Leinonen brings us a story of a young girl in times past who finds her strength in the bonds of blood and the old pagan powers of Finland. In **Magdalena Hai**'s story, a struggling heavy metal band



finds themselves neck deep in supernatural trouble in a swamp with a foreboding name. **Leena Likitalo** brings us a woman approaching the end of her days who transgresses the rules to give new life to an old love. **Helena Waris** provides us with a peek into her award-winning novel, in which a young boy must find his way home after awakening in a strange land with no memory of who he is.

The previous two issues of Finnish Weird are still available for free in epub and pdf formats at www.finnishweird.net, and other works by the authors I've mentioned can be found at online booksellers, and maybe even at your local bookstore. So, what are you waiting for? Come join us. Enter the Weird.

J. ROBERT TUPASELA



ANNE LEINONEN

CORPSECAUL, GHASTBRIDLE

Tuomikki guessed something was very wrong. The baby made no sound. Mother ordered Tuomikki to bring hot water, and Tuomikki brought a pailful from the sauna stove. It was too dark in the sauna for Tuomikki to see clearly. Mother grunted and huffed and washed the new arrival, but eventually put it on the sauna bench where it lay unmoving.

Now Tuomikki could see. It was a boy, but the baby's skin was covered with dark fuzz. It had a human face, but its pointed fingers ended in claws, the hands of a beast. It had a pale mark on its forehead, a corpsecaul. Blue veins ran between its nose and eyes, a ghastbridle. Tuomikki didn't have the heart to speak.

"Illborn," her mother cursed. Tuomikki had listened to her mother's screams and pain, but everything had been over quickly. When the baby had come into the world and Tuomikki had helped by pulling it out by its shoulders, she had only seen the blood and vernix covering the child. She should have seen something was wrong.

Tuomikki still had to help pull out the afterbirth. Her mother didn't cry, just pushed on her lower stomach, over the womb, but Tuomikki knew. Father had wanted a boy ever since the last one had suddenly taken ill and died.

"What is it, what's wrong with it?" Tuomikki worried.

Mother boxed her ear. "It's nothing! Nothing!"

Mother wrapped the afterbirth and the newborn in rags. "Don't you go telling your father a thing now. If he asks, you say it went in the swamp and that's all you know."

Mother told Tuomikki to wash the blood out of the sauna while she took the back path to the swamp. Beyond the water-logged tussocks and

duckboards was the place where they sank dead calves and enemies.

Tuomikki waited in the cabin and darned her father's trousers. Time moved at a crawl, the evening turned to dusk. Tuomikki's mind wandered in the swamp with the newborn and she tried to comfort herself. The mat of moss would make a good bed for its eternal sleep, the forest folk would take it with them. Not that her mother was likely to leave it on the moss, she would like as not throw it into a treacherous bog pool.

A cuckoo called in the yard. Tuomikki counted, as they said the cuckoo called out the number of the listener's years. The baby hadn't had the chance to hear a single one.

Mother came home first and put a fire on in the stove. Mother's face was set in the same expression she had when their milking cow had died of some unknown sickness. They didn't say a word to each other. The secret burned at the corners of her mouth, but Tuomikki kept it locked inside. That had always been the wisest course.

Father didn't come home until dusk had fully covered the land. He put his coat on the hook and wiped sap from his brow with his shirt cuff.

"Well, which is it?" he asked. He could see that his wife's waist had narrowed.

"It was a girl, but stillborn. I took it out to the swamp. No point in keeping it around."

Father sat down at the table and ate his porridge with a seething look on his face. He looked exhausted from the clearing work. A storm had brought down some good pines on the neighbor's land that had needed saving. Looked after right, they'd make fine logs for a cabin.

Father eyed Tuomikki, the firstborn, across the table, and a look of despise crept to his lips.

Tuomikki cast her gaze down. Her father had never felt like a father, more like a malevolent spirit that used all his time to torment Tuomikki.

"Tuomas's wife's loins produce boys," he said to mother. "Twins even. What is it that's gone and poisoned yours? All the children you have die."

"I did my best. I even used herbs to help it along."

"Better to not use those herbs next time." Mother pursed her lips and rubbed her back.

Father's gaze lingered on Tuomikki. "That little woman needs marrying off, as well. Keep her from eating our food."

"She earns her keep here," mother answered.

"All the same. We'd get a good sum for her."

Tuomikki couldn't sleep. When she closed her eyes, she could see the large, blue eyes of the newborn calling to her. There it was in the swamp, tossed away in disgrace.

Even though it had had the mark on it, she knew it had been breathing, but soon the night frost would take it, or if not that, hunger.

Tuomikki turned over in bed. He mother breathed quietly beside her. Father was snoring in the other room, he treated himself to his own soft straw mattress. Father had held off and left mother alone, but had mumbled that they would try again as soon as her bleeding let up.

Tuomikki couldn't wait. If she didn't see to the matter, it would bother her for the rest of her life. Even though she was sure her mother had said the spell of release and the words of passage, it wasn't all settled. The little one had been mistreated. Tuomikki had always been open to nature's signs, able to hear messages from the underworld. The child had to be taken across with honor or the baby's soul would be left to wander and haunt the Earth.

She fetched her coat and boots. The cabin door creaked shut behind her. The path started by the sauna. It wound through a small wood to the bog, which was wet even during dry spells. Tuomikki had often played on the duckboards as a child, but her mother had put a stop to that right quick. One misstep and you could find yourself waist deep in the mossy bog and not be able to pull yourself out.

On the border between firm land and marsh, there was a grave decorated by rocks gathered from the stream. The coltsfoot that Tuomikki had planted on it was still in bloom. The last resting place of a little brother.

A mist had risen from the swamp. Cold hands grasped at her limbs and frost crept through the

hollows. Tuomikki placed her feet with care. The swamp was flooded, and in many places the water was a fathom higher than during a dry summer.

Where had mother left her little brother? Was he hidden in the thicket at the edge of the swamp or deeper in, where the forest turned scrubby and the ground soggy and dangerous to walk on? Tuomikki carefully walked farther onto the rolling moss, some way beyond the end of the duckboards. The smell of marsh tea entered her nose, the night crickets chittered. There were some insects, but the summer swarms hadn't arrived yet.

Then, a sound. Light breathing, almost nothing. Tuomikki pushed aside the brush and saw a pale bundle amongst the heather. Mother hadn't dared to throw the child into a bog pool like some ne'er-do-well, but had left him as an offering to the forest animals.

Tuomikki reached out and took the bundle up in her arms. She pressed her face close to the baby's face. He was having a great deal of trouble breathing, a freak of nature. He was deformed, for sure, but the fur had shielded him from the cold. His small hands and fingers were perfect, beautiful with dainty claws, and now they were squeezing Tuomikki's finger.

Tuomikki took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and let her mind take wing. Each breath drew strength from her surroundings. Nature stopped, blood rushed in her ears. She breathed out and blew strength into the baby, nourished it from the edge of exhaustion, fed away its weakness.

The baby whimpered.

Tuomikki opened her eyes.

The ground around her had turned brown, the grass had dried and withered. Nothing would grow there for some time.

She hoped no one would notice. Mother had forbidden her from using *väki*, magic. Men didn't like women's magic, and her father would kill her if he found out she could bend things to her will. Only men were allowed to use magic, girls were meant to know better than to do so.

The child opened his eyes. His gaze was bluer than spring water, piercing and strong. It bored into his big sister's face, seeking her eyes. Tuomikki was sure that the little one was smiling at her. Her brother recognized her.

Tuomikki carried the child closer to home. In the middle of the swamp, the lowest branches of a young spruce formed a little hut where she laid the baby down. She made a bed for him from moss and wrapped her slip around him for protection.

"Stay here," Tuomikki whispered to him. "Be safe here, hidden from eyes and ears."

The baby stared at her intently. He pursed and smacked his lips. Tuomikki lifted the hem of her shirt and pressed the child to her breast. The baby grasped and began tugging on her nipple with his mouth. He suckled so hard Tuomikki's nipples ached, but she let him suckle at nothing until he fell asleep. Then Tuomikki rose and hurried home. She was feverishly thinking about what to take the child for food to keep him alive.

Father and mother slept, breathing heavily. Tuomikki crept into bed and pulled the blanket over herself. Her feet were cold, but she didn't dare look for socks.

In the small hours, Tuomikki woke to an ache in her breasts. When she sat up, the front of her shirt became soaked with milk.

Tuomikki spent her days doing chores at the croft, shepherding the sheep, cooking, whatever needed doing. At night she would run across the swamp to the spruce tree to care for the baby. The child grew faster than a normal baby. At one week, it was supporting its own head, and at two weeks was grasping Tuomikki with his hands. At one month, he could sit up. At two months he could crawl, and by three, stand up. Tuomikki went to see him every night, nursed him from both breasts and brought whatever scraps of food she could manage to sneak out of the house.

The boy never said a word, but took everything Tuomikki could provide. She would soften the pieces of hard rye bread in her mouth before feeding them to the baby with her fingers. He listened to Tuomikki's low voice as she told him about her life. She started with her dead brother and all of the stillborn children that her mother, choked by tears, had buried in the swamp. She spoke about her harsh father, and her mother who would quietly cower under every blow. Tuomikki painted a picture for the child of long, cold winters, short, intense summers filled with biting insects, and handicrafts done at the back of the cabin, though it was too dark to see. Not everything was miserable, though. There was the swamp and the animals that lived there, there were the sheep and their gentle bleating. There were the ravens that flew past the croft and the streaks of cloud in the sky.

Sometimes, Tuomikki would look out of the corner of her eye at the child's furry skin and his eyebrows that joined in the middle, giving him an

eternally contemplative look. The child's smooth fur shined in the clear summer light. Tuomikki held him in her lap, and he purred like a cat. At other times he would whimper like a dog when Tuomikki returned after having been gone a long time. She brought a comb with her from the cabin and used it to sort out his locks, which had grown long. His fur was like curly hair on his shoulders, back and buttocks. The fuzz on his hands and feet was short and dense. He didn't seem cold, and the insects left him alone.

Mother would give Tuomikki sidelong glances, as if she sensed something had changed. It was not easy for Tuomikki to visit the child. Though her parents slept soundly, there was always the danger that her father would wake, come to climb on top of her mother, and discover his daughter was missing. Once, her mother asked from in bed where Tuomikki had been. Tuomikki said she had just been doing her business. She was always afraid she would be caught. Her shirt was wet with milk, and her mother complained about her shirt always getting wet. Tuomikki made a habit of washing her face in the stream and making sure to get water on her shirt to hide the truth.

Tiredness gnawed at Tuomikki, and sometimes she felt as if she was working in a mist in which night and day were one, in which light and shadow had become sisters.

As autumn approached, the child began to explore his surroundings. He wasn't always at the spruce hut when Tuomikki came to look for him. Tuomikki had made it clear that she nursed at night, so if the boy wanted to eat, he had better be at the swamp.

When Tuomikki could no longer produce milk, she offered the boy her breast anyway. The child gnawed with his teeth, and her breast began to bleed. Tuomikki was frightened at first, but the child didn't seem to mind, swallowing ever drop it could.

This regular bloodletting improved Tuomikki's health. Her steps became lighter and her strength grew to the point that she could carry heavy firewood into the yard on her own. When the cow calved, she was able to pull the calf out of the womb without help. Her monthly blood stopped coming, but she wasn't surprised by that. The child took so much, but also gave back. Tuomikki had but to think of the child in her lap and she could bear all her father's ill words and her mother's silence.

One bright autumn morning, Tuomikki's father burst in the door to the cabin and snatched his bow from the wall. He cursed long and hard. "A lamb has been mauled to death."

"Perhaps it was a honey-paw," mother said, careful to avoid calling a bear by its true name. "This is the time they hoard up for their winter sleep."

"It's a wolf," father said. "We haven't had any of those around here for a long time."

Tuomikki hid her fear and touched her hand to her breast. The child had sharp teeth and often bit her, but seemed to be satisfied with what Tuomikki brought him, the offerings of her teats and scraps of bread. But what if he wasn't satisfied and was secretly hunting for himself?

Tuomikki followed her parents to the pasture. There, amongst the others, lay a lamb that had been torn open, its guts spread around it, ribs gnawed clean. Father shooed the other sheep away and knelt by the carcass.

"A wolf would have eaten its prey or taken it away," Tuomikki's mother said.

"I'll set the traps," father said.

Tuomikki was not frightened, though she knew how important the sheep were to them. They provided milk and wool, their meat kept them alive through the winter. She looked upon the dead lamb and realised that she saw it as nothing more than an empty shell.

Tuomikki felt dizzy. Power stirred in her head and limbs. A killing had taken place here, blood had been spilt, and the entire chain of events was there for her to read. She sensed Tuoni, the river between worlds, flowing nearby. She felt the lamb's death struggle against the beast, the wolf's sharp teeth clamped around the lamb's throat, the prey's thrashing limbs and dying twitches. Life escaping with each breath, the prey's eyes glazing over. Most sharply of all, Tuomikki sensed the fear still floating in the air.

The grass in the pasture had been trodden down. The other sheep bleated miserably.

"A wolf is a wolf by nature, and will never learn otherwise," her father said. "It needs killing."

Tuomikki's legs felt heavy, and she was only able to leave that place with difficulty. The smell of blood stuck in her nostrils and filled her head. When she rubbed her breasts, she noticed that blood had seeped from them to soak her shirt.

The farther she got from the pasture, the quicker her steps grew. She ran across the yard to the sauna and the duckboards leading to the swamp. The

moss and mushrooms smelt of rot, water churned under her shoes.

Tuomikki called the child to her. Her voice echoed across the marsh, the curlew's call fell silent. The only sound was the whistling wind. Tuomikki stood and listened until the grass rustled and first a head and then a body rose from the brush. Tuomikki held out her arms and the boy ran to her.

"It wasn't you, was it? Tell me it wasn't!"

The boy shook his head. Tuomikki squeezed him to her chest. "Be careful of my parents, particularly father. He wouldn't understand."

The boy pressed himself against Tuomikki. He felt wiry, his muscles grown. He had become many years older running in the forest. A shiver ran down Tuomikki's spine as she realized the boy had already escaped into a world she could never reach. He had his own life, his own destiny.

Her brother brushed his claws against Tuomikki's arms, which were covered by a rough network of scars, many from years ago. Tuomikki flinched, but lifted the hand off her skin gently.

Autumn was upon them. Tuomikki clothed the child in rags that she had sewn from her own clothes that had become too small and she stole a threadbare shirt from her father. She also brought the child her old shoes, but he paid them no heed. He preferred to keep his toes free, though he did consent to wearing pants and the raggedy shirt. The boy didn't care for the toys Tuomikki brought at all. He liked to listen to Tuomikki tell her stories, and would either sit in her lap or stroke her hair.

Her father set snares in the forest. When his work in the woods was done, he began patrolling his traps with his bow. He was a skilled hunter, and brought home hares, wood grouse, and even a fox, but never a wolf.

Tuomikki felt a chill every time her father took to the forest with his bow. She had warned her brother, but couldn't be sure he had understood the nature of the danger. He seemed to caper through the woods along his own paths, enjoying a life only touched in passing by humans. Sometimes Tuomikki could hear a distant, wistful howling.

In the evenings, her father sat at the cabin's table and glared at Tuomikki from under his brow. It felt as if he has sensed everything Tuomikki had hidden away in her heart. Sometimes he would share news from the other crofts, what had happened to whom. Mother was quiet, as always, at most mentioning some fact of daily life or the weather.



"It's around here all right," her father fumed. His talk always circled back to the dead lamb. "The neighbors have seen tracks. Strange that it's always alone."

Her father hardly spoke of anything else. To him, the forest was now the realm of the beast, and there would be no peace until the wolf had been skinned. Tuomikki no longer dared get up every night to see her brother. He seemed to be able to take care of himself. He certainly didn't seem hungry, though he still took her scraps of bread.

The brilliant colors and mild winds of autumn gave way to wet and miserable rain. November brought a foreboding into limb and mind.

Once, when Tuomikki was returning from picking mushrooms in the forest, she saw a wolf at the end of the path. It jogged lightly in the tall grass, sniffed at the breeze, raised its head. The autumn sun warmed its pelt. Tuomikki admired the animal's noble posture, the curve of its head and the tautness of its body. Had it come with a pack? There was no shortage of wilderness here in which to raise one, lone crofts with sheep and cattle dogs for the thinning.

Then Tuomikki saw its eyes, blue, the eyes of a human.

"Don't come to the cabin," Tuomikki said to it. "Stay away from the traps."

The wolf raised its muzzle to the wind. In front of her eyes, it began to change. The air around it shimmered and warped. The wolf rose up on its hind legs and began to smoothly change shape. Its back paws became stout feet, and its front paws, quick hands – though its claws and pointed fingers refused to change. The fur on the back of its neck became dark hair, its muzzle flattened into a nose. Its blue eyes remained, the boy had the eyes of a beast. His body was naked, but covered in dense fur.

The boy's eyes laughed. Tuomikki didn't know whether to call him over or shoo him away, but the boy raised his nose to the wind and took off. In a moment he had reached the dense edge of the forest and disappeared among the spruce.

When Tuomikki turned around and had taken the few steps to the corner of the sauna, she nearly bumped into her mother.

Her mother grabbed her painfully by the wrists.
"Do you know something about the wolf?"

Tuomikki shook her head.

"You talked to it. What is it?"

Time stretched out between them. There was the croak of a crow. Her mother was still squeezing her

by the wrists, and Tuomikki noticed that a dark fuzz had started growing on her own arms.

"It looked like a creature from the underworld, a freak."

"Don't you recognize your own child?" Tuomikki cried.

Her mother let go her grip. A look of terror spread across her face. Tuomikki couldn't help but feel satisfaction. Words hurt more than fists.

The first snow fell, revealing paw prints around her father's traps. The wolf had dutifully visited every snare, but hadn't set off a single one, not even the ones her father baited with meat.

Her mother had gone out into the swamp to look for cranberries frozen by the coming of winter. Tuomikki was making firewood with a saw and axe. It was hard work, but she had become skilled at it. She could split even a large log with a single blow.

Her brother had grown large, nearly her size now. She seldom saw him now, but Tuomikki could feel his presence. He was never far off. His pack was here, after all.

"Pellervo's younger son might be willing to take you," her father said all of a sudden. He was standing in the door of the woodshed, a dark figure against the brightness of the day.

Tuomikki froze. She put down the axe and let her gaze fall to the ground. She had never met Pellervo's younger son. She hadn't met his older son for that matter. She had no call to go running to the neighbor's. A daughter's place was at home.

"But will he have you is the question, tight-lipped as you are."

Tuomikki tried to answer, but the words caught in her throat, as they ever did no matter what she had seen and had the opportunity to tell. Who would believe the stories of a child, the words of a mere girl.

Suddenly her father grabbed her arm.

"I suppose you'll learn to speak once you're married off. A man will set you right."

Tuomikki cried out and tried to run, but her father grabbed her hair and pulled her into his embrace. His hands sought out her breasts.

"First you'll make me a son," her father panted. He pushed her down and climbed on top of her, tore off her clothes and trapped her hands at her side. Tuomikki thrashed and yelled, but her father was heavier and larger than she was. He struck Tuomikki on the face and she tasted blood in her mouth and her world filled with stars.

Tuomikki left her body, and for a moment saw and heard nothing. The world had stopped. There was only the moment, two figures on the ground, one on top of the other. She howled. She howled from the depths of her heart, emptied her lungs of everything they had in them.

Then she was back in her body. The weight lifted from her, she heard a growling and her father's bitter curse, which was cut short.

Her wolf brother stood astride her father. In the blink of an eye, his teeth were at his father's throat.

Their father cursed. The two of them wrestled on the ground, kicking up sawdust. Tuomikki dragged herself farther away and drew herself onto unsteady feet. She leaned on the frame of the woodshed's door and tried to catch her breath.

Their father took the knife from his belt and plunged it into her wolf brother's gut. Her brother squealed like a stuck pig and doubled over. Her father took the axe from the ground and lifted it to his shoulder. Her wolf brother curled up, panting, in the back of the shed. He had nowhere to run.

Tuomikki's vision was filled by a blue darkness, she let the earth pass through her, let the grass and the forest sprigs grow through her body, let the soil become her hands. The plants seized her father and pulled him towards the ground. He stumbled and dropped the axe. Tuomikki knelt on top of her father and pushed her hands into him. Her hands were full of death, they sank into the man's body like into soft soil. Tuomikki did nothing to hide her anger, to hold back her power. Life flowed from the man into Tuomikki. She could feel its power radiating through her hands into her whole body, making her brow and heart pound.

This man was not her father. She was not of his seed. Her real father lay, bound, at the bottom of the swamp where this treacherous usurper had thrown him. Tuomikki remembered now. She had been five years old. She remembered how her real father had begged for mercy and how the drifter had smashed in his head with a shovel. Her mother didn't know. She had been helping the neighbors and came home to a crying daughter, whose confused words made no sense. A drifter, supposedly innocent, had wormed his way into the house and had taken the place of the father. Her mother hadn't been able to see through the lie and care for her pack.

The man Tuomikki had called her father withered before her eyes. She put her hands to her brother's stomach and let the power flow from her

fingers. The wound closed up without a mark, leaving his skin whole again.

Tuomikki fell to the ground, as calling up the *väki* had been taxing.

Her wolf brother rose and bent over the dead man. He lapped up blood from the wound on the man's throat and the gap in his chest. Then he bent over Tuomikki and began licking the corners of her mouth. Tuomikki could taste the iron blood.

Tuomikki was too spent to do anything. She was still lying by the body when her mother returned home.

Her mother stopped next to her and stood there for some time.

"There was nothing else I could do," Tuomikki said and pulled herself up. The world looked pale blue and seemed to be swaying. Sounds quivered brokenly in the air and the light hurt her eyes.

Her mother produced a sound that was halfway between a spit and a sigh. She grabbed the man by the legs and told Tuomikki to help. The body was heavy, but together they pulled and rolled it to the swamp where they slipped it into a watery pool. Father sank slowly into the water, and mother pushed the body deeper with a thick branch until it was concealed by the dark water of the bog.

Her mother wiped dampness from her eyes, but said nothing.

In the evening as they sat inside by the warmth of the stove, they heard a scrabbling at the door.

Tuomikki opened it. Outside stood her wolf brother in his human form, arms hanging clumsy at his side. Tuomikki looked at her mother, who was repairing a tear in her skirt with a needle and thread. Her mother nodded.

Her brother came inside and curled up in Tuomikki's lap. Tuomikki stroked his back and the boy stroked his sister's smooth arm, the dark fur that had begun to grow from her wrist to her elbow and towards her shoulder. They took comfort together in the warmth of the fire.

ANNE LEINONEN

Translated by **J. Robert Tupasela**
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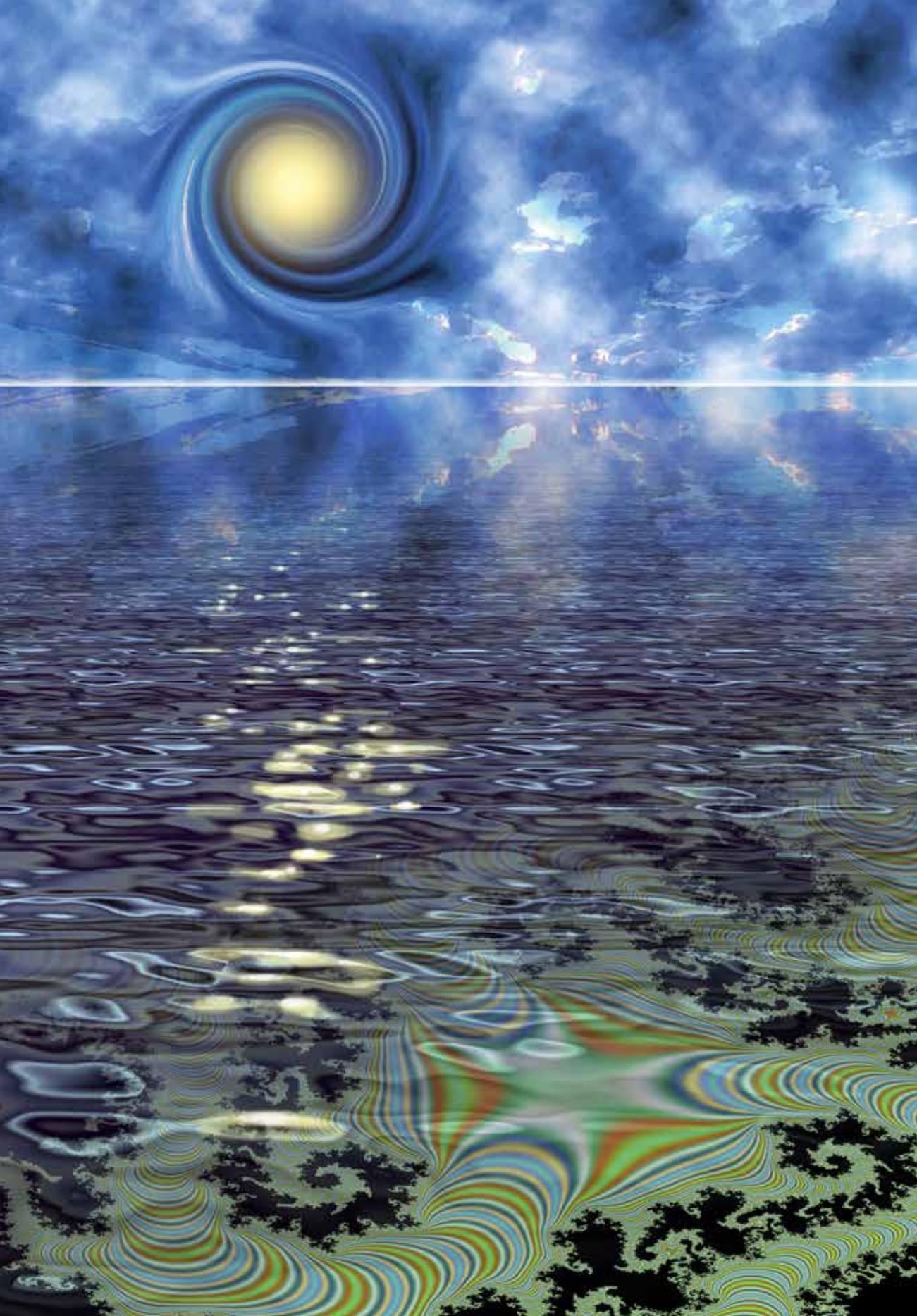
ANNE LEINONEN

Anne Leinonen (b. 1973) is a writer who lives in the countryside with bats, glow-worms, and her family. She writes speculative stories, in which she is particularly interested in "weirding" the everyday and recycling folklore. She has published numerous books with co-authors as well as works of her own.

She has won the esteemed Atorox award three times and she and co-author Eija Lappalainen have been nominated for the Finlandia Junior and Tähtivaeltaja awards for the novel *Routaisarukset* [Children of the Frost] (2011). The short story collection *Kuulen laulun kaukaisen* [*I Can hear a Distant Song*] (2011), co-authored by Leinonen and Petri Laine, was also nominated for the Tähtivaeltaja award.

She has written critically acclaimed science fiction novels, including *Viivamaalari* [The Line Painter] (2013) and *Ilottomien ihmisten kylä* [The Village] (2014). Her latest novel, *Vaskinainen* [The Brass Woman], was published in 2015 and mixes Finnish and international myths. In addition to young adult and adult prose, Leinonen has expanded her work into radio plays and television drama.

In addition to her own written work, Leinonen teaches, works as an editor, and organizes gatherings for sf and fantasy writers.



JOHANNA SINISALO

THE KINGS WITH NO HANDS

I had just decided to go into the woods to die when I saw something large kicking up dust on the horizon.

It looked like it might be a large animal. I'd never seen one of those before, so I decided to wait to get a better look at it. When it got closer, I saw that it wasn't a single creature. The illusion of size and speed was a result of the mode of transportation: eight bicycles hitched in front of a wagon. The apes riding them stopped nearby without paying me any attention. They puffed and panted and slurped water from the stream that flowed out of the small wood and disappeared into the sand a hundred paces away.

This was one of the only oases in Europe.

I had intended to go lie down in the sparse shade cast by the small stand of pines and let myself starve. I wasn't going anywhere and I no longer saw any point in trying to get anywhere anymore. The intense smell of sap and the slow gurgle of the stream winding amongst the roots of the pines were the most beautiful things I had experienced on my journeys. Besides, I was out of food. Ending my life there had been an excellent idea.

Before too long, the strange wagon team had had enough to drink and the apes began climbing back on their bikes. They were chimpanzees, I recognized them from pictures. I had never seen a live ape. I had never seen so many bicycles in one place, either. They were built from different colored parts, and some had parts that had clearly been made later out of wood, and some that were made out of such a fine metal that I couldn't even identify it. I assumed that a bicycle wagon was a faster way to travel the roads than most. Maybe this team was going somewhere? It seemed like a strange idea, because where would anything be better than everywhere else.

When I had started down the trail to the south-west, I had had no reason to go anywhere or end up anywhere. I just had to start walking, because there was no room for me in our village anymore.

Everyone was allowed two children, but if both children made it to maturity, one had to leave. Then it was up to you to choose what roadside or oasis to die at.

I didn't mind dying. After all, I had just seen a miracle.

I looked across the spring at the chimpanzees bustling around their bicycles. Theirs was an immense treasure: there couldn't be many working bicycles left in the whole world. It had never occurred to me that chimps could ride a bicycle, but of course, there were many other things in the world that had never occurred to me.

The wagon seemed heavy, and when the chimps mounted their bicycles and began to pedal, they strained and puffed, and guttural noises and short hoots escaped their throats. The bicycles were not quite the right size for chimpanzees. The wagon creaked into motion. Their cargo was covered by a large tarp that looked a bit like leather. I guessed it must have been from the ruins of some city.

I sat calmly and watched as the wagon drew away into the south-west. When I was a child, a travelling storyteller once passed through our village. For a moment I toyed with the idea of trying to continue my journey long enough to find a village. My story of a wagon drawn by eight chimpanzees on bicycles would be sure to earn me a piece of bread. It would be an entirely new story, not one told in some old book or known by any other storyteller.

Suddenly the wagon stopped again. I could see it as a small, dark silhouette against the brightness caused by the sun striking the dust in the air. I could see small figures darting back and forth. Then one of the chimpanzees started back towards the oasis. It was much more agile and moved more naturally without the bicycle.

I was mildly surprised when the chimpanzee came straight towards me. It reached out its hand, grabbed my wrist, and pulled. Its gesture was clear enough, it wanted me to come with it. I was amused, but too weak to get up.

The chimpanzee tugged on my wrist and made agitated ooh! ooh! noises. When I made no effort to answer the gesture, it took a step back, released its grip, and began to make signs.

This amazed me far more than a chimp riding a bicycle had, because I recognized several of the signs it was making. There was a family in our village who were all deaf and spoke to one another with these kinds of signs. It was an ancient custom. They taught it to their children who taught it to their children in turn. Now this chimpanzee was communicating in the same way, and I recognized at least the signs for help and food.

I thought it was asking me for food and decided to make my situation clear. With weak hands, I made the slow sign for hunger. The chimpanzee froze and stopped signing. It looked at me with bright, observant eyes, tilted its head, and then took off at a bow-legged run. After a short while, it returned with something in each hand. It laid them down on the pine needles in front of me. The chimpanzee had brought me a reddish yellow root and something that looked like a dried fish. The ape gestured, pointing at me and making the sign for eating.

I lifted the root to my mouth and bit. It was sweet and delicious. I ate it slowly, savoring it. Then I took the fish. It was a bit dry, but I took it to the edge of the spring and soaked pieces of it in the water for a moment before eating them and then drinking a great deal of water. I felt the strength come back to my limbs, and it felt as if even my brain had only needed some food to be able to once again feel wonder. I became truly curious about these generous travelers. When the chimpanzee, which had been impatiently watching me eat, saw that I was finished, it signed at me again, encouraging me to follow. This time I did.

When we reached the bicycle wagon, I immediately saw what the problem was. One of the bicycles had fallen over, one of the chimps lay motionless in the dust, and six of its kin were swarming around it in agitation. I touched the chimp: it was lifeless. It had apparently had some kind of stroke or seizure while struggling with the wagon.

I made the sign for dead. The chimp that had been my guide repeated it immediately. Then two other chimpanzees grabbed the dead animal and carried it to the roadside. One ape walked to the wagon, lifted the tarp, and took out a shovel.

It was an enviably good shovel. I could see that right away. It was made entirely of metal, not just the tip, like in my home village, where the tip would always be switched to a new wooden shovel when the old one broke or rotted away.

The ape began to dig a hole in the hard ground. It was difficult, and the ape had trouble holding

on to the shovel without opposable thumbs. That didn't stop it from trying, though. I walked over to it, made the sign for help, and took the shovel. The ape backed off cautiously, and with a few shovel strikes I had made a suitable hole. The apes dragged their dead comrade into the hole, and I covered the body with the dusty earth. Then three of the chimpanzees walked up to the fresh grave and urinated on it. Maybe the scent of urine was meant to keep carrion eaters away. Or maybe it was a burial ritual.

Now the ape took me by the wrist again. I followed it without resisting. It took me to the bicycle that now had no rider, pointed at it, and then at me. It made the gesture a second time and signed "food".

I slowly lifted up the bicycle. The chimpanzees made excited noises and grabbed the handlebars of their bicycles. We began by walking our bicycles, dragging them forward. It was painfully slow and exhausting going. Once the wagon wheels started moving we mounted the pedals. I had ridden a bicycle once before for a few heady days in my childhood. A gypsy camp had visited our village, and they had had a bicycle. We gave them food and sleeping quarters, and in return, we were allowed to try their treasures. I learned to ride so quickly that after my third attempt, I never fell once.

My feet stepped on the pedals, and every time I pushed down, the force was transmitted into the harness and the wagon moved. Seven chimpanzees and I began to ride across the desolate, unknown land, always towards the south-west.

At sunset on my sixth or seventh night with the chimpanzees, I saw a terrible glow in the clouds on the horizon. The sky was burning an endless red, much redder and brighter than in my childhood when a vast forest had burned somewhere far to the east. The cold drought had lasted many years then, and I had heard the adults whispering to one another that the burnt forest stretched farther than a bird could fly in many days. And still this glow was more fierce than the one I had seen then.

After two more days of riding, I could begin to see the glow reflected in the clouds during the day. It was as if there was another source of light beneath the sky, radiating just as bright and furious as the sun. But at night the glow couldn't be seen. I tried to point at the horizon and make the sign for fire with my fingers, but the chimpanzee didn't seem to understand.

I discovered the truth when we reached the sea.

I had never seen the sea other than in pictures in old books. I had, of course, seen lakes and ponds,

which were usually brown and smelled, and I knew that the sea was unimaginably large, and in the pictures was always blue or green or grey or black from a storm. This sea was different.

The chimps stopped when the sea became visible as a streak along the horizon. One of them went to the wagon, lifted the tarp, and took out a cloth bag. It opened the bag and produced a bundle of glasses with black lenses. No one knew how to make glasses any more, and the ones that had survived in our village had become heirlooms. I had never seen glasses with dark lenses before, and each of these ones also had a different kind of frame. Some were made of bright plastic, some were made of bent metal, and some had such dark lenses you could see your reflection in them. The chimps placed the glasses on their eyes and handed me a pair. They had beautiful frames, bright pink and shaped like hearts. The glasses sat well on my nose and ears, but the chimps had great difficulties due to their flat noses. Some had to use a piece of string tied to the ends of the frame and wrapped around the back of their heads to keep the glasses in place. Equipped in this way, we continued our journey.

After just a kilometer, I saw the sea. The new sea.

This sea was silver. It was a dazzling, burnished sheet without end, and the sun shone off its surface in the full madness of its unchecked anger. There wasn't a single bird in sight.

It was as if a thin, breathtakingly bright mirror had been spread across the surface of the sea I knew from the pictures and was now gently rocking with the waves. It reflected the image of the sun and the clouds as a wavering silver soup. The brightness was reflected up to the clouds and from the clouds back down to the sea as if the air was filled with shining, cold light. I took the glasses from my eyes to see better and began to scream. The terrifying abundance of light hurt my eyes, and though I immediately put the glasses back on, my eyes stung and I had trouble seeing for the rest of the day.

We rode on to confront the brightness.

I thought our journey would end at the seashore, because I couldn't see any kind of barge or ferry. We had come to a gently sloping bank, and when I was certain our road would come to an end, our wagon team let out a whooping cry and let the bicycles roll freely along a road paved with uniform white stone. I had no time to do anything before noticing that the road led straight into an unbelievably large hole that was pregnant with darkness.

I cried out as our wagon dove into the dark, which was made all the more threatening by contrast to the terrible brightness outside that burned all color away.

The apes and I pedaled all day in that dark place built under the sea. It was not difficult to pedal forwards amongst the apes. Though I could see nothing but black, the team guided me in the right direction. Before we had even had time to stop to eat, I could see light flickering at the end of the tunnel. It seemed that we had ridden under a narrow straight. By the sound of it, we had been riding over large, metal beams in the tunnel and had crushed myriads of small, fragile bones beneath our wheels.

We strained out of the tunnel and up the bank. We carried on along the shoreline. I watched the sea. The silver was not completely even, but was formed of large patterns made up of smaller parts that seemed to reflect the light in slightly different ways. Bright spots and even brighter spots. I saw high limestone cliffs reflecting the brightness, and our caravan was heading straight for them. Soon I saw that the limestone cliffs were full of caves and hollows at various heights. Some of them were so close to the sea that the silver membrane caressed their mouths. The chimpanzees stopped and began to carry things from the wagon into the caves. Each one of them seemed to have a job, and each object a set place where it was to be taken. I didn't recognize most of the objects.

The chimpanzee who had acted as my guide took several books out of the wagon, and because I'd always been curious about books, I followed it towards the mouth of a cave on the edge of the sea.

The silver reflection of the sea lessened the darkness inside the cave. Still, I had to take off my dark glasses to see.

In the gloom, I made out an outline that at first I had trouble recognizing as a person, though I had seen its like in books. The figure waddled like the chimpanzees, and the skin on its face was similarly wrinkled. But when the figure drew closer, I realized it was, indeed, a human, just very old. I wondered at the lack of a beard. It wasn't until a moment later that I noticed the two breasts flopping against her chest.

The woman received me in a strange way. She barked words and grabbed my penis through my clothes. She was wearing nothing herself. I didn't understand myself at all, but suddenly I found myself lying in the old woman's embrace. It felt completely different than at home with my sister. I wasn't the master of my desires. I thrashed around in the cage of her hips like a trapped insect.

My lust ended as quickly as it had begun, and I began to feel a vague embarrassment. The woman seemed to take the matter with the same cool demeanor as if she had only shook my hand. The

chimpanzee had watched with polite interest from the side, and when I pulled away from the woman, she seemed to forget I was there and began signing energetically with the ape. The ape handed the books over to the woman, who engrossed herself in them.

I realized that I hadn't said a word since entering the cave. I had stepped into a world governed by entirely different laws than anywhere I knew. I could feel it with my every cell. I cleared my throat while pulling my pants back on, and the woman glanced at me. She mostly seemed amused.

She barked words that I couldn't recognize. I shook my head and signed "I don't understand". After a short break, the woman began speaking with words that sounded longer and more flowing. I could do nothing but sign my dumb message once again. The woman shrugged her shoulders and opened her mouth again. "What about this? Do you know this language?" she asked.

I was thrilled. The woman's pronunciation was very strange, but I could understand her words. "Yes, I speak this language," I said, uncertain after such a long time without speaking. "I came here with the chimps. I don't want to intrude."

"If you want food and work, you will find both here," the woman said. "If you don't want to stay, you will die before long."

"I know," I said. "Why is the sea silver?"

The woman fixed a measuring gaze on me. "I'm not sure you really want to know."

At that moment, I was startled by the sound of splashing water from the mouth of the cave. Something dark, shiny and large was swimming towards us in the water.

"Hands. Hands taught us. Hands made this species what it became. Hands manipulate their surroundings. Hands were an extension of our brains. Our two most important organs are our hands and our voice box." The woman sat on the floor of the cave a short distance from me. She spoke in a dream-like manner, clearly not caring whether I heard her or was even listening.

"First verbal language, then written language, and through that a collective memory. But without written language, there can be no permanent race or species memory. And without a written memory, there can be no history, no science, no higher learning."

I didn't understand more than that the woman was talking about language. "How did the apes learn to speak?" I blurred out.

"The apes have always known how to speak, we just didn't know how to interpret it correctly. Their larynx isn't suited to making as many sounds as ours, so their verbal language is quite limited, with

the meaning of the same sound being altered by a simultaneous gesture or facial expression. Sign language is well suited to them. There has never been anything wrong with their minds." The woman sniffed. "There was a time when it was common to consider animals as being less intelligent than humans if they couldn't do the same things in exactly the same way."

"Can the apes read?" I asked, remembering the chimpanzee that had carried books to the woman with careful respect. The woman was taken aback. She stood from her day dreaming position, walked over to me, and looked me right in the eyes. "You're not as dumb as you look after all," she said. "No, I don't think they can read – not yet at least. And because they haven't yet learned, I don't think they ever will. The kings of creation will never pay them enough attention to give them the chance, or won't allow them the chance."

The woman stood in front of me and pressed her hand to my chest. The back of her hand was brown and wrinkled, and veins rose high on its spotted surface. A wave of lust washed over me again, leaving me trembling. The woman took me like she was performing an intense mockery of a dance. She didn't care for me at all. Realizing that, even in the midst of the lusty spell I was under, made me feel a sharp sorrow.

There were thousands of them in that strange community.

Most were chimpanzees. I never found out exactly how such a large number of chimps had ended up in these limestone caves. According to my book knowledge, the region was not one where they could survive in the wild, but here they were. The network of limestone caves included some large caverns that were partially under water. Huge loads of fish were brought out of them regularly to be dried, smoked, and salted. Some ways outside the caves, bustling apes cared for gardens growing a variety of vegetables and roots.

Every third or fourth day, the bicycle caravan would go out or come back.

Not much was known about the lost cities. The apes were straightforward and tenacious explorers. They would leave with the wagon full of food, ride for a time, and turn back when half of the food, enough for the return journey, was left. If they came across an abandoned city, they would load up the wagon with what they could find. Most of it was useless junk, but every now and then the apes would find just the right things – certain materials, containers, small instruments.

I heard that many generations of apes had gone blind before they found enough dark glasses.

The rest of the members of the community were humans.

The woman I met first was called Jackie. It wasn't the name her parents had given her, and she never told me what she had been called before. She had taken the name from an ancient magazine that the chimps had found in a lost city. The magazine was full of strange but clearly important information, because Jackie read it over and over again. Printed on the cover of the magazine in large letters were the words ALIENS BEHIND JFK ASSASSINATION. The woman had taken the name "Jackie" from one of the articles in the magazine. When I asked her why she had chosen precisely that name, she said in her annoying, incomprehensible way that she was the widow of the nation.

The other people were crazy. Even more crazy than Jackie. They mumbled to themselves, had long, signed conversations with the chimps, filled long lists with numbers and calculations, and stored odd-colored substances in glass containers. Most of them didn't share a language with me. Two or three times a day they would eat fish and vegetables. Some of them never slept.

I would often wander through the caves. There was no end to them along the limestone coast, and I never got so far as to run out of chimps or people. Every cavern was full of activity, intense and patient work. For a long time, I had thought that Jackie was some kind of leader, but she wasn't. I met a few other horribly old people like her, but she was the only one who was able or willing to talk to me. I signed with some people. They weren't the least bit interested in me. A few times I mated with women I met who came to me directly and without a word. Afterwards I felt empty and miserable. Soon I stopped my trips into the surrounding caves and only participated in the work in Jackie's cavern. It was light and easy. I carried things, boiled water in a rough fireplace, and carried the water into a cavern where they washed fine, thin glass containers. Sometimes I helped pull in a net that the kings had driven our daily portion of fish into. I had more food than ever, and soon began to be strong and almost plump compared to my previous form.

I quickly grew to hate Jackie, her power to use me sexually like an object. Her long, nonsensical speeches. Her certainty that I would never leave here. It was true that having become accustomed to an abundance of food, the mere idea of hunger had become repellent. Hunger, which circumstances had forced me to endure for months with bravery, was now a feeling that I experienced three times

a day as a pleasant and not the least bit painful expectation, a certainty that soon I would have fish and vegetables and sometimes even a strange and intoxicatingly sweet fruit.

"The ozone was lost from the atmosphere, and the climate warmed," Jackie explained to me one day while we were eating fish in our cavern. "It killed a great many people. That didn't really matter, but when it began to threaten the kings - they didn't like the stronger ultraviolet radiation or the ecological changes brought on by warming either - they decided to do something about it. That is why the sea is silver."

I took a bite of my white-fleshed, juicy fish and nodded, as I had noticed that Jackie was nicest to me when I pretended to listen to her.

"The kings found out that plankton and some other micro-organisms in the sea had begun to spontaneously mutate. They had begun to reflect ultraviolet rays, begun to develop epithelial tissues that would return as much harmful radiation back into the air as possible. They needed reflective substances for their metabolisms, and that is why we have been feeding them certain compounds for hundreds of years. Soon, most of the world's oceans will be silver. Sea life will be protected by a reflective surface that stops all harmful radiation. At the same time the earth will cool. It will cool a great deal as more and more sunlight is reflected back out. Imagine how bright it must look from space -"

I had trouble following her train of thought again. I remember how I had taken some of the silver surface in my hand. It was thin, almost non-existent, as if there was nothing but seawater in my hand. The hole I made in the silver membrane closed up in mere moments, sealed by beautiful patterns that were like parts of a flower or leaf, a series of patterns getting infinitely smaller towards their edges.

"Now they are changing the world. They have no hands, so they have made us their hands. They are harnessing the rest of creation to their purposes. Like we harnessed it before them," Jackie mumbled.

"Why haven't the kings ruled before? Why are they only doing it now?" I asked. Jackie looked at me with anger.

"Because they simply never thought of it before," she snapped. "Every god has its prophet." She got up and left the cavern. I took her fish and ate it, too.

The work, which had at first been light and almost like a game, became heavier and took on a more intense pace. The change happened so slowly that I barely noticed it. While at first I did chores just to

pass the time, now I noticed that I would lay down on my pallet in the evening sore and exhausted. I didn't know why I did things. I carried things, stirred strange-smelling substances in huge vats. Sometimes I would have to watch like a hawk for something to boil, other times I would drag large baskets of different types of earth from further inland into the caves. No one actually threatened me or ordered me around, I was just matter-of-factly assigned work, and I found it very difficult to refuse. Once when I decided to take an extra break, I came back to find that everyone had already eaten and there was nothing left but fish bones and the stubs of roots. I was hungry as a wolf for the rest of the day, and after that I made sure that I was always in sight and working at meal time so I wouldn't be forgotten again.

Nevertheless, there was another time when I forgot myself and had to go without a meal. I was visiting a cave very far from Jackie's cavern when I found a hollow I had never been in before. It was full of books and magazines of different ages, some in such poor condition they were barely readable. One book had been put aside from the others. It looked as if it had been read a great deal and then just cast aside. I picked it up. It was some sort of scientific work about war and weapons of war. Of course, I knew what war meant. In my grandparents' time, there had been a war. That was when most of the cities had become lost cities. This book went into detail about the various methods that could be used against an enemy. It had many words that I didn't understand at all, but one line stopped me in my tracks.

The book said that a large nation had looked into the possibility of training animals for war. Indeed, they had trained a large number of them and found them to be apt learners. They had been taught sign language and had been kept in continual contact with humans and their technology.

Then it had been decided that this kind of war equipment was not needed.

The animals had been set free.

Chimpanzees and dolphins.

"The question is of adapting to an environment. Humans never adapted properly. Humans need other humans, tools, and fire to survive. Humans have always needed hands. Humans need language to tell other people what it takes to survive. Humans need written language so that the information necessary for survival can be passed on even when there is no one to receive it directly at that moment," Jackie explained to me. "If all information was just passed forward from generation to generation as word of mouth, the smallest inter-

ruption or misunderstanding could destroy valuable information. But written language endures. We can still read the messages of the ancient Egyptians, thought the Pharaohs have been dust for five thousand years."

"Is that what we're making now? Written language for the kings?" I asked in a hoarse voice.

"I think so, though I don't believe that any of us knows what we're really doing. We are all part of something bigger. We are like cells in the body or parts in a machine. The ones who were given the original mission are long dead and have passed it on, generation after generation becoming more obedient. We are beginning to forget that there was ever anything else. We are becoming their hands more and more seamlessly. My children, and there are many of them here, wouldn't even know who I am if I went to talk to them today."

"I don't understand. Why don't you leave this place?" I asked.

"You haven't left, either."

"No, but I could any time."

"I don't think so."

I marched out of the cave and left an annoyed Jackie standing with her hands on her hips. I climbed up a hill, pulled up two handfuls of roots from the garden to take with me and, trailing clods of dirt, walked with determination in the direction I hoped would take me to the opening of the tunnel.

I don't know how much time passed before I blacked out.

Jackie stood over me. I was lying on the floor of the cave and I was in great pain. I raised my arm. It was full of cuts. I was bruised and sore all over.

"When you come back, you come the straightest way, not the most comfortable", Jackie said. "I would have warned you, but I've found that first-hand experience is the best teacher."

"How do they do this?" I croaked through parched lips.

"I don't know. If I did, things would be much different. Do you think I enjoy mating with an idiotic creature like you whenever the kings want? Do you enjoy it? They're making sure they have enough hands. They take a more free approach with the chimpanzees. The chimps couldn't survive without them. I think the chimps obey voluntarily, to preserve their species. But we need control. They take care of the will to reproduce with pheromones, I think. Strong scent signals that someone here must be making the materials for at this very moment without knowing it. How they make us stay, I don't know. Something in the food? Some kind of radiation or scent? Perhaps a chemical that



we have been exposed to and now cannot go without? I don't know. Nobody knows. A cell does not know why it dies when cut away from the skin of the hand."

I tried to sit up. My head was spinning and aching terribly.

"Are they going to build cities next, gather armies? I don't know. But they have hands, and we are those hands. Will they make the same mistakes we did? We were the ones who taught them, showed them that you can improve the survival of your species by manipulating the environment. That should mean that they could make the same mistakes."

"The war dolphins?"

Jackie looked amazed. "How do you know that? Yes, I think so. They had gained a great deal of knowledge about humans and the human way of doing things. When they were released, they spread and processed that knowledge. I can just imagine: the prophets of a new way of life, taught in a strange world by the gods. When the hazards caused by humans began to affect them, too, and we humans completely destroyed our advantage,

they turned against their gods. Sometimes I wonder if all of the disasters humans caused were put in motion by humans in the first place." Jackie rubbed her forehead and looked almost friendly for a moment. "They think so differently from us. I have sometimes wondered whether coating the seas with silver doesn't also serve another purpose: a message, an invitation, a signal. It makes the Earth so much brighter than before. Though the radio waves have fallen silent, the planet would now be visible as an attractive anomaly in far away observatories. I think the kings hope to have guests."

I had managed to stumble to my feet. "So, I will never leave here?"

Jackie shook her head. "No, you will live here until you are old, very old. You and the ones who live after you." She patted her stomach, and the horror of the gesture dawned on me in the blink of an eye.

I took two steps, jumped, and sank through the silver.

The sea water stung my cuts and bruises terribly, but it was a good pain, sharp and real, it cleared my head.

I held my eyes open under the water.
The terrible brightness of the outside world filtered its way down to where I was sinking, and that's when I saw it.

I saw the Book of the Kings.

It was a stunning lace, like the silver patters in the sea, but dark and strong, moving with the currents in the water but keeping its shape exact and clear. I imagined how the kings could take it with them, how it would follow them into all the seas of the world and how its message and the message of thousands of other Books of the Kings would remain unchanged when all of us were dust.

I could imagine how the kings had communicated and passed on their traditions up till now, but their language had been flexible, changing from generation to generation without a foundation to build on – to build cities and armies and perhaps flying machines.

I was not proud to have been one of the hands that had built the book. Neither had I stopped to think about what freedom was. When I looked at the Book of the Kings hovering in the brightness, I realized that long ago, when I had chosen the time of my death in that oasis, I had been at my most free.

As I tried to stay under the water, so that I would have to breathe water into my lungs and never be able to rise again, dark shadows surrounded me and blunt snouts pushed me back onto the limestone ledge.

JOHANNA SINISALO

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JOHANNA SINISALO

Johanna Sinisalo (b. 1958) is called “the queen of Finnish Weird” as a master of literary speculative fiction. She has won several literary prizes, among them the Finlandia Prize and the James Tiptree, Jr. Award. Her first novel *Not Before Sundown* (the U.S. edition *Troll – A Love Story*) has been translated into 19 languages thus far. There are also three other novels available by her in English, all praised by readers and critics alike: *Birdbrain*, *The Blood of Angels* and her latest novel, *The Core of the Sun*. Her novelette *Baby Doll* was shortlisted for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award in 2008 and the Nebula in 2009. There are other short stories by her available in English in several anthologies, and she has edited *The Dedalus Book of Finnish Fantasy*. Her works often deal with societal topics, like equality and environmental issues. Sometimes she likes to use dark comedy and satire as her literary tools.

Sinisalo also works as a screenwriter and script consultant for television and cinema. Among her most well-known works is the original story for the 2012 cult sf comedy *Iron Sky*. Currently she’s working on a “writer’s cut” novelisation of the film, which will be published in 2017 in conjunction with the premiere of *Iron Sky II: The Coming Race*.

Sinisalo is one of the Guests of Honour of Worldcon 75, to be held in Helsinki, Finland, in 2017.

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FREE
ENTRY



HELENA WARIS

LADY OF NORTHSHERE

Helena Waris has succeeded where many have missed the mark: she's written unique fantasy for adult readers, which draws from Finnish folklore.

There is a red-haired, smiling woman on the cover of the novel *Uniin piirretty polku* [Path Drawn in Dreams] (2009), which begins the *Pohjankontu* [Northshire] trilogy. The photo is of Helena Waris, a gardener and mother who lives in Ristiina.

The *Pohjankontu* series consists of three novels: *Uniin piirretty polku*, *Sudenlapset* [Wolf's Children] (2011) and *Talviverinen* [Winterblood] (2013). All three novels won the Kuvastaja award, which is annually given to the best Finnish fantasy novel.

But the story doesn't begin with the publishing contract for *Uniin piirretty polku*, nor even from the moment when I first met Helena and read her manuscript. It begins over twenty years ago, with a young woman's dream and need to write.

SCRIBE OF DREAMS

In 1987, the 16-year-old Helena was deep into writing and wrote for several hours every day. At that time she devoured the works of **J.R.R. Tolkien** and the *Earthsea* stories by **Ursula le Guin**, was interested in Celtic Ireland, Vikings and prehistorical Finnish tales. Her other sources of inspiration were the *Ryhope Wood* series by **Robert Holdstock** as well as *Ronia the Robber's Daughter* by **Astrid Lindgren**.

Then Helena had such a powerful dream that she had to write it down. The first words of the *Pohjankontu* trilogy were born.

Over the years, the story and cast of characters launched by the dream grew. Finally, they formed a 700-page manuscript the core of which was, from the very beginning, about coming home.

"When I was 13, I moved from Kitee to Mikkeli," says Helena. "Homesickness was reflected in what I did. Writing was a form of therapy on paper."

Helena kept writing for years, and cherished both her dream and her story. The original manuscript contained dragons and druids, but the stories grew in the author's mind, and eventually the milieu moved far away from Ireland and druids.

"I experienced a sort of national awakening in 2003 and re-wrote everything," says Helena. "This change, too, happened because of a dream. I saw my characters in the cold environment of Koli. I realized it would make sense to move everything to a place which was like Finland."

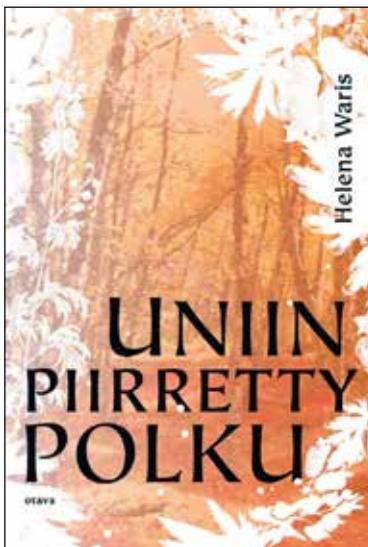
In 2004, Helena drummed up the courage to attend a meeting of a local writers' group, Mikkelin kirjoittajat, with her pile of manuscript pages. Her internal compulsion had finally driven her to show the text to somebody.

"I was so scared," says Helena. "But I also felt it was the best book in the world. I read the first page out loud to the listeners. That same first page is still in the story."

That winter night was the moment when I met Helena – and *Uniin piirretty polku* – for the first time. Helena read an excerpt of her text and even such a small sample demonstrated that this truly was creativity: the manuscript was unique, the rhythm of the sentences worked and the prehistorical Finnish tone was palpable.

Over the years, the story had matured close to being publishable. However, it took a few more years until the manuscript was polished enough to be accepted by a publisher.

"I'm glad I didn't get published too soon. After this work, I was much more mature and ready to write the other books of the series."



Helena says she now feels she is able to and capable of writing credible fantasy. Her influences are no longer too strongly reflected in what she does, but instead she dares to be herself. And this is where the charm of Helena's rich Finnish fantasy lies.

LIFE – NOT JUST A BED OF ROSES

The starting point of the trilogy focuses on searching: three siblings are searching for each other and their home.

Troi, who was raised on the Viking-esque Tuulentaari (“Winds’ Island”), and his sister Aile have lost their memories and do not know of each other’s existence. As they grow up, they begin to remember their backgrounds and start searching for a way home. One of the siblings, Arni, is still at home in North-shire. He draws paths in dreams which Troi and Aile use to navigate.

The destinies of many other people are also entwined with the siblings’ paths. They face love and death, witches and mortals willing to sacrifice themselves.

One of the distinct characteristics of the story is how natural and detailed it is. The description of everyday life is exact and rich, even though the backdrop to everything is a mythical world and old, almost already forgotten, powers.

The series is also enriched by vivid, motivated characters who strive towards their goals through trial and error. The female characters are especially strong. There are darker shades alongside the traditional growth-from-a-girl-to-a-woman storyline, as life offers harsh lessons and misfortunes provide an education. Romance and love are not forgotten, either.



The narrative of the story is titillatingly complex. Although the story starts with young girls, very quickly battles, conquerors and death are also introduced. Life treats characters harshly and the reader can never tell when the grim reaper is about to arrive.

As the story is also filled with ancient Powers, kokko-birds, stallions and witches and the time perspective expands to cover several years, it is clear that the story has grown beyond the typical framework.

UNIQUE CRADLE OF HOPE

The second novel, *Sudenlapset*, focuses on the children from the first novel after they have grown up. The third novel delves through the entire timeline through the character of Troi.

Helena highlights Troi as the most important character to her. He is a tragic figure, who has to search for his loved one and his home for forty years. The man has mystical qualities even to the author herself, as he, along with his siblings, has existed since the beginning and has forced Helena to write him onto the paper.

“Now that the series is finished, my head is buzzing from trying to evict characters from it. In some ways, they feel more like members of my family than my actual family members. Maybe I should’ve been put into an asylum for having discussions with fictitious persons for over twenty years,” Helena jokes.

Troi is much like Kullervo from the *Kalevala* as the hero of a fantasy series. A man cursed by destiny who wrestles with himself and the consequences of his actions.

Troi has been forced to make sacrifices and he has lost his true love.



There might still be a happy ending at the end of his road, even though he feels guilty for the ones who have died because of him. Love walks hand in hand with the Powers and the destruction of the world.

The *Pohjankontu* saga also includes characters who sneaked in at a fairly late stage.

"The witch Terihan came in very late, but then she took a very important role for herself," mentions Helena.

A central character in the novel is also Arni, the brother who remained in the north waiting for his lost siblings. He remembers them, and it is his call that draws the others. The whole world is changing, but only few see what is happening. The far-away Northshire is a cradle of hope.

NO QUEST FANTASY

The *Pohjankontu* series is told through a series of gaps. This is a good thing: not every trek from one place to another is narrated in its entirety. Instead, the reader has room to create their own interpretations. At the same time, the story spans decades.

"The characters certainly don't make their way home directly and this is no quest fantasy. It takes Troi 40 years to get even close to his goal."

The trilogy has received praise for its originality. Helena draws widely from Finnish folklore, but mixes these elements freely and invents new ones. Stories from the *Kalevala*, traditional gods and Sami influences melt into each other. The Powers steer people's lives, but a person can try to fight their own destiny.

Even though the story resonates with the images of the times of past centuries, it should not be read as historical. There is no need to look for "mistakes" that have no place in Finnish history or European culture. This trilogy, after all, is a complete fantasy, written by Helena.

"I didn't want anybody to be able to place the events in any real location. But even though I tried to think of new names, I later found out there is a Vornanmutka in Ilomantsi and a Lake Marrasjärvi in Lapland. Even Pohjankontu, Northshire, is the name of a housing company in Espoo," Helena laughs.

A THOUSAND PAGES DOWN

Helena first wrote her book with no guarantees that it would ever see the light of day. Eventually the idea of publishing the novel grew on both the project and the author. Helena received multiple rejections, until several publishing houses took an interest in the text at the same time.

When asked about the publishing contract, Helena says she had no idea what it actually entailed.

"I thought *Uniiin piiretty polku* was just a novel, it would be published and that would be that. How-



Helena Waris

FACTS

Born: 1970

Places: Helsinki, Kitee, Mikkeli, Ristiina

Books that left an impression:

Robert Holdstock: *Mythago Wood*,
Jeff Long: *The Descent*

Favorite movies: The Iron Man movies,
Apocalypto, The Lord of the Rings trilogy

Art: Paintings by Samuli Heimonen

Place to relax: Lapland

ever, publishing houses are looking for authors, not so much individual novels.”

Pohjankontu was sold to the publishing house Otava as a trilogy.

“On the other hand, that made writing more certain. The writing felt more ‘real’ since I knew the end result would be published.”

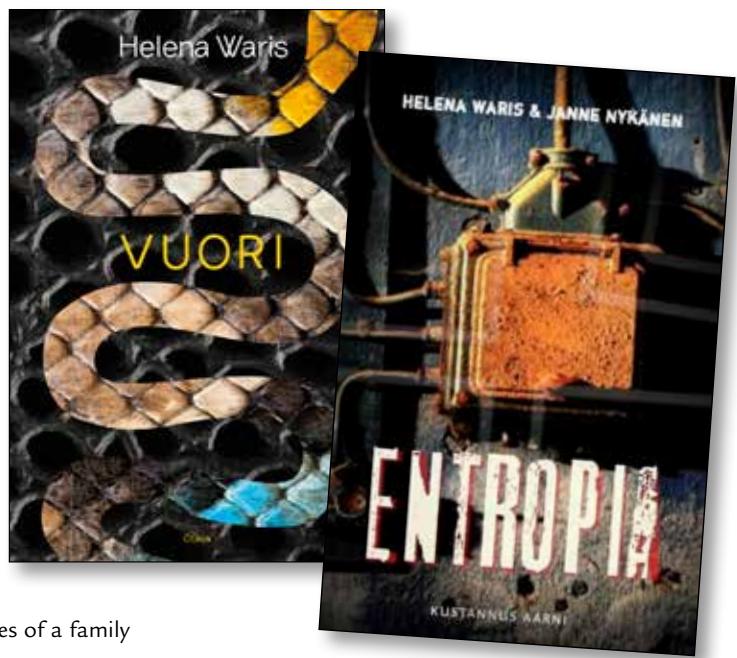
The books in the series developed on top of one another in Helena’s mind. The scenes and sheets left over from the first novel formed the basis of the next books. At the same time, the writing process got more intense as the trilogy progressed. There was ample time to polish the first novel, but working on the manuscript had to be done increasingly quickly for the third novel. Helena’s free-time was also taken up by the everyday chores of a family with children.

“The publisher has been incredibly great about my situation and has given me slack if I haven’t had time otherwise,” Helena says. “It’s also a nice feeling to notice people are really waiting for my texts.”

Now writing has begun to feel like an actual job.

“When I first started, I just felt I needed to write this story. Being an author has never been a job I had seriously considered. On the other hand, it’s not all that glamorous anymore. It’s just another everyday job.”

“I’ve always written scenes as if they are pieces of a puzzle and with post-it notes. I don’t work my text chronologically from the beginning to the end. Each day, I decide whether I’ll be in Vornanmutka or Northshire,” reveals Helena. “Yet, I think the books are a single entity. A single book, a thousand pages!”



LOTS OF FEEDBACK

Talviverinen is the final novel in the trilogy and it gathers the plotlines of the first two novels together. The readers can interpret the story as they wish and the author does not want to steer their experiences. Some have felt the story in its entirety is about a post-nuclear-war world, others see it as more of a medieval story, and others connect it with the Viking expeditions.

The observations made in critiques have surprised the author.

“They claim I’ve written a text which is on the one hand entertainment and on the other hand sermons about ecological issues, religion or feminism. Strange! I had not consciously thought about any of those,” the author laughs.

Helena has no need to be modest. The themes she mentions might come from her subconscious, but they can be found in the text easily. The people from Mustarinta dig another sun out from the bowels of the earth and push their waste to the surface. The ground shakes and the surface gets polluted. This is one interpretation for the freezing winter which covers the world.

The winter can, of course, also be explained as a mythical cycle, which happens because the Powers wish it. But here lies the richness of the *Pohjankontu* saga: despite being entertaining and character driven, it is filled with various themes and lends itself to interpretation.

This is certainly part of the reason why Helena has received lots of feedback from the readers.

“You get an extra kick to writing when each week you receive several messages from people who are rooting for you and are excited about your books. In that sense I owe a lot to many people.”



During the writing process, some readers even wanted to instruct her as to what should happen to each character. The choices made by the author, such as the love between siblings, has caused confusion in some critiques. Helena has not allowed the comments to influence her decisions.

And then to the question on everybody's mind: will there be continuation to the trilogy?

"I've always cursed 12-volume fantasy dinosaurs. We'll just have to see how many volumes I can produce..."

Slightly more seriously, Helena assures us she will not be returning to Northshire. She has other plans in her mind and other manuscripts on her desk. But you never know, maybe the road will lead back to Northshire: a short film called *Noidantuuli* [Witch's Wind], based on *Unii pürretty polku*, has been made. The film takes place before the events described in the *Pohjankontu* novels and it is written by **Saara Leutola**. The atmosphere in the film is lingering, and it utilizes nature and the mythic qualities of the forest nicely. There are also plans for a full-length movie set in the Northshire world.

VUORI, ENTROPIA AND OTHER FUTURE PROJECTS

Finishing the trilogy was a massive task, but Helena has not rested on her laurels. Already while finishing *Talviverinen*, she started finding new stories in her head.

The novel *Vuori* [Mountain] (2014) was originally meant to be a science fiction short story. The idea, however, turned out to sprout elements for a longer story. Helena dove into the world of Viking tales and apocalypse, but modified them in her unique way.

The setting of the story is a town with a cloud-covered mountain in the middle of it. One day, the town loses all connections to the outside world and all signs point to the end of the world. The main character, Lif, is given the task of survival, and the only way to do that is to reach the mountain before anybody else does. Loki and other gods familiar from Viking mythology throw obstacles into the hero's path.

Vuori combines modern elements and fantasy so well that the Kuvastaja-jury awarded the novel as the best Finnish fantasy novel of 2015 – and this was the fourth Kuvastaja award Helena has now won. *Vuori* was also nominated for the Savonia award given out by the City of Kuopio.

In the autumn of 2015, Helena, together with her husband **Janne Nykänen**, published a thriller with dystopic elements. *Entropia* [Entropy] begins a three-volume series, which takes place in the Finland of the near future. The people of the countryside and the cities have been in conflict since an event called Black Tuesday. The main characters Marina and Jon square off against each other as well as the parties



running the system. The novel combines current worries about the development of society with conspiracy theories. It deals with energy running out, rationing, and the value of clean water, among other things.

Writing together worked well. Nykänen supplied ideas and developed the conspiracy theories, while Helena polished the work. Helena felt it was natural to write together with someone else.

Now there are new stories waiting. Helena still has her mind in prehistorical Finland and the stone age. The reasons for this might be the farmhouses in Saimaa, the near-by Astuvansalmi rock paintings, and the historical remnants the rain water has brought up on her cottage path. The author's box of treasures contains pieces of flint, bone fragments and pieces of comb ceramics. This upcoming work of paleofiction has the working title *Uiku* and it is currently simmering in the background. It will have both something new and something familiar for fans of Northshire.

Helena's path to becoming an author has been long, but it is the journey which has made her a storyteller. Helena has strict advice for those who dream of becoming authors.

"Choose a topic that suits you, both in content and in size. Write something that you like. You shouldn't go out of your way to try to find a 'sexy' subject."

Helena also encourages people to practice writing about different subjects and to stand by their own stories.

"When I was younger, I was susceptible to influences and comments. But now I am able to just let people think whatever they want!"

ANNE LEINONEN

Translated by **Marianna Leikomaa**
Updated version of an article published
in *Tähtiveltaja* magazine 3/2013



HELENA WARIS

WINTERBLOOD

The boy opened his eyes and found himself staring straight at the huge black bird leaning down over him.

"Arn!" The frightened cry escaped his lips before fear had time to wrap its strangling arms around his throat.

He was lying on his back on a steep slope, so steep that he felt himself gradually sliding down. His heels scrabbled for purchase at the roots of the rustling grasses. His breath caught.

This is still a dream. This is not real. Think! he commanded himself and slid one hand down to his thigh to pinch himself.

Ouch! Where have I ended up!

This was not home. Of that, the boy was certain.

The air held the promise of a storm. He could hear the sea roaring somewhere below, but did not dare move his gaze in the direction of the sound, not even for a glance. His eyes were locked on the bird waiting above him, the feathers on its face flapping in the wind and its shining beak poised over his chest like a sharpened sword, requesting consent for the final blow.

The arn kept tilting its head. It wanted to see its victim with both eyes, one at a time. Its gaze glowed with a quiet fire, speaking a language the boy did not understand.

Suddenly the boy's foothold gave out and he slid right under the arn's belly, and passed within reach of its knobbly claws. The bird's foot rose quickly and the boy saw the protruding toes spread out above him like a star. He closed his eyes as the bird's foot came closer.

A sound of ripping cloth. He jerked to a halt.

The boy stopped sliding. He heard the creature click its beak. A rebuke, but a gentle one.

He cracked open his eyelids carefully. His whole field of vision was filled by blue-black belly feathers fluttering in the wind. He raised his head and

saw that the arn's claw had punctured his trousers at the thigh and nailed him in place. How carefully the creature had done it! If it had wanted to, it could have crushed him. But the arn had not wanted to. It was protecting him!

The boy ventured to raise himself up to his elbows and look at the scenery opening out between his feet. A foreign-smelling wind made waves in the grass on the slope. A foaming grey sea churned far below. Green coastal hillocks ran in both directions as far as the eye could see. It looked like it would start raining any moment.

A cold quiver traveled down his spine. Nothing looked familiar.

Where in the world am I?

Suddenly something hurtled through the air. The arn squawked angrily and staggered. The claw that had held the boy in place was lifted. Enormous wings rose up from the bird's sides and swished the air so hard that the boy's ears blocked up from the pressure. He rolled over onto his stomach and hoped that he could stay in place. The arn jumped a few steps to the side before regaining its balance. Then all was quiet again.

The boy lay down with his cheek against the grass and saw the arn a small distance away. The bird shook its head and looked around grimly.

The boy saw the next stone as it hit the arn in the forehead. There was a sickening crunch and the arn's head rocked back. The boy saw blood starting to redder the paler feathers at the corner of the bird's eye. Fear dribbled down his chest like cold water.

The third stone was already flying through the air. The boy felt the bird's pain in his own temple. The cry arising from his throat intermingled with the bird's screech of agony.

"Get in the air! Fly away! Do you hear me?"

The boy got to his feet shakily and looked the bird straight in the eye. He wanted the bird to be safe, even though he was also afraid of being left alone.

"Go somewhere safe!" he yelled.

Reluctantly, the arn took to its wings. It gave the boy a long, wistful look, which filled his heart to bursting. Then the arn let itself be caught by the wind and rose far into the sky.

The boy turned in the direction he had seen the stone flying from. He brushed the black hair from his face and set his teeth with determination to meet whatever he had saved the bird from. Blood roared in his ears and he was filled with anger and defiance to the very tips of his fingers. If he had been handed a spear now, he would have snapped it in two.

He cried out in disbelief as he saw a strange boy climbing up the slope towards him. The stranger's blond bush of hair fluttered in the strengthening wind. His loud puffing could be heard all the way up the slope. When the newcomer revealed his flushed face, looking simultaneously worried and triumphant, the boy saw that the climber was a boy no older than himself. The stranger shook his fist in the arn's direction and, in an agitated manner, spoke words that sounded unintelligible.

The boy did not understand the language, but realized that the newcomer was full of bluster, thinking he had saved the boy from an attack by a monstrous bird and certain death. The fool.

The blond stranger clambered the last few steps on all fours and slumped down next to the boy, grinning broadly. The newcomer asked something, catching his breath. Perhaps it was about the bird, perhaps about the stone he had thrown. Perhaps the newcomer wanted to know where the boy had sprung from all of a sudden.

That's something I would like to know, too.

The blond stranger waited for an answer, but soon settled for shrugging, noticing the boy's lack of comprehension. Then the stranger pointed a finger at the pendant around the boy's neck and said something about it.

The boy wrapped his fingers possessively around the dark firesteel. It was all he had now, even though he was unable to remember where he had got it. The object still felt important. Infinitely important.

You can't have this.

Suddenly the blond stranger touched the boy's black hair in an interested manner. Tugged on a strand and let it go before he could raise his hand. Next the stranger squeezed the boy's arm mischievously to try out the firmness of his biceps. Before the boy could tense his muscles, the stranger's hand let go and he

sneered in way that the boy knew was meant to belittle his strength.

After a few searching moments, the newcomer pointed to himself and said kiet. He repeated the word proudly. It must be a name. Kiet.

"Kiet," the boy tried out carefully, prompting the other to nod, pleased.

Then Kiet poked a finger at his chest.

My name, the boy thought. I must have a name, of course, but why can't I remember it now? I can't have forgotten who I am!

At the same time, a fierce gust of wind rolled across the slope, carrying with it a tentative rain. Kiet gestured at a rocky ledge further above them and tugged him along. They stumbled under the cover of a small cave right before an abrupt thunderstorm attacked the landscape in all its fury.

The boy awoke in a cavelike hollow. As he saw his blond-haired guardian, he remembered what had happened earlier that afternoon.

Did I fall asleep?

Beyond the curving stone shelter now opened a rain-scented, nocturnal field that ran down the slope.

He clambered next to Kiet and took a good look at the sea writhing far below. It looked immeasurably large and deep, and he knew that he had never before seen such an expanse of water, such a shoreline. The steepness of the slope made his chest tighten. The landscape overwhelmed him with its strangeness, but it also made him shiver in fascination.

And the sky?

He looked up at the stars and flinched. *Oh, the sky!*

He felt his throat constricting with tears.

"The stars are wrong!" he had to say to Kiet, even though he knew Kiet would not understand. Would anyone understand?

"The stars are not supposed to be like that," he explained anxiously. He gestured upwards, waved his hands and ordered the stars to take their correct positions, but in vain. They would not do his bidding. They were frozen into strange configurations, twisted constellations staring coldly at him.

Kiet looked at him in astonishment.

The boy burst into tears. He prayed that someone would wake him. This had to be a malevolent dream. Someone was taunting him.

He pinched himself and felt the sting in his arm.

"What has happened to me?" he asked hoarsely. "Is this death? Am I dead?"

Suddenly Kiet seemed to grasp something of the boy's distress.

"Fog?" the stranger asked sharply.

Fog?



Kiet took his hand and started to pull him down the slope, repeating the word multiple times. With his other hand, Kiet mimed a bird's wings flapping.

"Fog, no! No!" He realized that Kiet thought the giant bird had come back. *Dimwit!*

Kiet did not care about his protests, but kept pulling him down the slope. They started to gain speed uncontrollably on the steep hill. They rushed down the slope, one after the other, and let go of each other's hands.

The boy felt his feet leave the ground and realized that running was the only option, as he could no longer slow down. The shore got closer and closer. The grass on the slope turned stiffer, and bare, sandy mounds rose up here and there. His feet hurt.

He had already run past Kiet when he heard the other boy shout something behind him. Still running, he turned his head back, caught his foot on something, and flew down into the grass. Kiet, running right behind him, had no time to stop, but ploughed right into him. In one big heap, they tumbled down onto the level sand.

After a few groans of pain, the boys started to laugh at their fall. He was still rubbing his bruised knee when Kiet stood up and started kicking the grass where he had first fallen.

Suddenly Kiet cried out in what sounded like amazement. Even though the boy could not understand the words, he saw what Kiet was pointing at.

Kiet pulled a sword from the grass carefully, as if his find were made of fragile glass.

What a sword!

He noticed he was holding his own breath.

From Kiet's grunt, the boy realized how heavy the sword must be. It certainly looked heavy. A mighty weapon. The blade shimmered dimly in the night, and he could see the ornaments and engravings upon it.

He reached out his hand to touch the sword, but Kiet pulled the sword closer, and the boy realized that Kiet was going to keep it for himself. He was indignant: he was the one who had stumbled upon the sword first, he had found it first. Kiet also seemed to understand this, because his expression held both annoyance and pride.

The boy started to follow Kiet, who held the sword in both hands and swung it clumsily at the long grasses in front of him. The sword whooshed heavily through the air.

Suddenly Kiet stopped and turned to him. Kiet looked him straight in the eye, serious. First Kiet pointed at the sword, then at himself, then followed a stream of speech and gestures that initially made the boy flinch, thinking that Kiet was threatening him, until he realized that the other boy was talking of having saved him and of the large bird and the stone.

He wants the sword because of his non-existent feat, the boy realized and nodded in resignation. He did not know how to correct the situation.

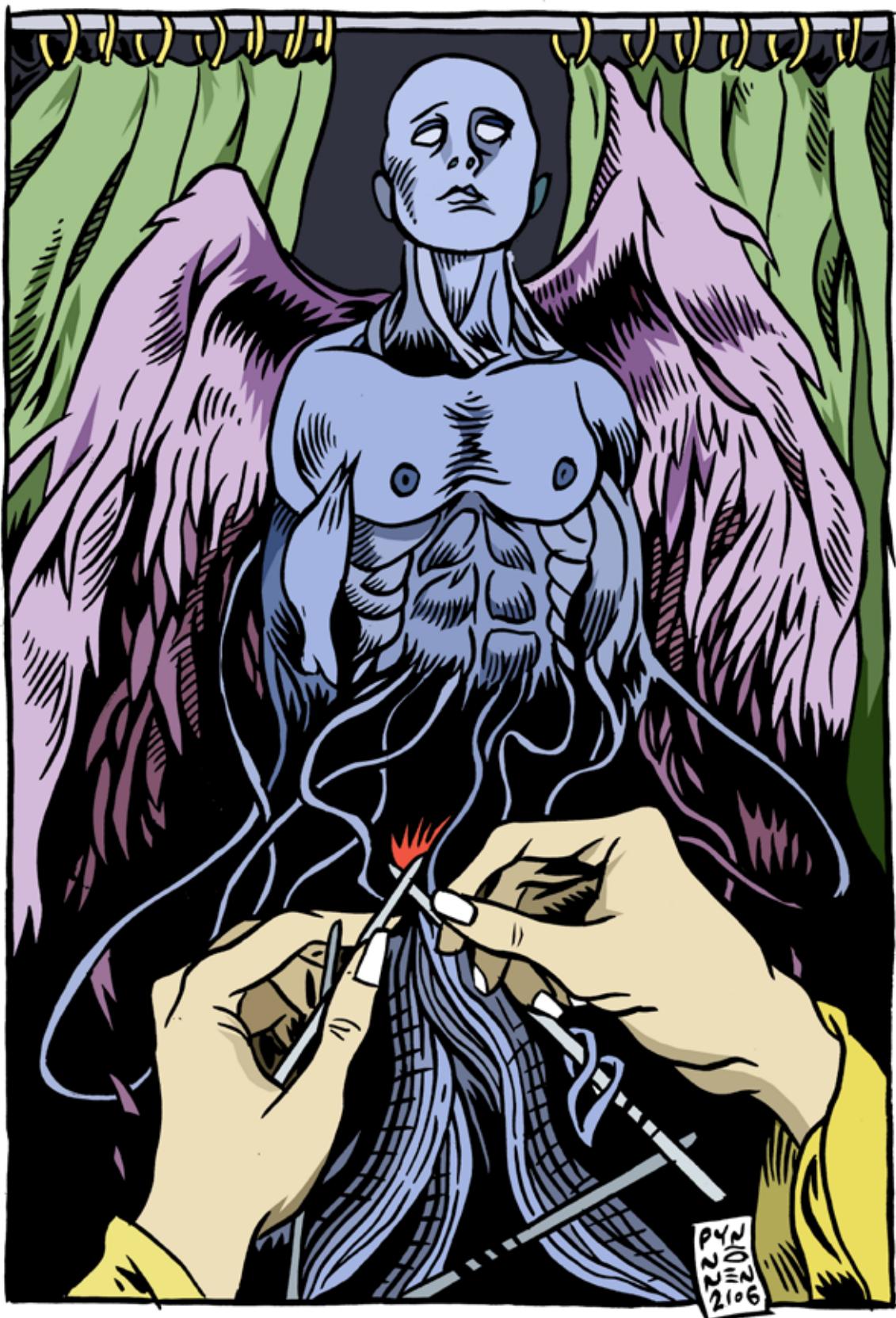
Kiet still had something to say. He wrapped an arm around his own neck, stuck out his tongue, and gagged, pretending to choke. Then Kiet took the amazed boy's hand and waved it through the air, straightened up, and offered the sword to him. Kiet had to repeat his performance twice before the boy grasped what he was trying to say.

If you save me, the sword is yours.

HELENA WARIS

Translated by **Sarianna Silvonen**

Excerpt from *Talviverinen [Winterblood]*
(Book 3 of the *Pohjankontu* series), 2013



PYN
NO
NEN
2106

LEENA LIKITALO

HER LIKENESS, MY BREATH

All the lantern soldiers are men. The ones that fight in the sky by the Emperor's side. Those just brought to life, chests shining with the brightest of lights. And those still being assembled by the girls like Sunnin and me.

"Annin," Sunnin calls at me, but just loudly enough to be heard over the sound of two hundred girls sewing silk and working silver.

"What is it?" I whisper back, but my fingers never stop weaving. The Emperor needs a constant supply of new soldiers to keep the ever-night at bay.

"She can't see or hear us now," Sunnin replies, and true enough, the white-robed Madam Jinn instructs the new girl seated on the other side of the skywell.

I attach the arm to my archer's shoulder before I pause in my work. I need to finish assembling the frame today so that I can start on the silk skin tomorrow. "Well? What can be so very important?"

"He is." My friend stands beside her soldier, so frail and pale compared to her latest creation. The swordsman wears the blue as iridescent as that of a monal's back feathers. His shoulders are wide and arms thick with muscle. But it's his face that takes my breath away. His eyes are slanted to perfection, his cheeks curve round and strong. His lips pout proud between the curled moustache and the chiseled jaw.

"What do you think of him?" Sunnin asks, though she knows no one masters faces quite like her.

I struggle to come up with the right words. A soldier's visage doesn't matter as long as he is functional. Some girls weave faces that remind them of their lovers, some in resemblance of their brothers. I always give my soldiers the same face – one that doesn't belong to anyone. Though no honor is as great as serving by the Emperor's side, I don't like the idea of sending even a part of my loved ones to a certain death.

Creating the blue soldier has taxed my friend greatly. Sunnin's pallid skin clings to her skull too tight. Her cheeks remain hollow and eyes sunk as if she were four times her age, not only twenty-two. But it would be cruel of me to deny her the praise she deserves. "He's beautiful."

Sunnin grins, and where just moments ago there was but bone and skin, I can see a glimpse of the girl with whom I fell in love all those years ago.

"Time to awaken him then," Sunnin announces. And though every single one of the girls around us produces one soldier a week, they all pause in their work to pay homage to my friend.

Since Sunnin is short like me, she has to rise on her toes to bring her creation to life. She winks at the crowd as if she were about to kiss a boy, not a lantern soldier. The newer girls giggle, but only because Madam Jinn can't hear them now.

I hold my breath as Sunnin inhales deep. Her lips are always soft and taste of jasmine tea. When she presses them against the soldier's mouth, I imagine myself in his place.

The tail of Sunnin's long exhale rasps at her throat. Soon, a blue light blooms inside the soldier's chest. His eyes open wide. A tremor runs down his straight back.

Sunnin sways, weaker by one more breath. I rush to support her, to rub her shoulders. For giving a part of oneself always leaves one cold.

The lantern soldier lifts his right hand and studies the fingers. He wiggles them in an accelerating rhythm. They move smoothly, without making a sound.

"Welcome to life." Sunnin shivers in the breeze that smells of sun-warmed leaves and red soil. She feels lighter now, seems gaunter.

The blue lantern soldier nods at Sunnin as if to thank her for a job well done. Then he brings his heels together and...

Sunnin smiles luminously as the soldier's feet part the floor. He drifts past the girls and soldiers being assembled, toward the small courtyard and the skywell. My friend clutches her twig-like hands against her chest as the soldier soars up, past the clouds, to join the imperial ranks in the sky.

"I think he's the best of my creations yet," Sunnin says as I guide her back to her desk.

I don't reply to her. Tonight, her soldier will fight valiantly, but there won't be too many like him. My friend can't have more than two soldiers left in her.

Sunnin shares her last night with me. We stroll the lantern-lit garden paths hand in hand. Rhododendrons bloom in the shades of pale lilac and peach despite the mist rolling down from the mountains.

We listen to the undulating call of the gold-maned monkeys. It almost sounds as if they're singing to or praising someone they love.

"I wish I didn't have to part from you," Sunnin says when we reach the stream bordering the garden. The calm surface reflects the sky, the blackness pierced only by the red, blue, and green dots. The sight, the war waged so far away, is eerily beautiful despite all the death and loss involved.

"Don't think of it now." I squeeze her cold hand and guide her toward her favorite spot, an arched stone bridge. From there, one can see the stream curling down the verdant mountainside, the bamboo forests inhabited by little brown bears, and the cottage with the curved roof that has been ours for almost ten years.

Sunnin leans against the bridge's rail. Her yellow silk robes hang limp on her skeletal frame. She stares past her reflection, at the lantern soldiers in the sky. There will be another morning only if the Emperor triumphs tonight.

She says, "I remember my first soldier."

I wrap an arm around her, never wanting to let go. It doesn't matter if she wants to tell me a story I know already by heart. In a few more weeks, I'll be just like her, a girl who's afraid to die. "Will you tell me about him?"

She shuffles closer to me, shivering in the night mist. When she speaks her voice is like honey in cooling water. "I was but twelve when I found him, washed ashore the river where my father used to fish. I waded to retrieve what remained of him, torn silk and bent silver, not much else."

In the sky, a green dot fades into nothing, marking the fall of another soldier. I can't help but to wonder if someone will find his remains or if he'll be lost forever just like Sunnin soon will be.

"I took him home in secret and reassembled him the best I could. When I showed him to my parents..." Sunnin's voice trails off.

I gently brush her cheek, and a tear clings to my finger. Her parents truly loved her. Though honored by her calling, they'd wanted her to stay with them. I... I had no choice. In my family, men become silversmiths and women serve the Emperor.

"It felt so right to fix him, even more right to bring him back to life."

I've always been in awe of Sunnin, and now more so than ever. For even though awakening all the soldiers has cost her dearly, my friend doesn't regret a thing. No, she's proud of the part she's played, of every new morning the Empire has seen thanks to her sacrifice.

"I have something for you." Sunnin takes a half-step back, and the sudden distance is almost too much for me to bear.

"Have I..." I whisper, afraid to ask if I've done something wrong, angered her.

Sunnin shakes her head. She produces a weavework from inside her robes and holds it before me. The silver threads glimmer, reflecting every single color of light imaginable.

I realize, the weavework bears her likeness.

"Sunnin..." I glance around us, but no one else braves the night. Yet, I dare not to touch her likeness. She shouldn't have stolen the silver, woven her face in secret.

"Take it or take it back." Sunnin presses her likeness in my hands with more strength than I thought was left in her. "But just take it."

How could I refuse her? I slide her likeness inside my robes, against my chest. The contours of her face prickle my skin with cold. I don't mind that at all.

Sunnin kisses me then, and I kiss her back fiercely.

She tastes bland and pale as if no drop or morsel had ever passed her lips.

Three days later, Sunnin has been gone for two days. I weave slowly and clumsily, using more silver than is needed for joints of a hand. I have created five hundred and forty soldiers. Sunnin was only three soldiers ahead of me.

I stir to the clack of Madam Jinn's clogs. I perch on my seat, tugging for more thread. No desk stays empty here for long. Countless girls dream of this honor, but only few qualify for the role. One must have sharp eyes, nimble fingers, and the talent for awakening the lanterns soldiers.

"Annin," Madam Jinn says as she halts before me. Her skin bears a healthy yellow hue and her black hair, gathered into a bun, glistens. As she motions to the peasant girl hiding behind her, her robes shift in a way that emphasizes the lushness of her figure. "Please tutor Linsin through her first soldier."

I place the unfinished hand on my desk, ashamed by what I see—really see—now for the first time. The joints are thick and ugly, the nails shaped wrong. Not ovals, but almost like claws. This soldier won't be an archer. "You honor me with your trust, Madam Jinn."

"That I do." Madam Jinn clicks her tongue as she takes in the flaws. "I will keep an eye on you both. Never forget that many a girl would gladly switch places with you."

A chorus of gasps draws Madam Jinn's attention. A bamboo green soldier hovers toward the skywell, bearing both a bow and a sword. Thus weighted down, he drifts up slowly, the light in his chest pulsing unsteadily.

"That's simply unacceptable," Madam Jinn mutters. "I must talk to that foolish girl immediately."

Linsin eyes greedily the silver rolls and bolts of silk stacked on Sunnin's desk. I clench my teeth to



prevent myself from saying things I'd later regret. Linsin has no right to take my friend's place. And yet she has all the right and reason.

"Come here," I say, just to delay the inevitable. "Show me your hands."

Linsin tiptoes to me, chin pressed against her chest. Blush creeps to cheeks sharpened by poverty, and her hands tremble as she shows her palms to me.

I umm and hmm as I inspect her hands. Calluses and healed cuts cover her slim fingers and small palms. She's used to hard work, though she can't be a day older than eleven. "Where did you get these?"

Linsin shrugs, keeping her gaze glued to the floorboards. Under her yellow robes she's rail-thin. "Ma..."

"Ma what?" I snap at her, though it's not Linsin's fault she'll have to continue where Sunnin left off. That gradually she'll take over every place and spot my friend once occupied.

"Ma was a basket weaver." Tears stain the corners of Linsin's eyes as she bites her lower lip. She thinks I might have her sent away. As if that was in my power. "I helped her the best I could."

I close my eyes, chastise myself. I am not honoring anyone by hating this girl, least of all Sunnin. I breathe out from between clenched teeth and open my eyes. Ours is an important duty. "You always start from the feet. They're the basis of every soldier."

Linsin nods. She eyes the hand on my desk, trying to take it all in. She must think I shaped the nails into claws on purpose, for she asks, "Will you help me with my first soldier?"

I grab silver thread from the roll and spin three rounds' worth loose. I was once eager like her. Sunnin helped me the best she could. "I will."

I don't sleep much these days. I lay curled on my right side, facing the bamboo wall. The silk curtain shifts in the moist, night breeze. As the scent of

damp earth and decomposing leaves fills the small cottage, I cradle Sunnin's likeness.

"Duck with crispy skin served with spicy rice noodles."

I tense, though it's just the new girl talking in her sleep. A part of me hates her for occupying Sunnin's old bed. A bigger part of me pities her.

"Silky tofu so soft it melts on your tongue."

I slip Sunnin's likeness inside my pillow, into its hiding place. Yesterday, I caught Madam Jinn studying me, dark eyes narrowed in what could have been either suspicion or concern. Yet, no one has mentioned the missing silver. Perhaps Sunnin's theft has gone unnoticed.

"Roasted pork belly with soy and spring onions. They let us eat as much as we please!"

Can you imagine that, Ma?"

I hug myself, fingers laced against the hollows between my ribs. Linsin speaks only truth, but doesn't yet realize, that even as we're fed like royals, in the end we will all wither to old women before our time.

"Cinnamon, cardamom, and peppercorn. Ginger and chili, too!"

I listen to Linsin prattling for a long time. We lead a privileged life here and bring much honor to our families. I have no right to feel sad when I am serving the Emperor.

And yet I wish that there could be some way for me to be reunited with Sunnin.

The next day, I don't eat a morsel for breakfast nor do I touch my cup of tea. Madam Jinn turns her gaze aside as I enter the hall. The servants have reported to her. I am a girl about to die.

When I reach my desk, I start weaving the soldier that will be my last. Madam Jinn strolls past me, but she ignores me. I bite my lips to hide a smile.

Linsin hums as she sews indigo silk. She punctures the fabric with fast little stabs. The yarn runs through the holes, whispering in tune with her.

She is so occupied that she doesn't notice me slipping Sunnin's likeness on the desk. I shift a fold of scarlet silk so that it covers the weavework. No one would think a face's presence here peculiar.

"Annin," Linsin addresses me, voice laced with undertones of humbleness. I must look decades older than I am.

I glance at the girl from over my silverwork, the nail of a little toe.

Linsin licks her lips, nervous. "Can I truly assemble any soldier I want?"

I study her, trying to determine if she noticed what I did earlier. Linsin wipes a strand of black hair from her forehead, already duller in color. She seems

innocent enough, but in the end, I can't be sure. "What do you mean?"

"I've made only footmen so far." The blush fits her newly-rounded cheeks well. "But last night I dreamt of an archer, the kind you weave so well."

No, she doesn't know. As I move to work on the next toe, I take pity on her. "I'll show you how to weave the bow."

"You will?" she asks, unaccustomed to kindness.

I glance at Sunnin's silk-covered likeness. It won't matter if my last soldier takes a day or two more to complete. The archer will keep Linsin so preoccupied that she won't notice that my soldier will follow a whole new pattern. "Of course I will."

Eight days later, I sew the last stich on my lantern soldier. The fit against the rounded chest is tight. The links of the silver armor press against the scarlet fabric as if the soldier were already breathing. The seams stretch. Stretch. Stretch even more.

The fabric settles on the frame, the stiches intact. I sigh in relief.

Linsin, well onto her second archer, pauses in her weaving as I behold my soldier. "It almost seems as if..." She points at the soldier, blushing furiously. "I mean, it has..."

I lift a finger to my lips. *Yes, I know. Now, please be silent.*

Linsin turns her gaze aside. She tugs for more silver thread, fingers weaving like crazy. Later she'll pretend she didn't notice a thing. That is good. I

wouldn't want to get her or any of the other girls in trouble.

I tiptoe to stand before the lantern soldier. My last creation is short, the same height as I am. I glance around—no one has noticed my work's completion. Excellent. Madam Jinn would stop me if she knew of my plan.

Quickly, without any ceremony, I cup the silk cheeks in my palms. I press my lips against the still mouth. There is so little life left in me, none in the soldier. Yet.

I draw in my last breath. As I blow light into the soldier, life abandons my fingers and toes. Numbness spreads to my limbs, my whole body. My vision starts to blacken, and I've never felt as cold.

A heartbeat later, I can hear whispers raised by curiosity. Then outraged shouts. The clatter of Madam Jinn's heels. But it's too late to stop me. Too late.

The last thing I see is the soldier winking at me, so proud, so fierce, so familiar. I collapse on the floor, smiling, though my death is but a moment away.

My last soldier bears the likeness of my true love. A part of me will always be with her, no matter where she goes.

LEENA LIKITALO

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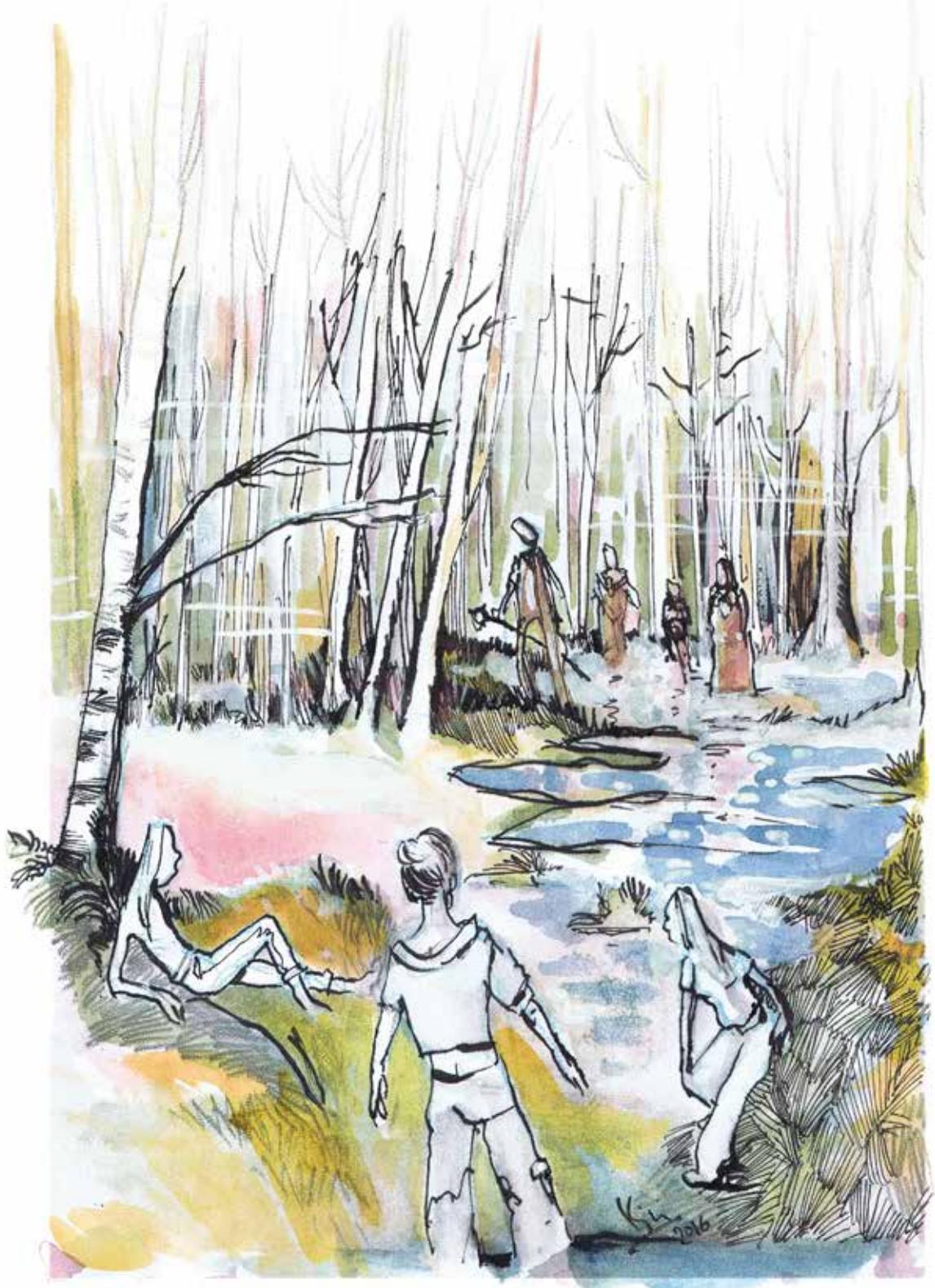
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MAGDALENA HAI

CORPSEMARSH

Once a year we head out to Corpsemash to play swamp soccer. It's really mostly about eating and drinking, lying on our faces in the mud in a light, drunken buzz, laughing so hard our guts hurt. But there's more to it than that. The heat of a high summer afternoon bringing out a light sweat on my skin. The smell of heather and moss. Just being there, in the moment. It really charges us up for the rest of the year.

We saw ourselves as a band who just had never gotten a break. At most venues, people thought we were groupies, even when we were there to play. But I guess that's because Ritu boinks every rocker-boy she can get her hands on. Now Heli is knocked up for the second time by Samuli from the Orcos of Doom. They're not married, of course. A "wolf couple" like the old folks say.

It's not like getting married would make a difference anyway. Samuli doesn't know a thing about being a dad. I doubt Heli has even told him yet. The pregnancy is too early to show, but I've known Heli long enough to see the "glow" a mile off—a certain feminine smugness, a certain blush of cheek. It won't be long before my darling Helcat starts puking and sleeping all day long like a limp rag. That's when Samuli will start stepping out again. Wolf couple my ass. Wolves are a whole hell of a lot more loyal than Samuli.

Petteri is our driver, always has been. He doesn't drink or smoke, but talks a lot about elves and forest folk. Petteri the Gazelle. He moves like a fairy, blonde hair trailing behind him, and clothes his willowy torso in tie-dyed shirts. He's so feminine that a lot of people think he's gay, but I know better. I've finished off a few sweaty summer nights wonderfully spread on his face.

Noora the Valkyrie, he calls me. Arms like oak, he says. Boobs like glaciers, burying anything in their way.

So, I'm no petite little girl. I've been a roadie for more than one band. They like me 'cause I look like I can handle anything. And since I'm a girl, I won't slack off nearly as much as some of the guys.

Petteri makes me feel strong in a different way. With him I am a fucking giant, in every possible meaning of those two words.

I give him a wide, dirty smile as he pulls his Corolla over to the side of the logging road.

"What?" he asks.

"Nothing," I say, still smiling, "just thinking."

Petteri turns the key to kill the motor and grins. A pearly white row of teeth in the face of a faun. "Yeah right, Noora Vee. I know how your mind works."

"We should really make a record, you know." Heli suddenly pushes up between the front seats. "A proper record. No more garage stuff, it's not our style. Then go on tour."

"That would be great," I say. "But it'll take some serious cash, which I for one don't have right now."

"Me neither," Ritu says and tousles her bleached platinum hair. "Student budget. Barely enough money for food."

Heli purses her lips. "It can't be that hard to scrape the money together," she says, disappointed, "if you really wanted to."

"Heyy. Let's not talk about this now," Petteri says with false brightness. He springs out of the car and bangs his knuckles on the roof. He knows that if he doesn't smooth things over, we'll have another fight on our hands.

Ritu and I exchange glances. Heli's family has money, so she doesn't really get what it means to not have *any*. Yeah, sure, we could get the money somehow. If we quit school and living and eating for a while. Heli doesn't notice our glance, of course. She just stares out from between the seats looking all demanding and wonderful. The world

could be her oyster alright—if she could just manage to keep from getting pregnant all the time.

"There's plenty of time to talk this through later," I say and open the passenger door. "Now my babes... Let's play ball!"

The air on Corpsemarsh is hot and thick as porridge. It descends on my skin and leaves it glowing. A lone mosquito buzzes lazily somewhere around my ear, but even it succumbs to the heat before I can crush it between my palms.

Yeah. It feels good to be back.

Heli has the ball under her arm. It's one of those old-fashioned leather balls, brown-grey and heavily worn from previous games.

"Let's sing," Heli says. Her blue eyes look serious. "I feel... like we should sing first."

I pop open a bottle of beer. It hisses beautifully with the promise of malty pleasure. "Alright, what do we sing?"

"*Omnos*," Heli says, squeezing the ball.

"Fuck no!" Ritu yells.

"Why not?"

"Well, because..." Ritu begins, but then lets her voice falter.

Heli grins. She knows she's won. "Petteri, you have your flute?"

Petteri whips a medievalesque brass flute out of the pocket of his pants like a fucking hippie version of Lucky Luke and starts playing the intro of Eluvietie's song.

Omnos suits my voice better than Heli's, so I find my spot and start singing. The language is long-dead Gaulish, but that's okay. The words seem hard to grasp at first, when you read them on paper, but once you catch the rhythm and actually sing them, they're easy enough to remember. I enjoy the roughness of the sounds, how the words roll off my tongue.

The song tells a story of a young, beautiful girl who meets a boy in the woods. But the boy is a wolf who breaks her heart and by doing that, causes her death.

Heli's high, clear voice joins in on the chorus. "Now only the deep pond awaits me," Heli sings. Her voice carries resolution.

This is why Ritu didn't want us to sing *Omnos* before the game. She's so superstitious, always afraid that one day one of us will fall and sink into some unseen deeper bog hole. But that's why we come to Corpsemarsh. It's safe, barely a marsh at all, and quiet as a tomb. There's room to prance around.

Helcat's voice and mine float over the marsh, and our echoes answer from the forest on the other side. It's moments like these when even I believe that someday we'll actually make it as a band.

Ritu doesn't join in the song, she just shifts her feet and glares under her crudely drawn eyebrows. A marsh wind rises, bringing with it the smell of decay. Heli's voice rises too, she takes the lead and I let her.

The girl in the song begs the wolf to stay with her. *I'll do whatever you want*, the girl says. But the wolf doesn't stay, of course. He laughs at her and says he never loved her. Never.

When Heli sings the last lines of the song alone, we all pretend we can't see her crying. The echo dies down slowly, and with it, the wind. The stillness of the air leaves us standing silently together. I cough. Petteri walks up to Helcat and places his hand gently on her shoulder. Heli presses her head against Petteri's bird-like chest.

"Samuli is a fucking idiot. You know that, right?" Petteri whispers.

Heli nods weakly. Sniffles.

Ritu is twiddling something in her pocket. She has an odd expression on her face. She stares at the marsh as if it were something malevolent. I decide to ask her what has been bugging her, but later, after the game.

Heli finally pushes away from Petteri and sighs. "Alright, I guess it's time to play." Her eyes are rimmed with red and she wipes her nose on her sleeve.

"Yeah," I say.

For the next half an hour we plough back and forth through the marsh, sometimes thigh deep in it. We are so fully covered in mud that only our eyes peak out through the smelly, black layers. I have twigs and peat sticking out of my henna-died bun and I think most of my clothes are done for. I'm laughing so hard I give myself stiches and I have to lie down on my back holding my side while the others still scramble after the ball. It barely stands out from the mud anymore. Then Ritu drops back from the group as well. Her chain-smoker's lungs are what they are, and it's not as if Ritu has ever been much of an athlete. A soft woman, inside and out, though she tries to persuade people to think otherwise. Her hair hangs across her face, wet and laced through with cotton grass.

"Hey, Creature from the Black Lagoon," I call out, "let the youngsters play. Let's go get refreshments."

Heli, who is only one year younger than me and Ritu, yells some kind of protest about my calling them youngsters, but she soon forgets it, battling with Petteri in the mud.

Ritu crawls towards me looking grateful. We plod together over to the tall pine tree where we left our bags.

Two more bottles open with a hiss, and we clink them together.

"Cheers," I say, and Ritu makes some kind of noise in response.

The bitterness of the beer glides along the roof of my mouth and sooths my heat-parched throat. I lean against the sap-covered trunk, thinking my shirt's ruined anyway, so what the hell.

"Oh god. I could stay here forever," I say, closing my eyes and enjoy the sunshine.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" Ritu asks. I open my eyes. Ritu is pointing her bottle at Heli, who is hanging off Petteri's neck, trying in vain to get him to fall over.

I have to think about it. "She's always been okay before."

Ritu picks a scab off her knuckle. She looks skittish and tired. I think it's time to bring up the elephant in the room. "Listen. Have you gone and slept with Samuli? Have your studies made you stupid somehow, so insensitive and cruel? You know how hard Heli takes it when Samuli cheats on her and—"

Ritu flinches and stops picking at herself. "What? No!"

"What's the matter then?" I growl.

"I..." Ritu opens her mouth and closes it again.

I take a sip, give her time to pull herself together. She digs into her pocket and pulls out the thing she was fiddling with before. A bronze brooch. It's a small thing, like a bunched up grub, barely two inches long. "I found this around here last year and took it with me. I meant to send it to the Board of Antiquities, but never got around to do it."

Ritu started studying archaeology in Turku the previous autumn. She's been so full of herself, just a little better than everyone else, and now it turns out she's been hiding artefacts from the authorities? Too precious. I laugh. "Isn't that illegal or something? To keep something like that for yourself?"

"Please, Noora," Ritu grunts. Something in her eyes makes me hold my tongue. "I've been having these... dreams."

"Okay?" The surprising turn of the conversation calls for a sip of beer.

"I started having them almost as soon as we got home the last time," Ritu says, rubbing the surface of the brooch with her thumb. "They're pretty awful. I dream that a man—a dead man really—a corpse comes to my window. He stares at me, and I know I've done something terrible."

"But they're just dreams," I say, wondering where this is going. "Right?"

"Yeah yeah," Ritu says. "At first I thought I had just forgotten something, was stressed about exams or... anything, really."

Heli screams as Petteri throws a clump of mud in her face. Petteri tee-hees. That boy's laugh makes me feel good.

"But then this one night, the corpse-man was trying to get in. In my dream. He was clawing at my window, trying to get it open." Ritu's voice trembles. "I woke up in a cold sweat. I got out of bed. I thought the corpse would come back if I fell asleep again."

I sigh and take another sip. "Still... Just a dream, Ritu."

"But then I saw the muddy marks," Ritu says. Her voice is hysterical. "On the glass and the window pane. There were muddy fucking claw marks all over the place!"

"Hey, come on now," I say, wrap my arm around Ritu's shoulders and shake her gently. "Some drunken moron was just trying to get in through the wrong end of the building, or had the wrong apartment. Your mind just added the noises into your dream."

"After that night, I started reading about the history of this marsh," Ritu continues stubbornly. "It was originally named Corpsemarsh because the locals believed that there are people buried here. Official surveys haven't found any proof of burials, though. No bodies and no artefacts." Ritu grunts. "I even asked my lecturer about this place. She said there are lots of stories concerning the marsh, and every archaeologist who comes to the area hears them, but that there's no actual knowledge of bog burials around here."

"What burials?" Heli asks, out of breath. She and Petteri have finally gotten sick of wrestling in the mud and have come for food and drink. "Are there swamp graves here?"

"Ritu was just telling a ghost story." I wink and give Ritu a squeeze, but she doesn't laugh. Instead, she pushes me away.

"Cool!" Petteri flings himself on the moss, amongst the lingonberry sprigs. Heli tosses him a bottle of water and takes a cider for herself.

"The stories are strange," Ritu says. "I read about this elk hunting party that found some stuff out here, brooches, fabrics and even a sword, but they didn't hand them over to anyone. They kept them a secret. Like souvenirs, I guess."

Heli hands out sandwiches from a plastic ice cream box. Her toddler has drawn a clumsy heart on it with a blue marker. "Salami and cucumber," she says, all motherly "There's cheese in them. I couldn't remember if anyone was lactose intolerant."

Ritu doesn't take a sandwich. She carries on with her story, staring at the metal thing resting on her palm as if she can't take her eyes off it. "Within a year the men had all died or disappeared."

Petteri, his cheek full of sandwich, tries to wail like a ghost.

Ritu furrows her brow and gives Petteri a look. "It's true. One of them hanged himself in a barn, and the other was run over by his own tractor. It was like he had suddenly decided to jump off at speed. The rest of the hunters—there were five or six of them, I think—just disappeared."

"Come on. It's not like some hillbilly farmers hanging themselves is news around here. And the other one probably just went to work drunk," I say.

"But no one thought they were those kind of guys," Ritu says. "And they all talked about someone following them, about hearing voices."

"Now we're talking!" Petteri says. "A real ghost story. Please tell us that you found more stories. *Terrifying Tales of Times Long Past...*" Petteri is grinning like an idiot.

"What? So you believe in elves, but not in ghosts?" I taunt, and Petteri throws a handful of sandwich crumbs at me.

"Hey! Those stick like ass!"

Ritu caresses the brooch. "I found more. Those disappearances and deaths happened in the 80s, so there was real information to be found on them. But people have disappeared here before, for a long time. And always just before it has happened, the people have talked about stalkers and having nightmares."

Heli adjusts her feet underneath herself. I'm pleased to see the game did her good. She strokes her belly without noticing it herself. "Hard to believe that there would be anything bad at Corpse-marsh," she says. "We've been coming here for what? Four years now? I've never sensed anything strange."

Petteri rests on his elbow and sucks his lip. "An exceptionally quiet place. There's no... you know, life... here."

"Don't get started on those fairies of yours," I growl.

"Elves," Petteri says. "Fairies are entirely different creatures. But there aren't any of those either."

Ritu trembles. "There's something here." Ritu opens her hand. The brooch has a patina of age. It looks fragile. "I think... I think I didn't send this to the authorities, because I knew..." Ritu looks up and seems to see us for the first time in a while. She looks so very tense. "I just knew I had taken something that doesn't belong to me, and that sooner or later I had to bring it back."

I yank a tuft of cotton grass off its stalk. Thunder rolls somewhere beyond the forest—the low purr of a gigantic cat.

"Chuck it back in then," I say. "Into the bog."

"It's going to start raining soon," Heli says. She gets a scarf out of her backpack and wraps it around her shoulders.

Ritu stares at the bronze grub. "I never want to see that man outside my window again."

A sudden breeze creeps up my skin and makes the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. We haven't noticed how the clouds have already formed a massive purple wall that begins to roll over the marsh. Ritu gets up. She squeezes the brooch in her hand. She walks a little further off. There's a pool nearby where the marsh water is darker than in the other pools. Her bleached hair has dried in the sun, it's like cotton grass now, a frizzed mess.

"That's strange though..." I say.

"What is?" Petteri asks.

"Ritu said that no evidence of bog burials have ever been found here. And all the people who have found something, disappeared later."

"So what?"

"Where's the loot?"

Petteri shrugs. Heli stops packing the food.

"What if those men disappeared when they were bringing the stuff back?"

Ritu holds her hand out over the blackness of the marsh pool. The grub-like brooch rolls on her palm. The murmuring sky has turned into a screaming shade of purple. I see Ritu's lips moving.

Now only the deep pond awaits me, she says. She repeats it over and over again.

A sudden bolt of lightning roars and rips the world apart. For a moment, I can't see a thing. I can't hear a thing. I fumble my way on hands and knees. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the tall pine begin to fall. Half of it one way, half the other. Only a tall spike, the tree's heart, remains stand-

ing, burning and fuming bitter smoke. The two halves of the pine tree crash to the ground, first one then the other. The ground seems to be still shaking from the lightning. I taste its sting in my mouth.

I'm trying to control the shaking of my body when my hand finally stumbles upon another human body.

"Noora!" Petteri yells, louder than he needs to. "Nordbert! Fu-uck! Valkyrie!" Petteri's babbling doesn't make sense. He's just making random noises, happy to be alive, and I begin to laugh. Hiccupping, I hug his narrow hips and pull myself up to the level of his eyes.

"Are you okay?" I ask, still laughing. Petteri nods, his doe eyes wide, and wipes the corner of my eye with his thumb. Tears. Damn it. I'm not laughing. I'm crying.

"Where's Heli?" I ask. "And Ritu?"

Petteri points at a figure limping towards us out of the smoke and mist. Her arm is hanging limp, but then she seems to pull herself together. Heli collapses next to me and Petteri and huffs, "I'm alright. I'm alright."

I sit up wiping the bitter smoke from my eyes. What's left of the pine tree is still smouldering. It doesn't explain why I can't seem to see more than a dozen yards in any direction. The thunder has left us under a thick blanket of fog. The mist is clammy. The heat is gone. Looking up I can barely see the dim yellow ring of the sun. There's nothing but moss and cotton grass where Ritu was standing before.

I see someone moving inside the fog. I shout, "Ritu!"

Heli pulls my arm down. She shakes her head with quick, jerking movements.

A man steps out of the fog. He is dressed in leather and wool. Wet hair hangs on his face and there's a rope around his neck. The neck itself is at an odd angle and his shoulders are hunched, as if he's in pain.

We scramble to our feet as quickly as we can. As the man shuffles closer, we can see the dark red abrasions on his neck. His eyes are covered by a dead, milky film. Bits of plants and brown, lumpy water trickle from the side of his mouth. More things sidle out behind him. They seem somehow fuzzy, unreal. Several have ropes around their necks, some have gaping wounds on their limbs and heads, as if struck by an axe. They stop and stand a few yards away, the quiet men and women.

They stare.

The hanged man, the first one, takes a step closer. He isn't very big, but he's sinewy. He has the body of a hardworking man. I feel the urge to let out a shrill laugh. His arms are covered in old tattoos, turned blue with age. In his hand he carries an axe. Beautiful workmanship, cast from bronze. Not green with age, like Ritu's brooch, but smooth and shining, like it must have been when it was new.

"We have heard your song," the man says, choking. He has trouble speaking and he licks his lips with a swollen, blue tongue. His eyes may be fogged by marsh water, but he's watching us sharp like a hawk. "It pleased us."

"Sing for us," the other corpses whisper behind the hanged man.

"Where's Ritu?" I ask. "What have you done with her?"

The hanged man doesn't answer.

"The sanctity of the grave has been broken," the other corpses whisper.

"The thief has been punished," the hanged man glares, tugging the rope hanging loose on his neck as if it's still hurting him.

The whispering behind him grows, "Sing for us, and we will spare your souls."

I can hear a malicious glee in the corpses' voices.

"Don't you mean 'spare our lives'?" Petteri asks.

The hanged man smiles. I shiver and take Petteri's hand. "They're going to kill us," I whisper but ask again, "Where is Ritu?" Yeah, she may be an arrogant university bitch, but I'll be damned if I let some Bronze Age swamp carcass take my friend.

"Gone."

"WHERE IS SHE?" I bellow.

The hanged man points at the bog pool.

"Oh, hell," Petteri yells.

Ritu's shoe is sticking out of the edge of the pool with her foot still in it. Her cotton grass hair is floating in a mess on the surface of the water, and the back of her shirt is bulging with swamp gas.

Petteri pulls Ritu ashore, turns her over and starts mouth-to-mouth. Ritu's eyes are like the hanged man's, foggy and open. Even when Ritu pushes Petteri off and begins coughing brown water out of her lungs her eyes don't change. She keeps on coughing, unable to stop. Far more liquid is coming out of Ritu's mouth than could ever have gotten in her in the first place.

"The thief is ours," the hanged man says.

"You keep saying thief," Heli says. "Even though you gave her the brooch."

The other cadavers hiss in fury, but the hanged man raises his hand to silence them.

"I was thinking about what you said," Heli says to me. "Everyone who found something in this marsh is missing or dead. Everyone has kept the artefacts secret, so there's no evidence of bog burials."

The hanged man stares at Heli. His milky eyes are hateful, but I see something else in them now—fear?

"It's a trap. You choose the people who you reveal the graves and artefacts to," I realize. "Then you haunt them, until they come back and sacrifice themselves here."

The hanged man twirls the axe in his hands. He nods with a stiff neck. "The living folk started the sacrifices, taught the Marsh to enjoy them," the man rasps. "As time passed, the folk forgot the sacrifices and their rituals, but the Marsh never forgot."

A wind rises simultaneously from everywhere and nowhere. It begins to circle us. It moves like fingers caressing me, my neck and skin. I look at Heli, who seems to feel it, too. A living marsh that eats life. Dear. God.

"That's why there are no elves here," Petteri says thoughtfully, and for once I don't argue with him. After this, I'll believe in anything. Elves and gnomes and goblins.

"That's why we never see people here," Heli says, and I realize she's right. We've never once seen anyone else here, no hikers, no loggers, no grannies picking lingonberries with their asses up in the air. I always thought that it was because we were making such a drunken ruckus, scaring them away. "Corpsemash eats them all. Or drives them off."

The hanged man steps up, this time stroking his axe with a conspiratorial air. He motions me closer. Standing up he barely comes up to my chin. I remember Ritu explaining once that Bronze Age people were tall. Maybe the axe is from a different era than the man, I ponder, but when the putrid smell of the marsh corpse reaches my nostrils I realize just how crazy and pointless that particular thought process is. The smell is so strong it seems to grab my face and it doesn't let go.

"We who suffer heard your song," the man says in a quiet voice. "We liked it." He caresses his axe with slow, gentle strokes. "Sing for us, and we shall only take you lives. Perhaps that will satisfy the marsh."

Ominous thunder rumbles. Despite the fog, the air feels heavy. The changing air pressure is a big, throbbing heartbeat in my ears.

"What's in it for us?" I cough. The man's stench gets worse the longer he stands in front of me.

"Only those whose souls are taken remain prisoners of the marsh for eternity."

"It's not good enough," Heli says. She has straightened her back, pulled herself up to her full height. It isn't much but she looks like a warrior. She caresses her still-flat belly and sets her jaw.

The hanged man snaps his neck into another position. He gives Heli an inquisitive look.

"What says the maiden?" the other cadavers hiss.

"What whispers the fair one?"

"You will drop this mist and let us leave the marsh," Heli says waving her hand at our surroundings. Wisps of moisture leave a twirling wake behind her hand.

"Why would we do such a thing?" the hanged man rasps.

"Because we promise to sing for you," Heli says, "for the rest of our lives."

The cadavers sigh and hiss. Their dead limbs splash in the pools they rose from. The hanged man strides with surprising agility over to Helcat. His rope trails behind him like an anchor. "Explain yourself."

Heli looks him in the eye. "You enjoyed our singing. So we'll promise to sing for you. Every night for the rest of our lives. If you let us live."

The hanged man weighs the axe. "And when your days come to their end? When your voices fall silent, what then?"

Heli doesn't even blink, doesn't spare us a glance, when she says, "On that day, you can call us back to the marsh."

"Like hell y—" I charge forward, but Petteri grabs my waist and holds me back.

"Noora," Petteri whispers, "don't! This could be our only chance."

I stop struggling. Petteri nods towards the ghosts. The ones in front have become more solid. Their voices are harder, more demanding. Their hands hold maces and axes, spears and sickles. They wait.

"You will accept our gifts," I hear the hanged man say.

The corpses begin to move. They are all around us. One at a time they come to us and hand over their treasures. I see Heli accept a round brooch from a tall woman whose face is covered in blood. I feel Petteri let go of me and utter a whimper. Someone is coming towards him.

I gasp when a young, blue-faced man grabs my

wrist and places the axe he's been carrying onto my open palm. The fittings turn black at my touch. The wooden haft rots and falls away until there is nothing left but a tube-like axe head made of iron. I take hold of it before it falls.

As I grab it I know I will keep it safe, my heart's secret treasure. I won't show it to anyone or tell anyone about it. The young man nods in approval, steps back and takes his places among the revenants.

The hanged man also turns to leave, but Heli stops him.

"One more thing."

The hanged man turns his head.

"Ritu," Heli says. "We need her."

The hanged man looks at Ritu with dead eyes. She's lying on the ground, still leaking marsh water, her wax-like features unmoved but for the slow flow of water.

"She is gone," the man rasps. "The marsh has claimed its own."

"Bring her back."

"Even if we did, it would be only an illusion," he rasps. "A figment of a person."

"That which is done cannot be undone," the corpses whisper.

Heli swallows and says, "All the same. She comes with us."

The hanged man measures Heli with his eyes. After a long while he nods. "As you wish."

Ritu stops retching water, but stays lying on the ground by the pool. The color starts returning to her pale cheeks. She sobs inconsolably. The revenants withdraw, sinking slowly back into the depths of Corpsemarsh. The hanged man walks into the silent fog that has already began its retreat towards the forest line. Thunder rumbles behind us, somewhere over the logging road and again farther off. Finally it falls silent. The storm has passed us. The sun's warmth pushes through the remaining mist. I only now realize how unfathomably cold it has been.

"Let's get the hell out of here," I say.

Heli takes Ritu and we go.

Full house again tonight. Sweaty faces, moshing heads, raised fists beating to the rhythm of the music. My voice kisses them, their mouths and ears. This will be our last Finnish gig for a while, and the crowd wants to squeeze everything they can out of it. From here we're hitting bigger stages, first Germany, then Brazil. Finnish fucking folk

metal. The best anyone's heard for a long time. Girrrl power.

"Thank you!" I take a bow and run backstage.

Petteri is already there, resting his head on his knees. His elfin hair a golden cascade on both sides of his skinny legs. Heli is tapping hearts into her phone. *Mommy loves you. See you soon.*

The night Heli's daughter Unna was born, we took Petteri's flute, my reindeer hide shaman's drum and Ritu, and sang Faun's *Gaia* right there in the delivery room, under the eyes of astonished midwives. We were lucky they didn't have us thrown out of the building. Heli calls home every night before the gig and makes sure Unna sings. We are pretty sure the deal we made with the undead wouldn't apply to an unborn child, but it's understandable Heli doesn't want to risk anything.

Thank god Samuli turned out to be a decent father after all. Helcat's kids are everything to her, but I don't know how Heli would manage without Samuli. He comes on the tours with the kids as much as he can, but he has a life, too. He's studying logistics in Rauma, becoming an upstanding citizen and everything.

I take a sip of water. *Genuine spring water*, it says on the label. I grimace. I can't lead just any old lifestyle anymore. I had to give up beer and cigarettes, and start eating healthy and exercising. I have my own fucking workout routine, *tailored to my needs* for fuck's sake. Sure, there's a lot of talk about how our band is heading straight for burnout anyway with this pace of gigs, but what can I do?

I wipe sweat from my face with the hem of my shirt. I hear hundreds of feet stomping on the other side. They'll start shouting soon. Every night a different crowd, but they all do exactly the same thing.

Ritu sits straight on a stool, her guitar across her lap. Ritu... Ritu is cool, as always.

Her cotton grass hair doesn't need bleaching anymore. After the marsh, it started growing bright white. It makes Ritu look wild and somehow dangerous. It's a draw to a certain kind of fanboy. On stage, Ritu's fingers fly across the strings, her boobs straining against her too-tight top, and I just know that backstage after the show there'll be a line of lads waiting for her. Death hasn't changed her preferences in the sack at all, but the guys she hooks up with... I don't know what she does with them, but they're never quite the same afterwards.

The roar of the crowd takes form. *Corpsemarsh! Corpsemarsh!* they yell. The hungry masses are calling, and we poor souls have to answer.

We always play the same encore. We end the night with *Corpsemarsh*. That's how it goes. Heli's voice is never clearer than when singing that song. Petteri's fingers tease a melody out of his flute that has both the men and women in the audience pissing themselves. Ritu is at her most fearsome.

But even under our playing I always hear a sound. It's like Captain Hook's crocodile clock, reminding us that one day we'll run out of steam. *Tick tock, tick tock*. One day, the crowd will get tired of our sound and no one will come see our shows anymore. Who will we pretend we're playing for then? Maybe we'll just lose the will to do it anymore. Stay in bed and take a day off. Let the song die.

But not today.

"ALRIGHT PEOPLE!" I bellow, "Are you ready to hear—"

I pause to let the crowd's energy build. Sweat is running into my eyes. It stings like a motherfucker and blurs my vision.

"—to hear how THEY'RE WAITING AT CORPSEMARSH?"

The crowd goes mental and I start growling into the mike:

*They're waiting at Corpsemarsh.
The deep pool awaits
Its treasure to reclaim.
Corpsemarsh always claims its due.*

Faster now. I scream and roar.

*Alone in my bed I hear it.
In my song I hear it.
Hear the thunder rolling.
And I weep. I weep. I weep.*

MAGDALENA HAI

Translated by **J. Robert Tupasela**
First published in the anthology
Rocknomicon (2015)



MAGDALENA HAI

Magdalena Hai (b. 1978) is a writer of science fiction and fantasy as well as children's stories. Praised for her imaginative worlds and heartfelt characters, her first novel *Kerjälaisprinsessa* [*The Beggar Princess*] (2012) was nominated for the LukuVarkaus award in 2012 and won the Kirjava Kettu award in 2014. Her short stories have been nominated for the Atorox award and the Estonian translation of her story "Vaskimorsian" ["Vaskmõrsja", "The Brass Bride"] won the Stalker Award in 2015.

A lover of cross genre fiction and all things strange, Hai's fiction often combines elements of sci-fi, fantasy and horror. Her main work so far, the *Gigi and Henry* series, is a steampunk trilogy for younger readers and teen audiences, comprising of the novels *Kerjälaisprinsessa*, *Kellopelikuningas* [*The Clockwork King*] (2013) and *Susikuningatar* [*The Wolf Queen*] (2014).

Besides writing, Hai is an active member and editor in Osuuskumma, a publishing co-operative founded in 2012. She also teaches writing.

Hai writes under a pen name and she will haunt a porcelain doll when she dies.

"There's nothing, I mean nothing in the catacombs under the City Hall. Leave now!"
- Rompanruoja, Head Goblin of ESC Wizarding Bank

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Jussi Vainikainen, maailman parasta 50-vuotisjuhlavuotta!♥

SPEKTRE – Speculative fiction in Tampere

AFTERWORD



Now is the time for diamond dogs and spiders from Mars.

Organised Finnish sf fandom got its start 40 years ago with the founding of the Turku Science Fiction Society on 27 January 1976. The *Spin* fanzine from Turku, and particularly the fandom column published in it by **Tom Ölander**, the father figure of Finnish fandom, introduced Finns to global sf fandom.

Things really started spinning when fandom activities spread across Finland in the early 1980s. Various cities got their own sf societies and magazines, such as *Tähtiveltaja*, *Portti* and *Aikakone*. Finnish con culture also took its first steps with *King-Con* (1982) and the first *Finncon* (1986), both helmed by Ölander. Increasing numbers of Finns also began travelling to large European cons. Both the 1987 Worldcon in Brighton and the 1990 Worldcon in The Hague drew a particularly large crowd of Finnish fans.

Though the idea seemed completely utopian in the 80s, people were already dreaming that maybe one day Finnish sf writers might be translated and read around the world. Tom Ölander had an even wilder dream of bringing a Worldcon to Finland. Tom passed away in 2002, but the spark he lit is burning brighter than ever.

Next year this mighty dream that many thought impossible is coming true with Worldcon coming to Helsinki. It is wonderful to be here to witness this outstanding feat. It is also fair to say that the foundations for this event have been laid by the entire 40-year history of Finnish fandom and everyone involved in it.

We hope to see all of you in Finland in August 2017 when Worldcon 75 will take over the Helsinki Expo and Convention Centre. It will be a great party!

So let's do the time warp again!

TONI JERRMAN

The writer is an age-old dinosaur who thinks he remembers something from the 1980s.

FINNISH WEIRD

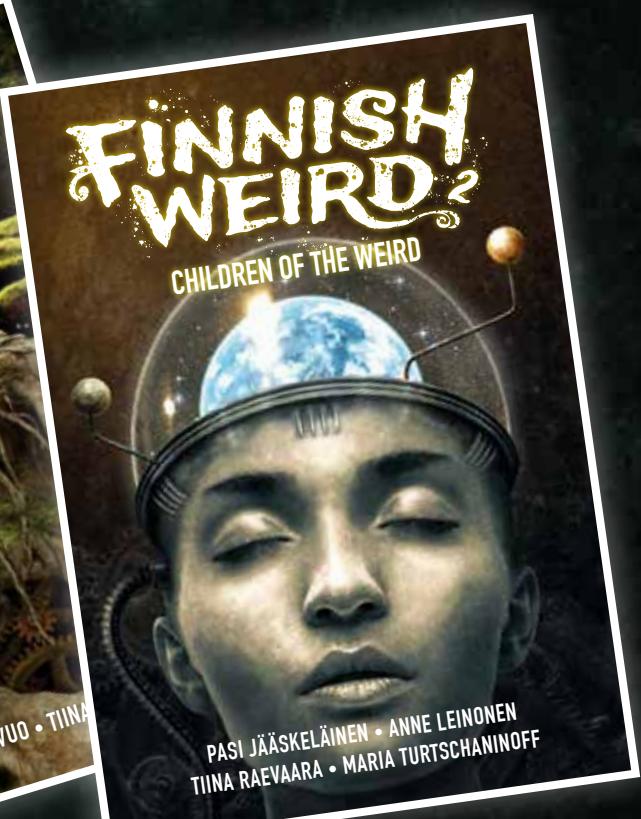
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TONI JERRMAN has been editing Tähtivaelta magazine for over 30 years. When he's not working on Tähtivaelta-related stuff, he writes reviews of books, comics and movies for various Finnish newspapers. He would be a totally different person without Substance D, The Lizard King and a pocket-sized Ubik. www.tahtivaelta.com

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VILLE PYNNÖNEN is an illustrator and comic book artist with a fascination for horror. His work also includes short comics, though long-form storytelling is more natural territory for him. Recently Pyynönen has also favored traditional social realism in his stories, but there is always a place in his heart for horror even if that space has to be made with force.

SARIANNA SILVONEN is a multitasking translator, technical writer and archaeologist as well as a lifelong book lover and science fiction fan. She shares a roof in the bourgeois suburbs of Espoo with a little comedienne and a man who collects ugly plastic gorillas. She enjoys archaeological fieldwork, playing with words, watching cartoons with her daughter and walking in the woods with her dog.

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