

Black Ribbons

by Chris Slusser

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1

Abigail stood behind the counter at the university library. She wore jeans and a long-sleeved patchwork shirt, a random mix of dark pink and darker pink patches. She wore canvas moccasins on her feet. Her long brown hair was loosely pulled back into a clip. She had a pretty face, dark blue gray eyes. She wore computer glasses and was leaning on the counter, studying the computer monitor intently. Three big books were open to certain pages and spread out around her. All the lights in the library were off, except for the desk lamp beside her.

She had closed up the library, but stayed late to do research, as she always did. She had graduated from the college a few years ago. She was now 25. But she still worked here. Mostly to have this private after-hours time to study.

In the silence, she suddenly heard the front door open. She was startled and looked over. Had she forgotten to lock that door? She may have left it open for the janitor. She did that sometimes. She couldn't remember.

The black silhouette of a man walked slowly toward her. She knew she should panic, but she felt prepared to handle anything. She had pepper spray within arm's reach... and holy water.

He stopped walking a few feet from the counter. "Miss Smith?" he said.

"How do you know my name?" she asked, feeling more alarmed.

He stepped into the dim light of her lamp.

"It's you." she said. She was shocked.

* * *

The sky was dark as the sleek mirrored ship sped toward the surface of the Earth. Its reflective surface was really copying the view around it, to camouflage the ship, making it nearly invisible.

Inside, men were rushing around trying to secure a safe landing. Their leader, Rowan, stood at the helm near the pilots.

The pilot to his right said, "I don't think we'll be able to land here. The ship's too damaged."

"Still, we have to try," Rowan said. He was tall and strong with rugged features and long dark hair. "If we can land safely, we can make the repairs and leave this place quickly. But our repairs can only be done on land. And we'll not make it all the way to Raress without them."

The men behind him were struggling to tie and strap equipment and boxes down, so they wouldn't fly around if they crashed. They would secure themselves in the adjoining room when they were done. One by one they rushed off to belt themselves into their seats.

"Secure yourself," the pilot to Rowan's left said to him gravely. He held

tightly to his controls.

Rowan soberly stepped behind them and watched as this well-planned mission went terribly wrong. Alarms began to sound, and a monotone voice—part of the ship—said, “Atmosphere exposure. Prepared air diminished...”

The hull had been breached. It had been weakened by an asteroid field they had tried to weave through. They'd been hit. Another hit had damaged some of their ability to control the ship. They could no longer control speed.

He saw the Earth's surface come hurtling ever faster toward them. They still had power. They intended to descend gradually, but steering or pulling up seemed to be compromised as well.

Was it all over? Were they meant to die here on this primitive planet? The dark Earth grew closer. A forest of pine trees rushed up to meet them. He was amazed he had taken the time to identify them. He had read so much of Earth.

Feeling truly that this would be the last moment he would ever know, Rowan braced himself and closed his eyes.

A thundering boom accompanied the sudden jolt of them being slowed by crashing into the trees at an angle, then the sudden harsh stop of the ship crashing and burrowing itself quickly into the Earth.

He had heard glass shatter and metal groan and fold. But now there was silence. He opened his eyes.

He was hanging by his seat belts. The ship was almost completely nose down, halfway buried in the ground. Pine trees and branches had pierced through the ship's windows and hull easily because of their high speed. His pilots had both been stabbed and impaled with branches. Both were dead.

Tears leaked out of his eyes quietly. “Argot! Zephan! Nephah!” he called behind himself.

He unbelted himself and let himself fall the six feet down to a piece of earth where the nose of his ship used to be.

He heard men groaning and shuffling around in the room that was now above him.

“We're here,” came a weak reply at last. “All but Cadet.”

Rowan cursed in their native tongue.

“Trees breached the hull...” another man said sadly above him. It was Gregor.

“Come down,” Rowan said soberly. “There is a way out.”

The pressure of the crash had blown open the bottom of the ship, which was now upright. Gregor swung down from above and dropped to the earth between the pilots. “So many lost,” he said.

Rowan said nothing, only turned and made his way out of the ship through the opening. He stepped out into still night air, cool. He wondered how many had heard their crash, whether it had shaken the earth. He was

sure it had.

Gregor climbed out behind him. Then slowly one by one the others made their way out. They gathered silently around him, waiting for guidance. Nephah was bleeding from a wound to his side. He held his hand to it.

"You're injured," Rowan said to him.

"It will mend," Nephah replied. "Three brothers are lost. This is but a trifle."

Rowan nodded. "There are seven of us now," he said sadly. He stared longingly up at the sky. Then he looked back to his family gathered around him. "There is a rock formation, a cave, where travelers before us have hidden an emergency ship. It's small, but will have rations, and enough power to get us back to Raress."

They looked surprised, but relieved.

"The problem is we will have to travel on foot a long distance. And our food supply was destroyed when atmospheric air entered our ship." They looked worried, and he dreaded telling them what he had to tell them now. "This is a savage planet," he said. "Many of our kind have visited before us. They brought back warnings and knowledge." He took a deep breath, "Which I will share with you now."

The men were looking more alarmed.

Rowan continued, "There is nothing on this planet with enough life force to sustain us except for the blood of humans."

"What?" Zephan cried.

Rowan went on, "The sun of this planet means certain death to us if we stand directly under it. We will burst into a sudden and all-consuming flame."

"You can't be serious!" Argot let out.

"The people of this world have devised magics to... repel and harm us. A certain water they call holy, and a symbol made of crossed bars," Rowan demonstrated a cross with his hands, "and certain plants."

"Ohh..." the youngest brother, Shae, crouched down on the ground and put his head in his hands, no longer able to stand. "Human blood," he said in misery. "Our ancestors..."

"It's like cannibalism," Zephan said. He looked pained. "Can blood be drunk without killing the human?"

"No," Rowan said with remorse. "We would need all of the blood, and even then might not have enough."

The lone wolf of their clan, Piah, had gone over to stand by himself. He faced a tree and absentmindedly kicked it every now and then.

Rowan continued. "We will take families," he said quietly. "So none will have to suffer the loss of the others. And we will pray over them. We will move as quickly as we can across this land to our destination."

The men looked utterly in shock, each trying silently to deal with this harsh new knowledge.

“Let us bury our dead,” Rowan said quietly. “And prepare for our journey.”

2

Abigail stared at the man in the library. He said nothing. He was dressed all in black, as usual. It had been years since she'd seen him. Her heart was pounding in her chest, but she did a good job of hiding her fear.

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked, with as little emotion as she could. Her hand had moved slowly to a shelf underneath the counter. She wrapped her fingers around the bottle of holy water.

"What?" he said. He sounded honestly surprised. "No."

She let her grip on the holy water loosen a little bit.

"I had to ask," she said seriously, "you know."

* * *

The men were gathered around Rowan. They had buried their three brothers the night before, then spent the day hiding from the sun and sleeping inside the ship.

Now it was night again and they were all dressed in black. It had been decided they should wear black clothing to blend in with the night better as they traveled. They also had black cloaks with hoods. Possible protection from the sunshine. They had packed very few things. Rowan held a compass and a map in his hands.

"We will send back a group to salvage this ship as soon as we can contact them, but for now we leave it as it is. We must walk to the south," he pointed briefly to the map. "We are in a place called Canada now. Our destination is somewhere in the area called Montana. That is where our rescue is hidden."

"Is there no faster way to travel?" Nephah asked. His side still hurt from his injury.

"They have only archaic transportation devices," Rowan said, "and none of us knows how to operate them. We'll call less attention to ourselves if we travel by foot."

They said nothing, only listened.

"We'll stop near the first house we sense there are a multitude of people in," Rowan said gravely. "We will sneak quietly inside, so as not to wake them. We will take them in their sleep. Piercing veins in their necks to drain the blood quickly."

Shae looked as if he might be sick. All of them were hungry. And the Earth's atmosphere made them crave cleaner air, pure. Pure everything. Nothing on this planet could sustain them for long.

"We will fold their hands and say the Final Prayers over them," Rowan said quietly. "Then we'll burn their houses to the ground. We don't have time to bury them. But they must have a proper farewell."

The men were silent, some staring at the ground, all looked grim.
"Let us begin," Rowan said. He raised the hood of his cloak onto his head and began to walk through the woods. The men raised their hoods as well and followed him.

* * *

After about five hours of walking they finally reached a little town. It had only one street, seemingly. All was quiet. They walked slowly by each house, sensing the living beings within. One or two in that house, three in this. Then finally they came to a house with six.

"Here," Rowan said under his breath as he halted.

It was a two-story house, light blue, with a neat yard and a white picket fence. Rowan walked almost silently to the front door. He took an eternity to turn the knob. It was unlocked.

He unlatched it carefully and made no sound. He swished into the house in his black cloak and the others followed. He motioned for Zephan, Shae, and Piah to follow him and the others to search the first floor.

Zephan and Shae looked a bit petrified. Piah looked almost angrily determined. They followed Rowan up to a carpeted hall. He motioned for Shae to come with him. The other two walked on. Shae and Rowan entered the room of two little boys.

They seemed to be about five years old. Twins. Each in his own little bed. Rowan bent down silently. His sharp upper teeth grew longer. He covered one boy's mouth and bit quickly into his neck. Shae saw the boy's eyes fly open, but then slowly close again as his body was drained of blood. A tear ran down Shae's face. How could he ever do that?

Rowan turned to look at him with blood on his lips. He motioned for Shae to go to the other boy. Now that the boy's brother was dead it was almost easier to kill him. To spare him the misery of waking up to find his bother gone.

Shae did as he had seen Rowan do. He bent over the boy, let his sharp teeth descend, covered the boy's mouth and bit quickly into his neck. The boy squirmed under his hand and Shae started to suck quickly. The blood tasted disgusting to him, like metal, but he was so hungry. The boy stopped squirming and Shae drank the last drop that he could get. It wasn't enough.

He could hear Rowan muttering The Final Prayers behind him. He folded the hands of the boy he'd just killed and started to recite the Final Prayers over him too.

Zephan and Piah had killed the parents of the boys, down the hall. Argot and Gregor had shared the drinking of a teenage boy on the first floor. Nephah had killed a teenage girl. The house seemed even more silent than it

had when they'd arrived.

Rowan licked the blood from his lips and wandered down the hall to an unoccupied room to be alone and grieve. It was a large room, filled with dolls of various sizes. And a sewing machine. Lots of dresses, a few partially made, were piled on a table. Dresses for the dolls. This made him feel worse. There were tears on his cheeks already. He didn't care.

He saw bolts of ribbon and fabric lined up on shelves, and one caught his eye. It was a spool of beautiful black shining ribbon. Perfect for a funeral, he thought. He took the big spool of ribbon, and left the room. The others had gathered soberly on the first floor, waiting for him.

He silently motioned for them to walk out the front door as he descended the stairs, though there was no need for them to be silent anymore.

As they walked back down the path to the gate, Zephan and Piah stayed behind to light the house on fire, each with two flint sticks they had packed. They rubbed the sticks together to create a large flame that quickly engulfed the frame of the door. They each walked around and lit other places outside the house.

Rowan stood outside the gate. He unwound a long length of black ribbon and cut it with a knife he'd taken from his pocket and unfolded. He let the ribbon drop in a random pattern at his feet. He said a quick silent prayer with his eyes closed, then he motioned for the others to come. As a group they quickly walked away from the house, down the street, and ducked into the woods at the first opportunity. The house was completely engulfed in flames now. They stopped briefly to look back, then hurried on, through the cold woods, to put distance between themselves and their crime.