

Henceforth, a jape.

Monkeyshines

Winter 2022



MONKEYSHINES.MEDIA



*"Matter" by Christopher Fahey
instagram @crucial2020*

Winter Animal Oracle



The Sow: the symbol of generosity, nourishment, and discovery

Though the Sow is usually a sign of generosity and nourishment, reversed it can symbolize greed and ignorance. The winter is a perfect time to look at the little things that make the world beautiful and not overlook them. There is beauty in imperfection. Ignorance of such things makes one ugly. Make a change to rid yourself of that ugliness, and bring forth the beauty of your wisdom. Try to judge all living things on their merits, flora and fauna alike.

I leave you with this old Gaelic saying, "When you thought you were riding the sow's back, you were standing beside her in mud."

Until next season.

// Painted Birch //

beithe péinteáilte

Winter Animal Oracle by Painted Birch
mailto:oracle@monkeyshines.media



"Eye of the Storm" by Alexa Goldstein
instagram @ alexa.isabella.goldstein

Free Yourself

Smile and nod
Blend in with the fog
Become one with the mist
Say goodbye with one last kiss

I will not change
Nor be consumed by your rage
With a smile on my face
I become your absolute disgrace

Some may need to defy
In order to someday fly
Let them be
Happy and free

by Alexa Goldstein
instagram @ alexa.isabella.goldstein



Poisoned Souls

It started when he came into the hospital. It was late at night, and her shift was ending. He told her he was poisoned, and she didn't doubt him. His face was cadaverous, along with the rest of his pale body, and he stood there, swaying with languorous eyes and a frightened expression on his face. He died thirty minutes later. The tests showed that there was an injection done at least twenty-four hours ago. So, she told the police, who then interrogated the family. They confessed almost immediately. The victim's two siblings. Yet, they both claimed they worked alone.

by Catherine Baker

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Thank you Betty. So it goes.

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Featuring:

Cover image: Krampus by PLUGO
<https://PLUGOarts.redbubble.com>

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Circle by Brian Ferrari

A Bug by Dan Love

Matter by Christopher Fahey

The Doorway by pthelo, using
Zoetrope 5.5 AI by @ai_curio
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Misplaced Clip Art by Shiney

Special 4-page insert: Announcing
the Kickstarter campaign launch
of **A Tiger's Tale**, a graphic novel
by our cover artist, **PLUGO!**

Winter 2022

Monkeyshines



The Astronaut

I give off this image of steady and routined and true
when all that always lifts me is the soaring mind,

free and unencumbered, making lists of things so
choosing and doing without judgment and crime.

It's in the air. It's waiting to land. It's in the block
of time we've committed to and the alone it affords,

the order and the anticipation, the universe in
the length of the cigarette. You might think these

are artificial boxes and that to be truly free you
must rid yourself of these lands of markers, but

I say, sure, yes, maybe in a perfect world, whatever
that is. I'm afraid of giving in totally to that urge

because it would be like the end of parents, lovers,
history and child, work and systems of meaning,

and everyone else like out in space without a suit,
just waiting down those fatally sublime moments,

those heavens in the seconds spiraling softly in
new air until utterly and, finally, this silence.

by Alan Semerdjian
twitter @ alansemerdjian



Circle

In a Queens, New York row house
A mother and her infant begin their daily stroll.
She pushes the carriage forward
embarking on their route
In these trying times.

She turns right into the kitchen
then right through the living room
another right into the dining room
where mother and child are momentarily bathed
in a sunbeam through the skylight.

Another right turn and it's
back through the kitchen again.

There's a rhythm to the carriage wheels
rolling on and off the area rugs.
The mother chants along in a sing-song voice:
Right turn, right turn, right turn, sun!
Right turn, right turn, right turn, sun!

Around and around they go.
Through the sunlight every 37 seconds.
The child squints and laughs
The mother smiles through her song.

This moment in time she will always remember
How she kept her baby safe.
This moment in time she will never recount
to a child too young to remember.

The mother's efforts will not be in vain.
The child will live for 101 years.
Ultimately exposed by a grandson
Who didn't trust the science.

Lying in an ambulance headed to Elmhurst Hospital
There is some cellular recall.
A flicker of a memory:
Right turn, right turn, right turn, sun.

by Brian Ferrari
website @ brianferrarinyc.com

Q: Historians looking back at 2021 - what will confuse them?

Jorts, the himbo cat. Please do not butter Jorts.
His employee photo was a sweet potato, but HR
asked us to change it.

- Ape NFTs

- Bean Dad

- Milk Crate Challenge

Lost hiker won't answer phone calls from rescuers;
thinks it's a spam call.



The Road's a Good Time Too

One Night As I Lay Sleeping
My Wife's Breath Upon My Face
I Woke a Restless Dream
And We Walked A Sacred Place

The Field Was Full of People
The Moon Rose High Above
Forever On Its Journey
As The Trees framed it in Love

It Seemed a Sacred Temple
Standing in That Place
The Night Sang Out in Chorus
The Moonlight Full Upon Our Face

I Held Her Hand In Deep Reflection
Of Our Place In Time And Space
It Seemed the Cosmos Moved Before Us
And We Followed in it's Grace

So as We stood there Staring
So Enraptured and so Clear
We missed a Friend Beside Us
Until He Whispered In My Ear...

Yo The Road's a Good Time Too.

So We All Left the Nightclub
Full of Trees and Stars and Blue
To Venture to The Road
For the Promise of a Good Time Too

Some Just Stood There Staring
At the Slow Progress of Flight
As the Stars Continued Dancing
Across the Canvas of the Night

Like Gods... Like Gods of Old that Told Us
That on Them We Can Rely
And While We Walk The World Below
...Our Spirits Bound to Sky

And We Dance the Dance of Destiny
To a Tune We Can't Ignore
We Live Within The Moonlit Night
And Sing The Simple Score

The Road's a Good Time Too
The Road's a Good Time Too
The Road's a Good Time Too

*by Scott Grimando
instagram @grim_studios*





© Scott
Grimando

"In the Deep" by Scott Grimando
instagram @ grim_studios

Freedom?

I do not find Saturday mornings are the best time for me to contemplate the true meaning of words, but I found myself doing so during a defensive driving class in which I recently was enrolled. The instructor, an amiable man named Jim, asked everyone in the class to go around and state the biggest reason why they enjoyed having the privilege of driving. When it was my turn, I stated that I liked not having to rely on anyone else to go places. Several other people in the class said they enjoyed the freedom that being able to drive gave them, and each time I heard it, I bristled. At that moment, I realized I had a problem with the way other people use and define freedom.

I was curious about what the official definition of word actually is but Merriam-Webster's Dictionary was no help as it gives two sets of definitions: an "essential" version and a full version. And while both definitions have some overlap, neither the shorter essential version nor the longer full version could assist me in explaining what was bothering me about the usage of that word.

It wasn't until a conversation with a group of friends days later when I brought up my issues with the word freedom that I began to see why I felt unsettled about its usage. We agreed that freedom commonly refers to the ability to make one's own choices and to say and do what one wants, free without constraint.

"But what happens if I am purposely hurting someone while exercising my freedom?" I argued. "Don't I have a responsibility to take that into consideration?"

I don't think I even realized it until the question came out of my mouth. That's what I think is missing from the current discourse around how freedom is used. While one cannot control how other people will react to the things people do and say, does a person have a responsibility to weigh the consequences (intended or unintended) that come with exercising their freedom? While I feel that people should consider the consequences of acting on their freedom if it would purposely harm another person, there are other who would argue that my thinking isn't really freedom. It would be a logistical nightmare if every person was bogged down by the thought of what might happen as a result of making a choice to do what they want.

Upon reflection, I think my concerns have less to do with what freedom actually means and more to do with how that meaning is interpreted by others. To go back to my defensive driving example, the feeling of freedom

one might get from being able to drive anywhere at any time comes with certain responsibilities: observing all traffic laws, being alert to road conditions and other drivers, ensuring my vehicle is properly maintained, etc. It's the responsibility part that is missing from current discourse around freedom. Currently in media and on various social platforms, there is a sense that one person's right to freedom is more important than anything else, including the freedom and rights of others. While the word freedom refers to one's ability to do whatever they want without restriction, it is important to understand that freedom comes with a responsibility to ensure that what they are doing isn't intentionally inflicting harm or violating someone else's rights.

It is also important to note that we are technically not able to do anything we want to do whenever we want as there are laws and legislation which dictate acceptable ways of behavior. To use a horrific example, one may think they have the freedom to harm or kill someone, even in their own home, but laws specify that the police have a right to come into that person's home and arrest them if the police suspect or have evidence a crime is being committed. To use a more innocent example, one may want to go to White Castle at 2 a.m. for some sliders but if White Castle is closed, one does not have the freedom to break into the restaurant looking for food.

I guess what my real issue with freedom is that many opinions being expressed in our country seem to be that exercising one's freedom comes with no responsibility to ensure the safety or well-being of anyone else. But that view forgets that, to some degree, we are forced to rely on others to negotiate and survive the world around us. Some are people we know but others are strangers. Even with the impact of social media highlighting this fact every day, we often forget how much we rely on other people and how interconnected our lives are. For people to co-exist together, we must understand that, intentionally or not, our actions have consequences for others. If I decide to go to work while I am sick, my decision impacts every person with whom I come in contact during that time.

At the end of day, I think it's important to consider this question — should your right to exercise your freedom absolve you from any responsibility if you intentionally harm another? And if the answer is yes, then shouldn't it follow that some one else's right to express their freedom absolve them from any responsibility if they intentionally hurt you?

by Thomas Becker

DECADE IN THE MAKING!



Leaping from the pages of *Kung Fu Magazine*! The classic comic-strip jumps off those black and white pages and onto bookshelves this Chinese New Year of the Tiger!

Featuring digitally remastered and colored artwork, glossary and back matter; this graphic novel is created by **Monkeyshines** cover artist PLUGO! Created in the grand tradition of *A Journey to the West*, *Usagi Yojimbo*, and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

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A Tigers Tale

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One Lucky Collector will receive **The Original Gouache PAINTED Monkeyshines Krampus Cover-Art!**

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Darkness Rising, part 3

Content Warning: Violence, blood, and brutality.

The air was stagnant upon the desolate, arid plane where Ralla first felt the pains of humanity. She sat casually atop a large boulder overseeing the sea of dead soldiers in various stages of decay strewn about. Her living army was nearing four thousand, a sufficient number for her needs. She looked at them, pathetic in comparison to herself, but fine specimens of the roaches that they were. Well, most anyhow. She paid close attention to Sanya, calculating her rate of success should she be wrong in trusting her. It's been two full years since she relinquished control over her every move, and Sanya has yet to disobey. The prospect of being granted unlimited power weighs over her dainty head. Every village, harbor, and town they have encountered has been pillaged and left desolate. There were few survivors, and even less not taken into service. It was only on whims that she would indulge Sanya's humanity. It was almost always the children and elders that would be spared, useless to the fight she would say. On occasion she would peruse through Sanya's thoughts, searching for any indication of betrayal. She found none. Yet, there is no room for miscalculations once the portal is opened. They must move swiftly and without hesitation. Ralla watched them go about their motions of life, ignoring Sanya striding closer, the slightest frown grazing her lips.

"Not feeling remorse are we, Commander?" Sanya's lips breaking into a slight grin.

"How can I feel remorse when according to you I am heartless?" Ralla's expression remained unchanged.

"Indeed. Then I must assume that you do not trust me despite every order I have so dutifully obeyed." Sanya leaned upon the boulder where Ralla sat and joined her in gazing about the troops.

"Mine are much easier to tend to," she murmured. Ralla leered at her. "Relax, I have every intention of aiding in your return and

helping you exact your revenge. I'm much too invested to back out now. Besides, isn't it I who should be worried? Once you are finished with me, what's stopping you from casting me aside?"

"Blood may mean nothing to me, but my word in battle is solid as stone." Sanya snickered at Ralla's words.

"That's not very convincing. I've seen you destroy mountains," Sanya jested.

"You have served me well, and we have struck an accord. When I take hold of Baradwys, I will return you and your minions to this wretched place to do with it what you will."

"Pardon me if I take your word as salt." Sanya knew she was testing Ralla's patience, but was willing to push further. She knew that the only reason she was alive is because she was the key in executing Ralla's plan. She stood becalmed as Ralla pulled the small dagger she kept in her boot. After everything that she has endured, she was sure this would not be the way Ralla would take her life.

"Open your mouth," Ralla commanded, and Sanya willingly obeyed. Ralla put the dagger to her own arm and sliced her flesh. She watched the crimson stream flow from her veins down Sanya's throat. Sanya accepted this gift willingly. Ralla had given her only a few drops once from a finger prick when the torture had brought her near death. It had saved her then, but this was much more. She could feel every muscle in her body repair itself and increase in strength. She drank for but a moment, yet felt more powerful than she ever imagined. Ralla clenched her fist and mended her wound. She handed the dagger to Sanya who reciprocated the offering.

"Now you have more than my word. Never have I done such things, nor do I anticipate doing such again." Ralla returned the dagger to her boot, healed the gash in Sanya's arm, and resumed her supervisory position as rain began to trickle from the sky.



This is a continuation of the story that begins with "Darkness Rising," part 1. To catch up, simply point your mobile device's camera at that QR Code to the left, or go to <https://monkeyshines.media/2021/summer/serial/fiction/darkness-rising-p1.html>

Ralla assembled her troops as the sun and moon began their changing of the guard. She did not need to see Sanya in place to know that she was ready. Her minions were milling about, slowly encasing her own soldiers. She could feel the nervous tension

Darkness Rising, part 3, cont'd

emanating from the living as the dead meandered. Ralla waited until Sanya's puppets forced them to the remnants of the crater that was brought into existence upon her arrival. She allowed herself a fractioned second to confirm Sanya's stance, and to her relief it was unnecessary.

Sanya watched the sky for the exact moment when the sun sank below the horizon. Upon the last rays, she closed her eyes and played her strings. She has become accustomed to the sounds of death, even finding the sweetness in their demise. She breathed in the aroma of new death and could feel Ralla's excitement as they both watched the crater fill with the blood. For a moment, they locked gazes and she could see the smile upon Ralla's face and the battle lust in her eyes. Ralla sliced her hand, and dipped it into the pool of blood, chanting quietly as her essence mixed with her sacrifices.

The ground beneath them began to quake, deafening thunder crashed around them. Ralla collected the bellowing winds into a cyclone, engulfing the crater. Sanya ran to her side and stepped into the cyclone, bidding the ranks of the risen to follow. Upward she rose until her fingers touched soil. She climbed out of the portal and took cover beneath the thick brush just as Ralla had instructed. This was her post, she was to remain hidden until further instruction. From this point, she drew her minions quickly and efficiently. Sanya opened her mind to Ralla, affirming their progress. She would be the last to emerge. And it was a small eternity until she did. Upon her entry, Ralla turned and closed the gaping rock behind her. Two moons glimmered brightly in the sky. Ralla leaned upon Sanya's shoulder and admired the celestial view.

"Are you ready? Do you remember your orders?"

"Of course Commander. I remain here, hidden. We meld, giving you command of the army. I will keep them moving and active but they will obey you."

"Good girl. When all is done, I will return to you here. Unless of course, you would like to stay a while." The edges of Ralla's lips turned upward at Sanya's musing.

"Perhaps I shall for a bit Commander. I think I would like this very much. Go, reclaim your rites. They will follow you."

Sanya accepted Ralla's control for the first time in years. She forgot how strong Ralla was. She could feel her blood lust coursing, and she herself became excited. She divided her army into ranks and handed them to Ralla. A hundred thousand dead soldiers marched at Ralla's back and she was finally in control. Sanya had already decided to follow through; there would be no sabotage, no betrayal. Her hate for Ralla had turned into hardened appreciation. She was her commander and Sanya was determined to follow her to the end.

Ralla closed her eyes and allowed her feet to land softly upon the familiar trail. It's been a lifetime since she's trod these pathways, yet she remembers as if it were only a day ago. She paused for a moment and opened her eyes to gaze upon her gully tree. With a flick of her wrist she conjured a force shield about herself. She could feel the rushing of heavy feet advancing toward her. She had the four thousand sacrificed soldiers at her back. The remaining minions were divided and left to defend her flanks. She was prepared for her uncle. He was tenacious in battle, after all he had trained her. Yet Ralla was but a child before she had surpassed him. For all his fierce strength, he was predictable. She arranged her offensive battalion in a circle, as to encase her. She would control the hive from the center. As she envisioned, Avouterie encircled her minions. He was outnumbered a hundred to one, but they were gods after all.

Ralla centered herself as she felt Sanya taking the posted battalions back under her control. The transition was fluid, seamless, as if they were of one single mind. With a breath, Ralla ignited the blades of the dead. Each sword and knife burned a brilliant green.

"So, dear niece, you have returned to us at last. I have waited for this day."

"Good to see you too Uncle. So glad that I didn't disappoint you." Ralla snickered. "You have but one chance. Return to whence you came. There is nothing for you here but your own demise."

Darkness Rising, part 3, cont'd

"I disagree, I believe there is a birthright to claim." Ralla was quick and playful with her words.

"That was forfeit when you wore your brother's blood! Another claims it now. You will never sit at your mother's throne!"

Avouterie lunged forward into the sea of the dead, followed by his comrades. Ralla's forces met him head on. The crashing of steel and crunching of bone drowned out the approaching reinforcements.

Sanya felt the rush of power as Ralla commanded her army. Every movement of every soldier was deliberately placed. She watched through Ralla's eyes the plan of attack. Under the chin, nape of the neck, and through the heart were the kill targets. She pushed her minions onwards until they were just out of range of the battle. She closed her eyes and allowed the scene she desired to play in her head. When her stage was set, she sent her army forward to play it out. Soon, her swarm was attacking from every side. Avouterie's army was encased by the dead and soon their sheer numbers overpowered the gods. The heart was the least effective target, so Sanya aimed for the nape of the neck. She felt Ralla's power grow with every true strike and with it, her own abilities as well.

Ralla relinquished the army to Sanya and waded through the battle toward her uncle to face him herself. She drew her sword. No magic flame adorned its blade. This would be a fair fight. She would give him that. Avouterie stepped forward to meet her.

"Here we are again Uncle. Just like old times." Ralla smiles eerily, twirling her sword.

"I am finally going to do what I should have done twice over. I will have your life Ralla."

"I think not, but you're more than welcome to try." Ralla rushed forward and was met by a force stronger than she remembered. Or, perhaps, she had grown too accustomed to fighting humans. The clash of sword and shield was weighing upon her uncle. He was beginning to tire as she grew in strength and speed. Every drop of spilled blood was running around her feet and she was pulling all the energy from it. With a crushing blow of the shield to the side of her uncle's head, Ralla at last had her opportunity, moved forward for the strike, and pierced her uncle's throat. Ralla drove her sword

deeply, nearly taking his head from his shoulders. She drained him, drinking the warm blood from his neck, absorbing his essence and power. She would need it to face her father.

Sanya slowed her army down and surveyed the scene. Much of her force was obliterated, either stomped or smashed, or turned to dust.

"How many more of your uncle's forces do we face?" she thought to Ralla. Telepathy was second nature now. Despite standing next to her, this felt natural.

"That was all of them. They didn't count on me retaining my power, much less getting stronger. They didn't bother to train more gods."

"Are you sure?" Sanya did not necessarily doubt Ralla, but was leery. It seemed almost too easy.

"My father will be the greatest challenge. He is my next target."

"And your mother? Do we dispose of her?" Sanya felt a twinge of sadness from Ralla.

"Please, make her death a quick one. You will need to strike her heart and sever her head." Ralla swallowed hard. "There is a child Sanya. Bring it to me. Alive."

"Yes Commander." Sanya nodded. She gathered and regrouped what was left of her army, added the fallen gods to her ranks, and set them off in the direction of the palace.

Ralla made her way to the gardens. She stood amid the vivid blossoms, breathing deeply. This is the scene of her first memories; her father, gingerly tending the suckling plants beneath a warm mist. She reached down and scooped a fistful of the rich soil, letting it scatter with the wind. A bitter feeling pierced through her. This was never her space, she was simply an intruder. Much as she is now. Ralla returned from her thoughts as she felt her father approaching the garden.

"More than a hundred years. For what purpose have you returned? And to this place? My place," Malfu growled.

"Yours and Akan's. But never mine."

Darkness Rising, part 3, cont'd

"I tried daughter, I tried to teach you, as I did your brother, to be gentle and nurturing. But you, you never listened. You broke every bud from its stem, ate every berry."

"You know what I remember father? I remember convulsing, right here, and Akan sitting upon your knee." Ralla took a deep breath, trying to fight back the anger and remain calm.

"I told you not to eat the purple berry flowers. You never..."

"You were sitting there watching the poison run through my veins!" Ralla howled.

"And yet even the strongest poison could not kill you!" Malfu roared. "I knew then, when nature itself could not undo the disaster that was your birth, that there would be no stopping you! Since the moment you could walk you were cruel to everyone and everything in your path. I always tried to counter your vile nature, you are my daughter and I wanted to love you. But you were always wicked. You hurt the other children. You killed for sport. You slaughtered your brother, your kin, your blood! And for what?" The clouds in the sky let loose with tremendous rains as Malfu began to focus his hatred upon his daughter.

"Why did you return here? Did you assume you would be forgiven for your transgressions?"

"Forgiven father? For killing my brother, or being born?" Ralla turned to face Malfu. "I have not come for reconciliation. I have come for vengeance." Ralla's voice was steady and firm as she drew the winds about her as a shield. Her father would not be defeated by the blade of a sword. She knew she would have to defeat him by hand.

Sanya did not bother with stealth as her army flooded the silver palace. She swiftly and accurately overpowered each guard in turn. Brute force and overwhelming numbers were her ally. She watched as gods smote and burned hundreds of her minions yet it seemed to do nothing to halt her advance. Every fallen god, even minus their heads, were worth the loss. She found it easy to manipulate them and discover their powers. She was able to advance quickly, as

many turned and fled from the scene. She was taken aback only when Shaah herself exited the palace. The other gods focused on her puppets, but Shaah saw through them, straight to her. Sanya instinctually drew her guard. She could feel Shaah's assaults upon her and was pleased to see this is where Ralla obtained her skills. These attacks, she was familiar with. Sanya locked her mind, blocking the mental and physical tirade that was being hurled in rapid succession. This is what Ralla prepared her for, and in this moment Sanya was grateful. She felt her adrenaline work its way through her body. She felt the excitement of battle fall upon her fingertips. She encircled herself with the fallen gods, alighting each of their powers to shield her. She drove her army forward, slashing and clawing at Shaah. With each flick of a wrist, Shaah set dead soldiers to their final rest, but was unable to reach Sanya.

As Shaah made her way through the ranks, Sanya began pulling the strings more fiercely. She tapped into the newly dead guard to find his strength and a smile broke from her lips. She raised the gods hand and drove her force to him, forcing his power from his fingertips, and all things stopped, frozen in this moment. Without a second's hesitation, Sanya made the nearest soldier drive his blade through Shaah's heart. A second drove his sword through her neck, and her head rolled upon the ground. To be sure of her death, Sanya used a third god to create flame. She set the body and head ablaze and watched it turn to ash.

When that was finished, Sanya began searching the palace. It was not long till she came upon the scared child. The small boy was cowering beneath a bed, tucked away in a corner. Sanya halted her minions and approached him. She took his hand without a word, lifted him up, and set forth to find Ralla.

When Sanya came upon the gardens Ralla was in the throngs of battle. Lightning sparked from the hands of Ralla's father. Sanya watched as Ralla absorbed the energy only to drive it back at her aggressor. Sanya studied him, watching two of his arms hurling attacks while the other two kept shields. Two chiseled legs supported this massive form, that towered over Ralla. Yet, her human body did not stop her. It made her more agile, not simply

Darkness Rising, part 3, cont'd

quick to strike, but gave her a rapid turn of power. As quickly as she was struck or absorbed energy, it could be sent on the rebound. There was no shortage of hurled bolts. Ralla drew a shield around her, taking a moment to penetrate her father's mind. She was met with his defenses, but Ralla bombarded him both physically and mentally until he could not defend both. She began to manipulate and control her father, attempting to bind his power as he had done to her for so many years. She pinned his arms to his chest and side, and dropped him to his knees.

Sanya watched as Ralla struggled to render Malfu useless. She watched her Commander bend and contort herself in attempt to keep control. She could feel Ralla's pain and energy, both horrific and beautiful at the same time, and she was in awe. Sanya left her mind open to Ralla should she need it, but never once did Ralla draw from her, not even in the moments when Malfu broke free of his child's binding, sending Ralla flailing backward and landing sprawled on the garden stones.

Malfu took careful aim at Ralla, sending his strike to her heart. Ralla regained herself and dodged quickly, allowing the power to grace her fingers. Sanya watched Ralla glow violet as the strike entered in one hand, rolled through her body, and was released from the other with grave accuracy. Ralla watched the strike pierce her father's neck, and did not hesitate. Immediately she launched a barrage of attacks, each finger releasing its own deadly missile. Ralla ran to her father, placed a hand on his heart, and delivered the final blow. She watched the blue light leave his eyes as she absorbed his power.

"Goodbye father. I loved you once." Ralla whispered as she knelt beside his body. She removed a crystal orb from his neck, stood, then set him aflame. True rest, he deserved that much. She knew the extent of Sanya's power and did not wish for such to be his fate.

"I would not have gathered him" Sanya remarked aloud as she approached Ralla, carrying the child. "I would have respected your wishes."

Ralla turned to Sanya and for the first time she was able to see the toll the battle had taken. Blood flowed from Ralla's eyes, ears, and nose, along with every wound she'd endured.

"It is well enough. For my will can be fickle and I would not want the temptation of such things."

"Shall I set your uncle and the others to the same fate?" Sanya asked earnestly.

"No, by all means, they are your spoils. But I would drain them of their blood, and bottle each in turn. You earned the right to their powers." Ralla wiped the blood from her eyes and looked at the crying child.

"What of him Commander? Do you wish him dead?"

"No. I will keep him. Well, someone will keep him. I will train him when the time comes. He has mother's spirit and father's eyes. He will be useful someday." Ralla surveyed her young brother.

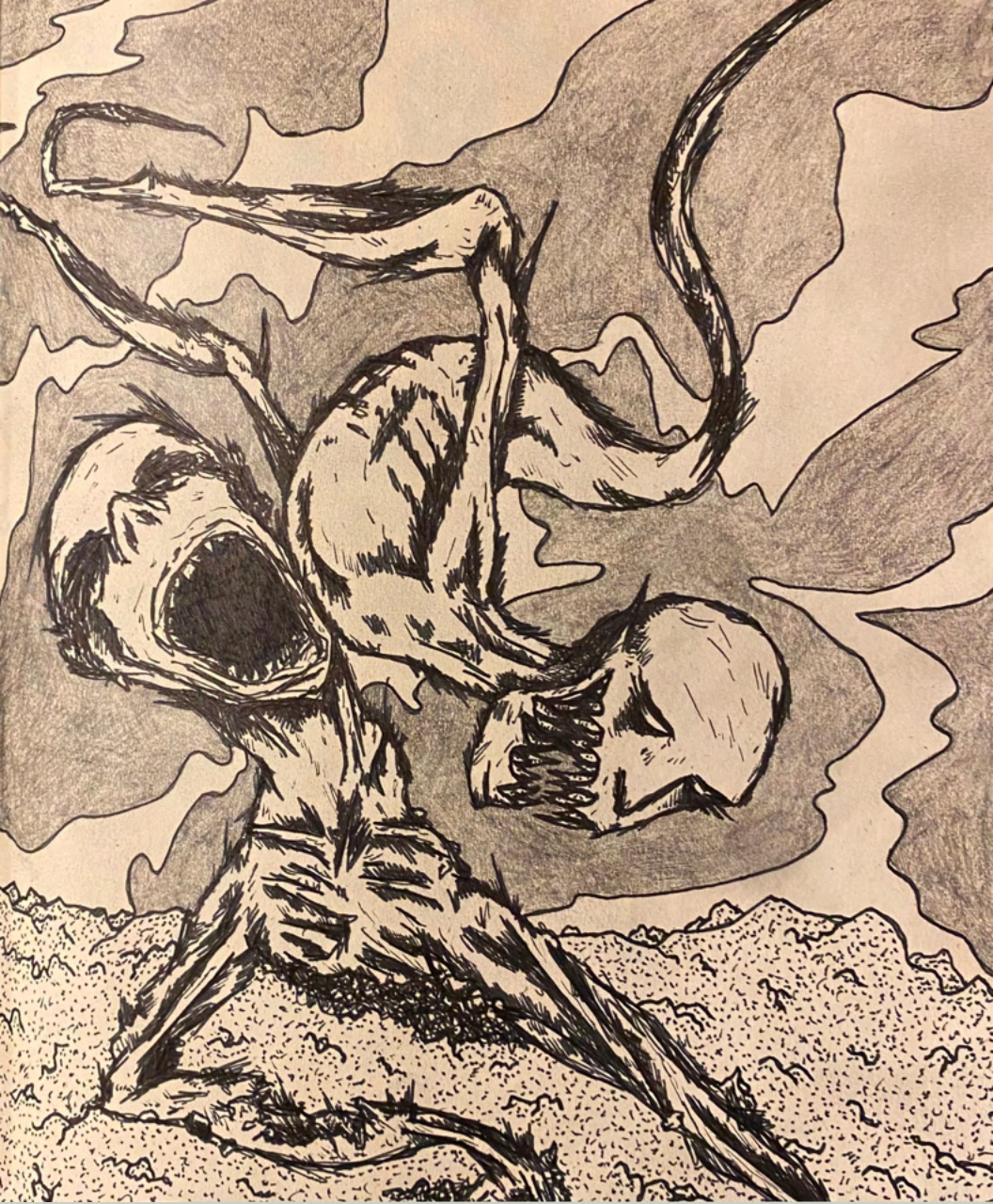
"You're not going soft on me Commander?" Sanya jeered.

"Not in the slightest," Ralla responded jokingly. She paused for a few moments, taking time to heal her most crucial wounds. "What say you? Want to go back to your wretched rock?" Ralla saw the hint of a smile on Sanya's lips and did not wait for an answer. She gathered herself and opened the portal. Locking eyes with Sanya she nodded, and in an instant all was quiet. Ralla took a deep breath, gazed at the surrounding ruin, the lack of dead soldiers, the uneasy stillness that possessed the air after battle, and laughed. She was finally home.

by Estelle Clark
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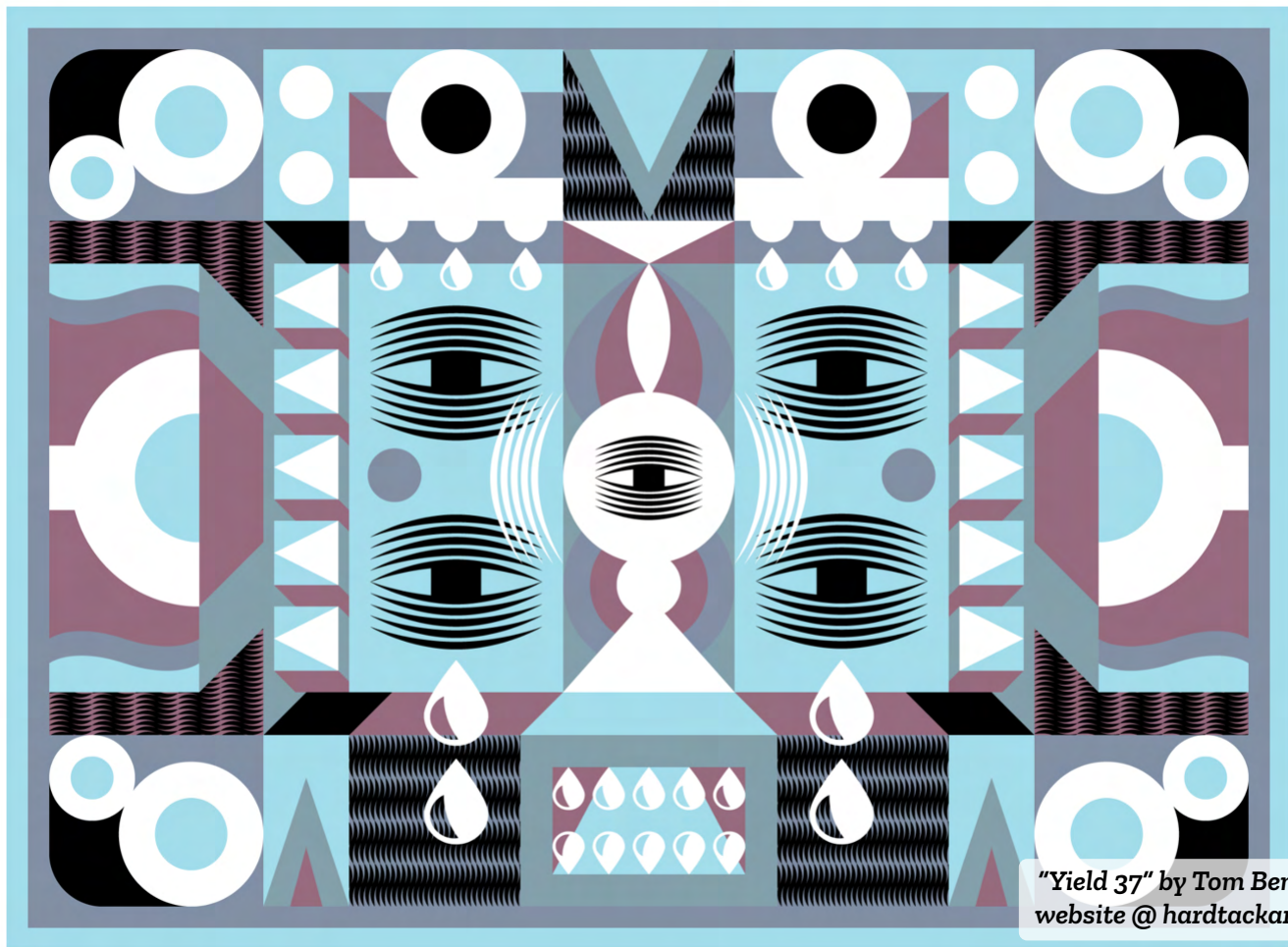


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