

HELIOS QUARTERLY

MAGAZINE

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 3

HORROR • SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

FEATURING:

DEBORAH L. DAVITT

SOPHIE SPARROW

JOHN A. FROCHIO

LAVA PAYNE

CHRISTOPHER BENAMATI

REIKO SCOTT

BRENDAN HALL

RUSSELL HEMMELL

JASON MYKL SNYMAN

FEATURED ARTIST:

KEVIN HURTACK

SEPTEMBER 2017

COVER ART BY: TOMMASO RENIERI
WWW.HELIOSQUARTERLY.COM

The Quiet Song of Return

By Reiko Scott

I was the last envoy of the Entan. The last one who would carry the memories of a time when our blood ran silver instead of red and when we didn't fear the black winds. The one who would deliver my people home.

"Yina," my husband said as he failed to wipe the dust from my brow. It caked to our skin each time we went out. "You don't have to go."

But I did.

It was only after the people of the Issass mountains migrated down from their perches and settled in the lowland forests of our home that the darkness showed its face. We Entan never spoke to these mountain people—we shared no language, no trade, no secrets—but as the darkness crept slowly and meticulously through the valley and the sun disappeared behind clouds of dust, we grew restless. We starved as the mountain people built structures on the water that turned the river to silt. The fish we caught downstream were limp and gray and had far too many eyes. We wheezed as the darkness spread from the ground-shattering machines that churned air into flame and spit out entrails of the earth into the sky. Our breath stained our insides and our blood darkened.

We sent emissaries out, one by one, to seek the truth of the suffocating winds, but one by one, they vanished. We never knew if they our envoys were lost to those men, to the spreading darkness, or to the wilds.

We Entan grew scared of sending people blindly into the darkness, so when the ground became too sooty for our crops to grow and our dogs went mad from eating the black-born chickens, we built ships from rotting wood to leave this shore forever. But, as the old teachings say, we couldn't move forward until we had finished looking behind.

By closing the last door to our past tied to the lowlands, I was our last hope for forging ahead. I was going to bring these lost envoys home. The duty called to me.

I kissed my husband goodbye. "There's no other way."

The road was silent from our village to their city. I didn't sing the Entan songs of travel because they detailed a return I didn't know I would be making. Clinging to hope was folly, so I saved my breath. The birds also didn't sing, for they had fled the wilted trees and left their nests frail and falling from the rickety upper limbs.

I approached the walls of their city from the north, where the cover was dense and where I could watch the comings and goings of the men and women through the gates. I noticed first that they had no guards. There were no weapons drawn at travelers entering, no interrogations, and no hiding. And then, I saw that except for their unfamiliar dress, they looked just as I did—deep brown skin and straight, black hair. They had noses and eyes and expressive lips. Why had I imagined them differently, red and white and snarling, like beings that had plummeted from the sky? All at once, I felt ridiculous for crouching behind a stump, waiting for an attack that would never come.

They welcomed me into the gates with a bow and shuttled me through the markets and into the city square. There, the darkness seemed to recede for a moment, as if the colors and sounds of hawkers dispelled the thick smoke that hung over their buildings. I couldn't

understand what they said, but every local who saw my clothes and lost look pointed and nodded, herding me toward a great spiral tower at the center of the walled city.

With stuttering steps, I climbed the stairs and entered the obsidian structure. It engulfed me with its grotesque architecture, twisting and curling into the sky much like the smoke that spouted from the chimneys stacked along its faces. There, I stopped. Something was wrong. Unbalanced.

I realized it was the smell.

The acrid dust that had grown so familiar had evaporated completely inside the walls. It was only then that I understood how deeply the darkness had penetrated the air. I drank in a sweet, clean breath.

A young man greeted me at the entrance.

“You’ve come for answers,” he said. He spoke my language.

“I’ve come for my people.”

“You’re not the first,” he said and motioned me to follow. I compared my age to his like kids in my village judged the length of the arrows they whittled as they were just learning how. He looked young enough for me to have birthed him, yet he spoke as if he were an elder.

We arrived at another wing of the tower and a sea of language poured over us. The room was filled with children and their parents, save for the far end where cloth-wrapped packages were being handed out over a shining stone table. Squeals of babies hugged to their mother’s chests laced with the peals of laughter that came from siblings chasing each other through the forest of adult legs. A bell struck and the hall quieted. In what looked like a practiced dance, the lines eased forward. The chatter filled the room once again.

“There’s something wrong with the waters in your lowlands,” the young man said.

“When we fled the Lightning Wars in our mountains, we settled here where it was safe, but the waters poisoned our children. We must filter it to survive.”

The wrapped packages they were distributing must be water.

“You made the darkness,” I said.

“It was the only way.”

“But the poison is getting worse because of you,” I said. “It’s *your* darkness that the children can’t live in.”

The young man turned to me, a look in his eye too far away to catch, and said, “And so, like everything, we are caught in a cycle.”

The bell struck again and the sounds of the people faded and grew again like a tide.

“You have no right to take the land from us.”

“It is everybody’s land,” he said. “We all shape it.”

He said this as if we humans could shape the sky as easily as we shape the wood we use to build our homes or the earth into which we dig our wells. As easy as a wave of his hand and a word, it would seem. Maybe for his mountain people, so used to being up in the air, it was that easy.

“You knew I would be coming,” I said. “You know my language. You’ve talked to my people.”

“There are many people curious about the workings of the Spire.” He took a grand pause, as if weighing his words against the depth of the chatter behind us. As if his voice was as grand as the sweeping supports of the structure they stood in. “The Entan are only one. This language is only one of many I’ve learned.”

“Others have come to stop you,” I said.

“No,” he said. “They come for the water. We share.”

“You trade our forest for profit.”

“It is *our* forest for the good of all.”

The young man beckoned me toward another door and we descended further into the Spire. The air grew stale as we dove into the earth itself. It felt like it should have been wet, like a cave or like a riverbed, but it was dry and clean and dead.

At the bottom, he lit a lantern and entered a room that glittered and glowed, reflecting back the light. I stared into the shimmering depths until I realized that I was looking at hundreds of bottles filled with blueish-white liquid.

“The filtered water was more than just clean,” the man said. “We learned it had properties that no other water had. It contained life itself.”

I moved closer to the shelves, peering at the shine of the life-water through the glass. Inside, I saw everything I missed. The lush greenery, young fawns suckling at their mother’s teats, a secret rustling of mice under the bush, the freshness of true air. I took a bottle in my hand and turned it over. It was more viscous than water, like it had too much to carry.

“Try it,” he urged.

I should have refused, but when I brought the bottle to my lips, I thought of the darkness and the songs of return. I thought of hunger and silence and the warmth of belonging and I knew I had found the lost envoys. I knew they wouldn’t be coming home.

I drank.