

Issue I | Spring 2019

Astral Waters

REVIEW

The Inaugural Issue

featuring

Kellie Doherty

author of *Finding Hekate* and
Losing Hold



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Masthead

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BE BOLD. BE POWERFUL. BE FANTASTIC.

Editor's Note

Dear readers,

I am so thankful to have you join us as we embark on this journey of a brand-new publication. *Astral Waters Review* ran a successful Kickstarter campaign in December 2018, and we owe everything to our incredibly generous backers. Our campaign was funded at 119%, and we raised enough money not only to fund our second issue, but also to pay the writers and artists whose pieces make up our magazine.

Because this is our inaugural issue, we've kept things on a smaller scale; we're featuring six pieces from five authors, all of whom represent and actively promote our core value of strengthening underrepresented voices in genre writing: female-identified or nonbinary, LGBTQ+, and/or POC—all unique and powerful voices that deserve to be highlighted for their progressive science fiction and fantasy writing and artistry.

While this issue is smaller than the average literary magazine, we do hope to grow very soon. We're still experimenting with design and branding. We're still looking for more artists and book reviewers. We're still dreaming big. And we depend on a dedicated, expanding readership to help us reach our goals, including full-color printing, featuring more authors and artists, and paying more to our contributors.

If you can, please help us spread the word about *Astral Waters Review* on social media and in person. We need your help to continue to promote underrepresented voices and to fight for diversity and equality in mainstream genre writing.

At *Astral Waters Review*, we vow to be a safehaven for diversity in genre writing, striving to challenge and progress genres that are meant to do the same for society.

With gratitude,
Amylia Ryan, Editor-in-Chief

The logo for Astral Waters, featuring the words "Astral" and "Waters" in a stylized, purple, handwritten font. The "A" in "Astral" is particularly large and decorative.

Firelight, Firebright

runes, ruins



HAL Y. ZHANG lives in a former factory with the ghosts of once-green plants. She writes at halyzhang.com.

“Firelight, Firebright”

Be careful, whispers the ruby.
I have seen the light,
and you will be struck blind.

Nonsense, the lapidary mutters. Be grateful, my child. Your cuts are nearly finished, all fifty-eight until you shine brilliant like me. The blood will wash off, never mind.

The ruby blinks. The diamond knife slices and dives, thrumming pressure as agony laps ever-pressing walls.
A vein bursts: she shudders into a blaze of pure red.

In the afterflames when the humans are saved no one sees her, her shatter unheard, just as well for the star-swirl dust to anneal quietly in coming eons outside of time.

“runes, ruins”

I gave you my word
the magic one, unspoken, palm to palm
you will know the time to use it
when the lattices of life—
kings totems engines favors
—plummet under us, leaden loose hem unplucked by a few
and all we have left are

gentle taps of fingers
deep tremolo of the palate
scratched rivulets in the toxic dirt
ritual scintilla of our restless minds
a glance, a click, a hymn a sign a plosive
virulent but not diseased, alchemist’s cleansing
wildfire, resonant gong ringing back thousand-fold stronger

boom there our left feet on the beat
our palms a-sky
boom there cracks the red earth
by the light of the sickle moon
boom there the heady flood carves
a new city on the solemn cliffs



DAWN OF THE VALKYRIE

Photographer: HEIDI BAILEY

Model: BREONNA JEFFERSON (Instagram: @peachie_kween)

Collection: FAIRYTALE

Mercy



MICHELLE GRUE is a doctoral candidate at University of California, Santa Barbara. She studies higher education pedagogy and writing studies through the lenses of intersectionality and critical digital literacies. She has previously published in the *Expressionists Magazine of the Arts* and *DASH Literary Journal*. Wrestling back her creative energies from motherhood and graduate school life has been a challenging pleasure.

Taunting humans with glimpses of not-dolphin is usually one of my favorite pastimes. The waste they leave behind always draws tasty scavenger fish, and observing human interactions—learning new knots, betting on fighting sailors, spying secret kisses and touches—is endlessly entertaining.

But today's dolphin pod has found a ship like no other I've seen pass through our waters. It smells different. The usual sweat, waste, and fermentation are still there, but are overwhelmed by sickly death. In the ocean, most death is quick and clean. We kill to eat. Sometimes we merpeople kill out of anger, or political expedience, but we are taught young to be efficient, not toying with our prey like the orca juveniles sometimes do. This too sweet, rotting smell is death deferred.

I don't particularly want to investigate, but harbingers must be assessed and reported. As I approach, my ears are assaulted by songs in languages I do not know, but in a key I recognize all too well from the days when plague defiled an entire canyon and I joined the healers there in trying to bring healing, and when that failed, mercy.

But mercy cannot explain why otherwise healthy humans are carting what sounds like hundreds of ailing heartbeats into our waters. Had I not sworn an oath not to meddle with tides or weather, I would capsize the whole thing, letting the ocean decide who received justice and who received mercy. Yet the power in being named the future high priestess is also a binding

one, so I must keep my vows. Appetite for fish and human folly gone, I swim away.

The many braids that trail past my tail are sensitive like seal whiskers, so even as I distance myself from the ship, I cannot help but feel the echoes. I try to ignore them and then feel something...odd.

A thrashing, almost like some poor creature trying to escape from hungry dolphin jaws, but too large. Nothing ocean born of that size moves like that. We're all too well-designed for hunting.

This, I can do something about. Rushing up to a floundering form, I begin to draw together tendrils of magic, lurking beneath the surface of my skin. Securing flailing arms and twisting this darker human upright takes only a moment's work. Finally, I see your face.

Ahh, this is why sailors carve crude renderings of their women on the fronts of their ships. The men are fine to look at, I suppose, but seeing the reality of 'woman' in front of me, I feel a sharp wanting no other desire has brought me. When your hands grasp clumsily at my shoulders, they entangle my braids, and the sensation bubbles through me like a slipstream left by fleeing fish.

Recklessness is rarely awarded among priestesses, but your face before me undoes years of rigid control. I seal my thin, hungry lips to your generous, desperate ones and give you breath, use my teeth to slice my tongue and give you blood. Release one arm so I can unwind a braid and let the pointed tips of my hair pierce your skin, sending magic from my depths into yours.

You have not asked, but who says no to life when it is given them? Surely you knew that the ocean could only mean death to one like you, and I could not waste such life, such beauty, such strength as I could feel in your arms, your mouth.

I speak a spell past your lips and now you can see my memory of reeking ship and crying dirge, of choices made and remade. It lets me see your child dying in your arms, growing cold against your empty breasts, torn away by pale, colder hands. Lets me see your choice to take advantage of newly boney ankles to chance the sea over whatever fate such people would drag you into. Lets me feel your gratitude, absolution of choice taken. Lets me show you glimpses of home in sea cliff and sisterhood. Lets me feel the need storming in you for revenge and rescue. I leave a trail of promises and possibilities behind every touch, and gloaming threads rise from each one. Knotting them together takes my hands from you for longer than I'd like, but when it's done, I send the threads away to attach to the ship you've escaped, that I swear we'll find again.

Faster than I expected, your legs bind together and rubbery, dolphin skin grows over them, yet the seal-brown hue remains. Gills to match mine grow from your neck and, where I cannot see, a litany of changes take place with every shuddering heartbeat I feel in the chest pressed against mine. When you begin to breathe through those gills, I think it safe enough to end our sanguine kiss. Your eyes are different, as ocean sight requires, but the rest of your face is the same, mourning and hope written in equal measure on the curves of your bones.

Our tails rub together, deep brown and jet black. You pull my mouth back toward you and I can see the loom my grandmother commands expanding to capture the breadth of the weft and weave our choices engender. ***



RIVER SIREN

Photographer: HEIDI BAILEY

Model: KRIS LEE RICHARDS (Instagram: @saltwatersiren9)

Collection: FAIRYTALE



HEIDI BAILEY is a photographer based in Kern County, California.

“Dawn of the Valkyrie” and “River Siren” are apart of her *Fairytale* series. The purpose of the project is to place LGBTQ, people of color, and diverse bodytypes as the main characters in their own stories. “Pop culture is such an integral part of our society,” Heidi says, “and representation is incredibly important.”

Cracks



MICHELLE TUDOR is a writer and editor from England. She is the co-founder and editor of Platypus Press and the literary journal *wildness*.

July was break-the-records-that-kept-being-broken hot. The summer—when temperatures were said to reach 135 degrees—came upon us like a tidal wave. We were sweating at 6 a.m., drinking iced lemonade for breakfast; dormant like hibernating animals. Each morning I sat in the back room of the house, draped across an old sofa we hadn’t yet thrown out. The sun didn’t reach there until late afternoon, at least 4 p.m., at which point I would retreat to the front of the house and find L sprawled across the hardwood floor, sticking every time she moved a limb. She was listening to the old radio. The adverts were loud, too loud for the heat.

My ears pricked when I heard a familiar jingle and the smooth voice that followed:

We are seeking candidates for our newest off-earth mission.
Find your own place in space.

I sat up and looked over at L, who, even in the humidity, looked serene. Her auburn-dark curls had softened from the sweat, her hooded eyelids fluttering as she fought to stay awake.

“What do you think about this?” I said.

“What?” She mumbled back.

“This new mission.”

“What about it?”

“Maybe it’s something we should talk about.”

“I don’t wanna talk.”

The few things that made L cranky were, in no particular

order: mosquitoes, people selling anything door-to-door, vacuuming, and the heat. I could accept most of them. I'd always answer the door, I'd always clean the house, and I'd always stock up on bug-repellent. But the heat was out of my control, the way the earth had started to smell scorched was a distant thing I could not catch. It was irreversible. The things she liked were myriad: baby animals, junk food, the way I kissed the back of her neck whilst moving her hair, gardening, and dancing. The list went on.

I nudged her with my foot. "I'm serious," I said.

"I can tell," she said, turning to look at me.

"Don't you think we should consider it?"

She shrugged, "Can't we talk about it when this heatwave is over?"

"It might never be over," I said, sighing.

I crawled down on to the floor beside her and draped my hand across her bare stomach, "Are you scared?" I whispered, nuzzling through a tangle of hair. She silenced me with a kiss, and I stopped thinking for a while.

A few days later I was sitting at the kitchen counter opening the mail when I heard the advert again. I grabbed a pen and jotted down the number on an unpaid bill. Money was tight and work infrequent. L had once worked at a vehicle repair center, but since the desert was so dangerous now, people had started walking to places they could reach easily, or simply staying at home. I worked, long ago, as a magazine editor and occasional writer. Work had gradually dried up—no one wasted money on such things anymore, who would care to read it? The only way I got work now was the occasional piece in the local newspaper. It was the same stories over and over: another town was out-of-bounds, more people were leaving earth for new lives, prices were still going up, wells were running dry—metaphorically

and literally speaking.

L walked in, her shorts and bra-top barely covering any of her slim body.

"Anything good?" she said, pointing down at the mail.

"The usual," I said, trying to cover the number.

"What's that?" she said, noticing.

"Nothing."

"Seriously, what is it?"

"It's just a phone number."

She narrowed her eyes at me, "For what?"

I sighed. I could never lie to her, "It's for that stupid mission, I wrote it down without thinking."

She hopped up on the counter and looked down at me.

"Why do you want to leave so bad?"

"Why do you want to stay?"

She closed her eyes when I said that, and I knew. I was selfish; I knew this. There had been so many times in my life when I had struggled to see other points of view or think about anything but my own happiness. Until I met L. And M.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Do you think he'll ever come back?" she said in barely more than a whisper.

"I don't know."

That was the truth.

The three of us had met in quick succession. I met M at work. He met L at the repair shop. I met L at a bar. We all met up, got drunk, and ended up together for three years.

"Why do you think he left?"

She'd asked me this question many times over the past six months. Sometimes we'd be having dinner, and she would ask out of nowhere, or we'd see people holding hands, and she'd clutch on to me and whisper it.

"I don't know. I really don't."

That was my always-answer. We still looked for him, still waited by the phone, still watched the news for reports. There was nothing. He had vanished whilst out running one morning, simply never came home. Nothing on him but keys. We searched the area for miles, but the land was dry, dusty, cracked, and we could never venture too far without the swirls getting into our lungs. We would retreat and start over the next day.

I ripped up the paper with the phone number on it and threw it in the trash. L went back to bed. I watched her sleep for a few hours, staring alternately out the window at the arid landscape and at her soft, fading body, laying there, as if unnoticed. It was much the same.

I walked into town a week later and almost hugged the giant fan at the entrance to the grocery store. I hadn't mentioned the latest mission to L in over two weeks. The pull was becoming too great for me, everywhere I went I heard the jingle, every spare moment I found myself daydreaming about a new life away from this dying one. I wanted L to come. I wanted M to come home. I looked up at my reflection in the glass pane of the freezer section and noticed how much weight I had lost. The heat devoured my appetite, and, still, every morning I ran, like the three of us used to, around the town. A fence had been erected two years ago, every little enclave was trying to self-sustain, and that meant keeping other people out. A guard was posted at the entrance but he saw little action. No one would come this far into the desert, not when the cities were drying out just the same. So we ran, around the inner-perimeter, for as long as we could. L had stopped when M had disappeared, but I kept it up as if I could retrace his steps, find him along the way.

I was focusing on myself in the glass pane, my body that

was becoming new to me, when I saw a familiar reflection. In the door, dark hair and glasses. M was standing there. I reached out when I should have turned around. My fingers found the no-longer-cold glass. I was startled for a moment but focused on the image. It was him, I was sure of it. He was smiling, a sure smile, like when we were all together. He seemed to be mouthing something to me. It looked like go.

After a few seconds, I came to and turned to find him, but the space was empty. There was nothing behind me but rows of canned food. I shook uncontrollably, starting to cry. I dropped the groceries I was holding and followed, in a heap, to the floor. Later, at home, L sat beside me on the bed, stroking my hair.

“What happened?”

“Nothing, I just fainted,” I lied.

“You can tell me,” she said before curling up beside me.

The store owner had found me a few moments after I'd fallen and helped me up, he then called L who came and got me. The image of M's mouth kept playing in my mind, his lips wide, his smile, his go.

I woke up that night sobbing again and went to the bathroom to splash water on my face. When I came back, L was sitting up looking at me. The moon was full and shined in through the window, illuminating the room. Her face was half-shadow.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

“For what?” she said, looking concerned.

I paused for a while, sat down on the bed beside her, stroked her face.

“I saw M today.”

“What?” she said, eyes wide.

“At least, I think I did.”

She cocked her head, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

“You saw him at the grocery store?”

I nodded, “I saw his reflection, but when I turned he was gone.”

“Are you sure it was him?”

“I was for those few seconds,” I nodded again. “All I wanted was for him to come and scoop me up.”

She stayed quiet, as if she couldn’t quite fathom the words, as if she didn’t have the language to express all of her thoughts.

“I think he was telling me something,” I said in a whisper, wary of my own words.

“Like what?”

“He was telling me to go,” I breathed heavily.

“Go? Go where?” she said, her brow furrowed.

I shrugged, “I think maybe he wants us to go on this mission.”

I could see her body tense up at that. “Why would he want that?” she said, her tone cool.

“I don’t know, but maybe it’s a sign.”

She jumped up and off the bed in one fluid motion, pulling on bottoms and a t-shirt.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to go for a walk, clear my head.” She looked at me, and I saw something like a flash of pity in her face. “I understand that you want to go, T, I really do, you’ve made that pretty clear, but please don’t do this, don’t use M to try and get your way.”

She walked out as I spoke, “That’s not what I’m doing.”

The door slammed, and I sobbed harder. Was this just my mind trying to convince me of what I already knew? Did I dream up M to try and persuade L we should go? What would I do without her, without both of them?

I dug the number out of the trash and called it.

Two days had passed, and L and I hadn’t spoken about the incident since. She came back after I’d fallen asleep, and the next morning it was as if nothing had happened. She kissed me good morning at breakfast and, the night after, we made love even though it was too hot. I still shivered under her fingers, as always.

When she left to go and see a friend I called the number and listened to the automated message:

Thank you for calling.

Are you looking for a way out?

A way forward?

We want to recruit you. Please leave your name and address, and we will send you a welcome pack.

I did as the voice instructed. Then I considered calling back and saying I didn’t want the welcome pack after all. I didn’t tell L when she returned, that could come later. When the pack arrived early the next week, I hid it in my old writing desk. The mission promised many things: a new home, a new career, fresh air, a way out. It was all so promising that I couldn’t help but want it. But I wanted it with L, and M, wherever he was. I couldn’t picture it without her; it had taken us months to learn how to be together without him, we had spent so much time doing everything as a three, it was difficult to navigate life as a two. But we always knew we still needed each other. I put the welcome pack back in the drawer and tried to forget about it. But soon the dreams started. I would see M mouthing go to me over and over and wake up sweating as if he were standing at the foot of the bed waiting. I would dream about L leaving without me, and I’d be alone, lost in the desert, thirsty, and aching for something just beyond my grasp.

I signed up for the training program, and every now and

then they would ask me to come and do fitness tests, aptitude tests. So many tests. When I'd first heard the advert I thought it would be easy, that it was a guaranteed thing, that they must be desperate for people to join, but I was wrong, they wanted the right kind of people. People who could offer something in return. Doctors, mechanics, biologists—not writers. So I studied hard and ran double the distance every day. I could feel my own body getting stronger.

One day L looked me up and down in the mirror, my stomach and breasts firmer now, legs stronger than before. "You look different," she said coming up behind me, running her hands over my body.

"I'm the same," I said, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

I could tell she knew what I was doing. She didn't question my longer-than-ever-before runs, but I could see the distance hiding behind her eyes. She was preparing to be left again. Sometimes she looked so innocent, so lost, so overwhelmed. I wanted to tell her I was doing it for her, for us. I never considered the fact that she wouldn't be coming with me. I was focused on the goal, determined not to fail. I was selfish.

A month after I started the training a letter arrived in the post, L had opened it, which she didn't usually do. She was sitting with it in her hand, as if she didn't realize she was holding it, staring out at the backyard. The sun was burning bright through the glass doors, and the whole room was blinding.

"What are you doing in here?" I said, not used to finding her anywhere the heat was.

She handed me the letter. I had been accepted on the next mission.

"When are you leaving?" she said, her voice calm.

I stammered, "I..."

"Were you ever going to tell me? Were you just going to

leave, like he did?"

I hesitated, "Come with me, maybe we'll find M and be together again."

"Don't do that," she said, frowning at me.

"What?"

"Don't pretend this is for him, or me. This is for you."

I bowed my head, "Look at this place L, don't you want to get out while we can?"

She shook her head and said nothing more.

I looked at the letter, which said I would be leaving within the next three months. When I sat next to her on the sofa and placed my hand on her arm, she flinched like I was a stranger.

Until the day arrived, I never truly believed it would. I was swept up in the tide. L was far-away now, the spark gone from inside her. Everything was drying up, withered like the land right outside our door. The cracks came closer every day until I was sure we would be swallowed whole as we slept. I reached out to touch her so many times, trying to bring back what was lost. I started to think that she would be glad when I finally left, when I finally let her grieve.

When the day came, I kissed her sleeping figure goodbye, tears streaming down my face.

"I'll come back for you," I whispered.

I looked down at her, looked down at forever, stood still, and waited for the world to close in on me. The sun was already beating down, and the blue paint had started to peel on our front door. I noticed, for the first time, a hairline crack in the foundations.

I walked to the gate at the edge of town and waited. Stopping for a moment to look back at the tiny place that had belonged to us. All of us. The bar we would drink at was all dried up now, the forest we made love in, barren.

An all-terrain vehicle appeared a few moments later, and a sandy-haired man told me to get on board. On the radio, the same advert for recruits was playing, yet somehow it seemed more urgent now. The man looked back at me.

“Okay?” he said.

I nodded, struggling to breathe. I hadn’t left the town in so long; I had forgotten how bad it was outside. We drove for less than half an hour, the view from the window blurring into nothing, just desert on repeat. We pulled into the next town, one I didn’t even know existed. Everything happened quickly. They took my details, my fingerprints, gave me a pass, got me suited up, checked me twice. I waited. I was told it would be a few more minutes. As I stood there I noticed a man walking towards me.

“There’s someone here for you.”

I looked at him, confused.

“No one knows I’m here,” I said.

“There’s a woman outside the gate, but be quick, you only have a minute or two.”

I walked over to the door I’d just come through and saw L waiting there.

“How did you...” I started to say.

She started to cry, “Don’t go, T, please.”

Tears fell from both of us, more tears than I thought possible from bodies living in this dry place.

The man inside called my name. “It’s time,” he said.

To walk forward would be to step into a new life, a new place to escape this old dying one. To step backwards was to her. L. The only place that would ever be home. My body was torn, split down the middle like the cracks in the earth that were slowly devouring the whole world. I looked forward, and then I looked back.

I took a step. ***



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Cherry Blossom



DEIDRE DELPINO DYKES may actually be three birds in a trench coat. She is the co-organizer of the Columbia Writers critique group in Maryland. She is a passionate player and GM of tabletop role playing games and enjoys writing short and flash fiction. Deidre tweets as [@DeidreDykes](https://twitter.com/DeidreDykes) and works as a slush reader for *Clarkesworld Magazine*.

Jakob turned the delicate hand over, his own grease-stained fingers leaving smudges on the porcelain finish. Its fingernails looked real in the flickering factory floor lighting over his work station. On the fine wrist was the small pink stamp, branding this as a Sakura S14—an older geishabot. Must be obsolete by now.

He bagged and stamped the hand and sent it down the line.

The right knee joint, flawless, came next. Then the other hand contained a small crack. He marked the damage on a yellow tag and sent the hand on. Perhaps it could be recycled.

Something lingered in the air. A spiced, floral smell hung over Jakob's table. It must have been the geishabot. He sniffed his own hands: sweet, cinnamon, powdery, and something springtime green. Then the smell of burnt plastic from down the line took over, and he crinkled his nose. The bot's wrists must have been laced with the scent.

There was the back side of the faceplate then, a kind of smooth mask. He hated handling the faces most of all. For a moment, Jakob pictured himself holding it up to his own face, this perfect doll's mask that was like a miniature of his own features (though these bots' faces were delicate, gently rounded, and fine where his own face was made up of a series of roughly hewn rectangles). With a small shudder, he turned the faceplate over.

At first, it appeared flawless to Jakob. An eyeless but beautiful face with a small, narrow nose and delicate flower-petal lips. It was lovely, perfection. Then he saw it: the tiniest

warped spot just below the right eye: a small air bubble trapped beneath the uppermost layer of plastic finish. It looked like a small teardrop, frozen in time. Jakob breathed out and bagged it up with a yellow tag.

When the end-of-shift bell rang, Jakob stood and wiped his hands on his apron and hung his apron on the back of his chair.

He hummed a tuneless song as he walked through the misty almost-rain of the late evening. Neon signs flared and glowed in the particulate water drops that hovered in the air. All around him were halos of light that declared Girls! and Beer! and XXX. He turned left down a narrow alley and entered an unmarked green metal door. Jakob sat down at the glowing white and silver bar.

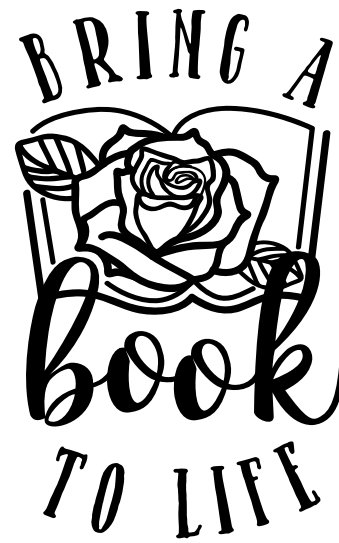
“You want company again tonight, mister? We got some brand new bots in from Suzaku. Real pretty girls.” The barmaid gave him a languid smile and stretched her dark, slender arm across the bar top toward Jakob.

“No thanks, Brandy. Not tonight. Just a drink.” He sighed and pulled his own hand back to his lap.

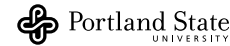
“Suit yourself.” She shrugged and went back to polishing a glass. “What’ll it be?”

“The usual.”

The spiced lily perfume that hung in the air made his nose twitch. ***



MASTER'S IN BOOK PUBLISHING



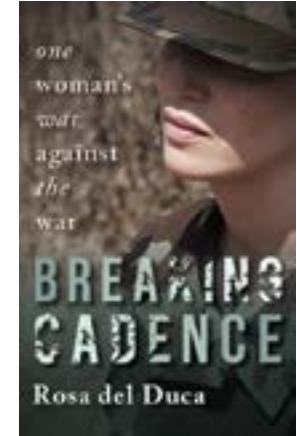
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Ooligan Press is a general trade publisher with national distribution rooted in the rich literary tradition of the Pacific Northwest, a region that is widely recognized for its unique and innovative sensibilities and its wealth of culture. Ooligan Press aspires to discover works that reflect the values, attitudes, and experiences that inspire so many to call the Northwest their home.

Corporeal Colors



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I didn't always want to be a cook, but I'm glad my people chose me. That they felt sure enough in my abilities to be an ambassador for my species. I like living on this spaceship, too. The *Seeker* is an X20 rescuer, helping those lost in the darkness of space, those whose distress beacons might've been missed, those who need a guiding hand on their way home. It has a crew of one hundred and a variety of species—hulking Eeya, globular Vesi, eight-limbed Frisks, to name a few—and I'm honored to be counted among them. To be one of the crew.

I head for the commons, holding my form steady as I push past a crewmember. The Eeya gives me a curt nod, his horned head scraping the top of the corridor and his vibrant purple fur shifting. He wears a black vest with blue striping, marking him as an engineer. I wave, but the Eeya doesn't wave back.

It's awkward to hold this corporeal form when my people—the Alurians—are not. We exist as intertwined energy, hundreds of space-dwelling creatures, but here it's just me. All alone. I try not to think about it. Here, I need to touch things to do my job, so I have to hold this form no matter how strange it might seem, but I'm still getting used to it. Without thinking, I phase through the commons' hatch. The crewmember on the other side yelps when I appear.

"I'm sorry," I say.

The green-skinned Lic shakes her spiked head and stalks off, muttering and straightening her vest. Okay, so maybe I'm not exactly one of the crew yet. I watch the Lic wander back to her friends seated around a squat gray table. They all wear blue

vests with yellow piping, navigators. More crewmembers trickle in, grabbing hot drinks and chairs. The constant hum from the ship trickles in, too, conversations between crewmembers. This dining space is welcoming, a circular area with furniture suited for the different species and a large viewport on one side. Stars dot the black backdrop like salt scattered on a table. My kitchen sits on the opposite end of the viewport, and I hope it is welcoming, too. I have some spikey blue fruit called lavai on the counter and keep a full pot of hot water next to it to make it seem more pleasant. Lived in, as they say.

I start making the morning meals—purple noxis bugs for the Lics, pink grains for the Eeyas, white sugar goo for the Vesi. I know what most of the crew likes by now, but my people want me to learn more. Grow my knowledge about different cultures and lifestyles and share it like we've done before. This mission is for an entire cycle, a year in the common tongue, so I'll learn quite a lot. I smile at the crew but catch a Frisk gawking at me with its beady black eyes, and I turn away.

My reflection stares back at me from a nearby pot, stretched awkwardly in the curved metal. I based my semi-physical form on what my species looked like before we became energy. Red-skinned, tall, hairless, long arms and fingers. A scaled tail curls beneath me instead of legs. Slits for a nose, small white eyes, an even smaller mouth. Well, it's safe to say that I can see why the crew stares. Even I think our old forms are odd. It probably doesn't help that this semi-physical form glows slightly, like a dim light waiting to go out. My non-corporeal form glimmers like moonlight on a water's surface, and this dimmer crimson light can't compare. I frown, a stab of longing running through me and turning my crimson glow violet for a moment. I miss my true form.

The crew laughs behind me, the happy sound grating my nerves and reminding me that I don't have anyone to laugh with

yet. That I don't have anyone to sit with. That I haven't even made a single acquaintance...let alone a friend. I've been trying to push the loneliness away, but it comes crashing back. I miss my people, our constant communication, our wax and wane. I miss phasing through hatches without scaring someone, and while the hum of the crew is pleasant, I miss the quietness of space, too. The silence is calming for my people. But I miss my family most of all. The lack of connection is a gaping wound that grows ever wider, like an animal trying to rip its claws into my soul and dig it out. I miss...everything. My light wavers, shudders almost. The glow slips into the cobalt spectrum as the loneliness slices through me.

I hug myself, lowering my gaze, and consider shifting into my non-corporeal energy sphere. Going into my true form would be a comfort, but it would probably scare the crew even more, so I resist. Instead, I go through the motions my sister Zixzee taught me for times like this, when doubt in myself and my abilities takes hold. When my emotions are nearly too much for me to handle and I don't have another Alurian to help siphon them away. I touch my forehead—remember my mission, the honor of being chosen—I touch my chest—remember my people are with me even now, they are always with me—and finally I touch my stomach—remember that communication with corporeal beings take time, more time than with our species. It's not as easy with them as it is for us. We give and take in an instant...with corporeal beings it takes a long time for them to know one another. Cycles, my sister even said. Cycles! She told me this mission would be overwhelming, that she experienced panic over the lack of connection, too, and that she pushed through it. She told me I would push through it, that I will make a new group while I'm here, and I know I will. My worry begins to creep away, slowly, as if a scolded child.

I turn back around and give the widest smile I can. “The morning meal is ready!”

A blue-skinned Riak comes forward. My curiosity peaks since I haven’t seen their species before on the ship. She has a narrow face, wide black eyes, and a broad mouth. She waves at me, and I can see the webbing between her fingers, but her tail catches my attention most. Her lower half is like mine, her tail wider and coming to a flat paddle instead of a point, but a tail instead of legs nonetheless. She takes a gulp out of the small water bowl attached to her arm, and the water trickles out of the gills on her neck. Breathing, maybe? Some water splashes on the collar of her dark shirt, edged pink. A communications officer. A rather attractive one, too.

She points at me. “Vixzee, right? You’re the only Alurian, so you’d have to be.”

I nod, noting the writing stitched to her shirt. “And you’re Plury Tion.”

“That’s right.” She slaps her tail on the deck. “A little advice from one crewmember to another: put on a top. It’s not common for females to go bare-chested, even if your kind doesn’t have the same assets others do.” She turns to the side, showing off her curvy profile, and winks.

“I—I didn’t know,” I mutter. Embarrassment floods through me, tinting my glow green. I had seen some males onboard without shirts and assumed that would be okay for me as well. The males were flat-chested after all, just like me, and no one thought it odd for them. Apparently I’d been wrong.

Plury chuckles. “It’s an honest mistake, I’m sure. On the positive side, most of the crew won’t mind if you phase through things as long as you’re not naked.”

That was why the crew treated me oddly? The horned Eeya, the green-skinned Lic, the gawking Frisk? I concentrate on my form, and a dark shirt similar to Plury’s shimmers into existence

over my chest. I add an orange line signifying my designation as cook.

To cover my embarrassment, I ask, “How did you know I was female if I don’t have the same...assets...as your kind? And as the other females onboard?”

“The males of your species have wider hips and longer tails,” she replies easily, and she’s correct. But few know that about my species. “When you were corporeal, at least. I probably couldn’t tell your kind apart in your new form.”

“I’m impressed,” I say.

“Well, it’s always a good idea to impress the keeper of the food.” Plury winks again, then grins. “Got anything sour? My type doesn’t really do sweet things.”

I make a note of that and rummage around, discovering a pan of sour yellow berries that I heat and pour over pink grains. “I’ll make something better suited to your tastes tomorrow.”

“No problem.” Plury takes the bowl.

I nod and go to grab some noxis for the Lic forming a line, but Plury catches my arm. “You know, I’ve never actually met an Alurian before, and I’d love to get to know you. We should hang out after your shift, and I think my friends would be happy meet you, too. You feed them, so they’re inclined to like you.”

Excitement courses through me, my glow shimmering orange. “I’d like that.”

“See you tonight then.” Plury wanders back to a low table nearby. She nudges a globular Vesi there, laughing and chatting. A friend of hers, for sure.

My form glows brighter, stronger, and warmth spreads through my being. It would be nice to know a Vesi and learn more about the Riak. My worries completely drift away now, pushed back by a new feeling—hope. I’ll find my own group here. In fact, I may just have. ***