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Editor-In-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

Into the Forever Land

Luke Thomas

Brooklyn, NY

I fasten the last braid about Jad's shoulder and step back. My belly flutters as I look him over, which isn't normal. Jad's my best friend. I'm never more comfortable with anyone than him. Today, though, he is to be venerated, and he looks the part. I knew the dyes used for this sash were precious, but only now do I understand what that means.

We both examine his reflection in the slab of mirrored glass leaning against the wall. The old tain of the mirror yellows everything—the wood and mortar walls, my pale skin and Jad's dark—it's all yellowed except the braids of the sash. They wind around Jad's lanky torso in blues and greens more vivid than life. I know a veneration ceremony is about the clan, not about Jad, but we can both see he looks splendid. His chest swells, literally. I can't help but laugh. "Jad...you're *preening*."

He blinks, smiles, at how puffed up as he is, like an engorged jormgand. He laughs too, but recovers himself more quickly than I can manage. He's a trained storykeeper, after all, and can isolate the rhythm of his breathing and trim the laughter right out of it. I've no such control.

"The exhorter will be here any moment," he says, settling down. I nod, struggle to contain myself. He turns to me. "Find calm," he intones, placing his hand on my diaphragm. "You want her to see you're ready to foster a legacy yourself, don't you?"

"Ugh," I say, hitting his hand away. "Do me a favor and save that until *after* you're venerated." He shrugs and pulls away but he did calm me down. That fluttery feeling has left me. It's Jad, before me, my closest friend, and I'm so happy for him. "Are you nervous about it?" I ask. "I mean about drinking the cutsap?"

"I am nervous about what will happen after. In the forever land. Where will I awake? Will I have to realign the dead man's place for myself?" His graceful hands add significance to his words. He seems to hold the possibilities out for me to examine for myself. To touch, to smell. "No," he continues, "drinking cutsap is not what I'm anxious about. I've recited histories while poisoned by all manner of things. I've made an accurate scrying after a week without sleeping. Cutsap won't be worse than anything I've already gone through."

I nod, and though I believe him I can't really comprehend having zero apprehension about what will be presented to him in the ancient cup. The vessel of petrified wood, carved with the sphenograms of the old cities, has been in our clan's possession since before the Lightbringer delivered our ancestors from their prison hundreds of generations ago. The cutsap within the vessel will be infused with the strands of memories that go back just as far.

Jada-Mero will imbibe half dead Geb-Ibbi's organ, and over time should be able to reknit the memories of the priest who took that cup from his pantry, along with some other meager possessions, four thousand years before today. He'll preserve the priest's shock of being sealed in the low temple by his cruel, duplicitous king. If Jad's as skilled a storykeeper as we think he is he'll preserve the fear of the dry suffocating dark, and the

awe of the Lightbringer's appearance from the vent between the worlds. He'll conjure that up for our people to experience in turn. And so much more.

But first, Jad will let the acidic cutsap scorch his insides while it does its work on his body.

Jad senses the course of my thoughts. "The elders want to be sure we can carry out our duty even under the influence of ulrohn powers," he offers by way of comfort. "Yooza, I've been subjected to plenty of things more painful than cutsap."

I shake my head. "It's just...they say it burns *terribly*." My face flushes. The heat of my blood reminds me of my own training. It traces the scars where my nerves were dulled and hardened and, in some few places, heightened. I know I'm being silly, weighing too much dread on one aspect of veneration among many. Yet the drinking of the cutsap, the implanting of an ool, is the hinge on which everything turns.

Jad snaps his slender, dark fingers in front of my eyes. "And don't *you* let me prattle about pain, hmm?" He squeezes my upper arm. Playfully, tenderly. Flirtatious in a fast, mischievous way only Jad can pull off. I barely feel his grip on my hardened skin, but the heat of him warms my blood.

My Jad has a romantic largess. A courage. We both know that who I take to husband is up to all of the elders of all eleven clans, but over this last year of harsh training we've admitted our hopes out loud. Maybe loud enough for the elders to take the suggestion. It's no secret that I'm progressing quickest of Fannoz-Kor's apprentices, and that I have a high threshold for spur powder. Jad's been called earlier than normal for veneration due to Geb-Ibbi's untimely death, but that's because Jad is a natural storykeeper.

He and I, we're good. I don't feel vain saying it. Together we could lead the clan to great things. The question is whether the elders will see fit to send either of us to marry into another clan, probably to cement an alliance. The Eleven Clans are united in name but that's hardly the reality.

"You'll be drinking the sap in no time," that look is coming into Jad's eyes as he says this, that narrowing gleam that's so contagiously inspiring. "We'll stand venerated together." He steps close to me, our bodies separated by inches. Now I feel the heat he radiates all over. "My spurred queen, hmm? My warrior. The council won't pull us apart. I won't let them." I open my mouth but have no words. But I don't need them. He knows my thoughts and gives me words. My poet, a sun at my back, warming me even while my flesh is hardened, made cold. For him I'll fight anyone and win. I—

Jad kisses me. Our caution, our fear of being denied, it vanishes. My thoughts, too.

#

It's a long time before we pull apart, though it doesn't feel so. I hear footsteps approaching and recognize the gait. Fannoz-Kor. I push Jad away and have to laugh at his surprise, his gawky reawakening to the situation and all of our old fears. Maybe it's a grim laughter, but no matter what a newly venerated Jada-Mero has to say about it to the council he cannot guarantee that he'll even live in Nin-Gish-Hogga a month from now. Sometimes pretty words are just that. Men forget that more easily than women, and that's why we generally have to don the spurs and protect them.

Naturally my thoughts wander desperately to the other apprentices, the young men who envy Jad's early ascension. Certainly there are plenty of male warriors who I

train with, but they succumb to the spur madness more quickly. Men can only cultivate dense, contained clusters to use as weapons. Women can withstand widespread augmentation to our skin and muscle. Male warriors gain weapons. Women *become* weapons.

As if summoned to as a case in point, the clan exhorter whips the curtain open and glides into the dressing chamber. Her toxic green stare squelches my already grim humor. Jad, too, snaps to attention. Is there, anywhere on Ulro, where dreams could escape Fannoz-Kor's talent for killing them?

"Jada-Mero," she says, "are you prepared." It's only nominally a question. The exhorter doesn't tend toward questions.

Jad swells up in imitation of himself only minutes earlier. "Take me to the place before the exodus," he says, with gravity, as if she doesn't know the details of the ceremony. The mad man has already created an inside joke of our last moment alone. Fannoz-Kor simply beckons for him to follow. My teacher spares me a glance before she leaves, but if she has any inkling of my feelings, any sympathy, none shows. I salute her sternly then salute Jad who will presently be an elder. I smile at him with my eyes.

#

The procession winds down the causeway and through the avenues of the bazaar. Above our heads the late day sun shines through the bazaar's canopy of dyed cloth. As Jad passes in his sash of fabric fit for the finest tapestries above, the clanspeople fall in behind him.

Our people fan out around the place Jad chose for the ceremony, under the tapestries that depict his favorite part of the history of the eleven clans. Above us are no well-defined pictures from the recorded past as in the outer tapestries. No snarling yupic crouched like beasts during the times of strife, nor bipedal yupic standing stoically alongside the clans of men when we rose up against the ulrohn oppressors. Here, near the center of the bazaar, we are within the great ring of black cloth that marks the exodus from Earth. Tangles of color mark the explosions of life that just occur naturally back on the old planet, land of plenty. Great pyramidal shadows represent the cities of *tens of thousands*, and bright filigrees of glitzy textile symbolize the kings who ruled those people with chains of gold.

Jad has told me what these more notional tapestries mean to him. Of how, as a boy, he was daydreaming under *these* tapestries when he was enlivened by the need to pursue a life as a storykeeper. "It was a shock, a conviction that washed me over all at once," he said. "It pinned me down, assured me I would set foot on the world on which these forms and colors are based. Even now, when I'm here, I feel the needle pricks of destiny on the back of my neck. No matter how much storykeeper's control I build up I can't quell the giddy notion that some day I'll see Earth with my own eyes."

#

I've settled myself atop the hillock closest to that on which Jad stands as the ceremony begins. He sees me his smile shines. He is resplendent, his eyes suffused with that gleam. Sar-Tabarazzon himself presents Jad the cup. This stocky old codger is a living legend. More than a leading storykeeper, he's a visionary. Decades ago he masterminded the great settlement. Because of him the human clans took stand after stand against the ulrohn, winning a dwelling place for every clan. One by one we founded

the hides and ended generations of migratory existence. Sar-Tabarazzon will be remembered for a long time, even by those who can only gain memory the animal way.

“Are we ready?” Sar-Tabarazzon asks for all the people to hear.

This seems an odd question, as Gerrioz is not yet alongside Jad on the hillock. Gerrioz is the warrior who will receive the other half of Geb-Ibbi’s ool, a thug but a decorated warrior. He’s not the new elder that most the clan is abuzz about, but certainly he is entitled to his share of pageantry.

Jad speaks quietly to Sar-Tabarazzon, and I’m sure he is asking about Gerrioz’s absence. The old storykeeper smiles warmly but doesn’t answer Jad directly. He whirls around and grandly addresses himself to the audience.

“There has been a change,” the old man crows, reaching both arms skyward. “A change that came down from above.” All grows quiet as the onlookers wait for him to go on. “This moment,” he says, his strong voice trembling, “is the beginning of the age of redemption. We have waited generation upon generation, and we have kept the faith. Now, here and on this day, the Guiding Light will again walk among us!”

Maybe Sar-Tabarazzon expected cheers, but he is answered by a stunned murmur. Jad leans down and asks him something, a look of concern dimming his features. Sar-Tabarazzon seizes him in a paternal embrace as if to lift him up for all the clan to see. His words boom out, resounding between the rocky valleys of the bazaar. “The Lightbringer has sent a message: He is returned! He has asked the Clan of the Constricting Serpent to take up a great honor. Jada-Mero, the young son who we are most proud of, has been elected to be the lantern that lights our way out of this long dark!” He pauses again for effect, but the silence is only more complete this time.

I forget, for a long time, to breathe.

“This is no routine ceremony of veneration,” Sar-Tabarazzon continues, holding the cup aloft, “within this cup is not a half but an *entire* ool! A full, undivided legacy, you’ll say rightly, but this even *more* than that. Through dead Geb-Ibbi’s ool the leader will return to reunite history with destiny. Bid farewell to this,” he gestures with an outstretched arm to the bazaar and the high wooden walls of the settlement, “this mere *subsistence*.” He spat the word out like something fed him by force, even though he was instrumental in founding the hide. “The Great Roving will commence again, and the eleven clans are to be the vanguard!”

At this, the message finally breaks through. All humans know what the Great Roving means—conquest, luxury, and most of all, a way home. The howls of a few warriors soon builds to a flood of noise. My people’s joy crashes against my shock. I feel miniscule.

A raised fist from the exhorter quiets the gathered, and all their eyes turn to Jad. Sar-Tabarazzon thrusts the cup toward him. “Jada-Mero, will you accept the honor that our savior Urizen has offered to our clan first among all the eleven?”

“Our clan...” Jad says, eyeing the cutsap, “what will happen? What will change about my veneration?” He hardly projects his voice but we can all hear him.

Jad is speaking to the old man alone, and instead of persisting in his speechifying Sar-Tabarazzon replies quietly, personally, even with tenderness. But this, too, we can all hear in the taut silence. “That you ask after yourself at this moment, Jada-Mero, shows why you were chosen.” He pauses for paternal effect. “Your ambition will give him

strength. If only I was your age,” he flicks a tear from his wrinkled eyes. “I’d have been able to become more than a mere storykeeper. You, my son, you will become *Him*.”

Jad stands frozen. Memories race through my mind as I look on, reaching back past these last years of grueling training and study, back before we determined, together, to undertake our apprenticeships. I remember running with him through the valleys of the bazaar. To us, the canopy over our heads was nothing more than a way for the sunlight to wash us in pretty colors while we played. It wasn’t the long story of exile, glory, and betrayal that I know now. The history Jad has explained to me on so many sweet, warm days.

Sar-Tabarazzon hoists the cup higher. Jad remembers himself, scans the crowd, finding me once more. He’s scared, and I don’t know what to do. I cover my mouth to stop the wail of grief or the scream or the kiss I want to send to him from a distance. I want to tell him that I’ll wait to greet him, like we planned, so we can stay up all night and talk about what he saw in the forever land.

But ‘you will become *Him*,’ Sar-Tabarazzon said. If Jad becomes *Him*, where will that leave me? I lose sight of my love, my poet through a veil of my own tears.

“Sar-Tabarazzon,” I hear Jad say, forcing strength into his lungs to speak like a storykeeper ought to, “will we...will I bring the clans home? To Earth?” The old man nods for all to see. After an awestruck pause the people cheer wildly. I wipe away my tears in time to see Jad seize the cup. He drinks. I’m seized by a spectral gag on his behalf. I’d feared the cutsap would burn, but I had no idea how bitter it was to be.

#

Jada-Mero wakes in a new place. It’s dark, warm, and filled with noises of life like he’s never heard. Chirping and chittering from small creatures, and the slink and prow of larger ones. Reaching through the gloom he touches a leathery, vegetal thing. Suddenly he is overwhelmed by the impression that he is surrounded by life that is perfectly natural and wild. This place was sown by no agriculture. He breathes the sweet air, and can taste the last word he spoke before drinking the cutsap. Earth. How long ago was that, that he could have been transported to this alien place? Is he really in a forest that wasn’t designed or molded by humans, or ulrohn devils, or even the Lightbringer’s own hand?

A golden glow springs up in the distance, reaching him through the giant trees. He starts to climb upward. The way is steep, but he clings to mossy and wooden things arranged in thrilling randomness. He makes progress toward the light.

He reaches the cusp of the immense depression in which the forest grows. He emerge from the trees and sees what is beyond, and his heart recoils with disappointment. This is not Earth.

How could he forget everything he’s been taught of veneration in the moment he is granted an ool? This place is not out-real, only in-real. The forever land. He rubs his chest to sooth the turmoil of recollection. He should be overjoyed to be here, yet like a child he is dismayed to not have awoken, miraculously, on Earth. This place contains the seed of every idea that has ever helped or befallen mankind, and yet his reaction is to think only of childish, selfish adventure.

He breathes, finds his operative rhythm, and lets his heart steady. He must commence his duty as a venerated storykeeper, and take stock of the realm of ideas.

Before him is an expanse of shattered things. Slabs of white stone are strewn in jagged masses, tortured by protrusions of all kinds of metal. This ruination is lit by a sky

that almost sags with stars. As expansive as the plane of ruin is, however, he can see that it is bounded by four distinct borders. Behind him the closest region, the sunken land of the forest, still issues its indifferent wilderness noise. The North, then, is where he woke up. His true home.

Out to the left, the ruins run along a great wooden palisade. In the clear night air he can see the wood glowing with an inherent warmth, which is enhanced by the many wide windows that flicker with the light of the hospitable fires inside.

Far to the right the broken stone and metal sink into a sea of dark water. Beyond that border, the sea rises up above shore-level as if merging with the sky. Jada-Mero is reminded of how storm clouds viewed from a distance appear to smudge the clouds into the ground, yet in all of that darkness there is no commotion of a storm. The entire gloomy volume is rigorously calm.

He peers across the field of ruin, past where the continent seems to end. A single tower rises up out of the void. This structure exceeds any possibility he has ever conceived of for height. Even with the sky so clear he can't see the merest hint of an upper limit. The tower looks pale silver in the starlight, but by now he knows what it is. The Spire Smaragdine is, of course, golden.

He is only looking at the tower from afar but feels compelled to go there, to climb it. He nods to himself, recognizing the way this place works. If he concentrates on each of the four border regions, four distinct rushes of feeling invigorate him. It's amazing how surprising something can be when is exactly as those who experienced it before you said it would be.

Behind him is the North, the forest of awe and exhilaration. Contemplating the wall at the eastern border assures him that it was not built to keep anyone out, but to shelter and warm all who enter. He lingers on his view of the great palisade and feels nourishment and succor. Turning his focus to the tower incites his ambition once more, and he can hardly remember the contentment he felt looking east.

How does looking west affect him? This is harder to describe. Happiness, sadness, outrage, and serenity are present within something larger, a burgeoning feeling that can only be expressed in one word: Rightness. The way things ought to be. A powerful sensation, perhaps even stronger than what is provoked within Jada-Mero by the other sights, but this last one is indistinct.

How could he have been disappointed to be here? Because it is not Earth? A poor reason.

He ventures forth into the stone ruins. It's not long before he comes within sight of the source of the light. Someone is tending a campfire of gold flame, not a stone's throw distant. This figure's silhouette is dark as the western gloom, but more solid. When Jada-Mero draw close enough he sees that what he took to be the silhouetting effect of the firelight is, in fact, how the stranger looks. His body is covered by a coat of black hair that clings to him like skin. His face is a mask of black feathers, punctuated by two golden eyes.

"Jada-Mero," one voice speaks though it sounds like a chorus of many voices, "thank you for coming."

"Thank me? I..."

He can tell the voice comes from the feathered mask, yet no mouth seemed to be moving behind it. "You will say you had no choice, but that is untrue. What is true is that you could not choose other than this."

What he says is true. Jada-Mero is shamed by having entertained the thought of not drinking the cutsap. He nods. "I had to do what was right."

Urizen looks out to the West. "No," he says, "you did not choose out of righteousness. You chose out of magnanimity. You did what was large, and could not have chosen the smaller act."

Could it be that this was even more true than what Urizen had said a moment ago? Instantly Jada-Mero can see that this being has just explained what lay behind every choice he made through his entire life. He looks past the edge of the firelight at the ruins of the eternal continent. It is a place he would love to explore, but he stands assured that his is a different destiny.

"I am ready," he says. He remembers the girl, Yooza. The memory stings. Does he believe he is truly ready? He can't not.

Something moves amidst the rubble to his right. He doesn't look fast enough to catch it, but the movement leaves a predatory wake. Should he run? No, he can't. Another sudden motion glints. A mane of gold trails a swiftly moving figure. He looks to Lord Urizen, trying to hide his alarm. Before he can say anything, a remarkable woman emerges from behind a stone. She steps very close to him. He stumbles back. Her body is all of a gleaming, liquid gold. Her eyes are hideous—one is entirely dark and the other shines with a caustic green light that makes his recollection of Fannoz-Kor's stern aspect seem a comfort. The woman opens her arms to him.

He can no longer suppress it, the need to run, but he sneaks a quick glance at Urizen where he stands behind this fearsome woman. The sight the Lightbringer is enough to anchor Jada-Mero again. He steps into her golden embrace. It's the most difficult thing he has ever done.

Her arms coil around him, catching hold with tremendous strength. Her grip tightens. She melts serpentine as she wraps around his whole body. Is this constriction meant as tribute to the patron of his clan? If so, it is a grotesque gesture. He struggles, but doing so just makes his body pulse painfully, as if struggling will force his skin to burst. "I—" exerting all his powers of speech, he can manage a few words to the Bearer Out of Darkness, "I'm willingly yours. Please...not like this."

Urizen approaches. The gold woman's hold only tightens. "Thank you, Jada-Mero, but this is the only way," the choral voice sighs. His dark hand touches the liquid metal squeezing Jada-Mero's chest and in that instant a feeling of revulsion and panic erupts within his torso, his eyes, his muscles, his joints. Something is being ripped out of him. Ethereal sinew stretches, ruptures and snaps. As his being is flayed it screams and fights. He screams with it.

#

Eventually it is done with. The struggle abruptly ceases. The victim drops, breathing slowly but evenly. He finds the ground cold but not objectionably so. Standing over him is a man who looks strong and intelligent. He looks familiar, very much like an image that he'd seen in a yellowed mirror in another place. This man wears a colorful sash. He speaks with a voice that seems to have many other voices speaking with it. "You

won't suffer anymore," he says, "I caused no more agony than was necessary, but you must understand it's paradoxical for one to willingly cede his own force of will."

The prone man is given the impression that he is supposed to nod in agreement, so he does. That done, he lets his head loll backward and looks up at the stars which were, at least, something steady to look at. He has a vague memory of thinking stars were very good things, but he doesn't see anything special about them now. Dots are dots, something to focus on and not even very good for that. Soon, he grows dizzy, which feels bad. Fortunately his head lolls in another direction, and he finds himself looking at something easier to watch. It is the corner of a big white rock, and it keeps still, and that is good.

#

There is singing, and a swaying, worshipful dance. The Clan of the Constricting Serpent celebrates to give Jada-Mero strength while he lays in the throes of his first sojourn in the forever land. Yooza stumbles in and out of abortive conversations, speculations on what is different this time. Eventually the crowd orients itself back toward the stage and falls into a rapt murmur punctuated by cries of ecstasy. She knows he's roused.

Yooza pushes her way to the ceremonial hill from where a procession lead by Sar-Tabarazzon is snaking away. Her fellow clanspeople give way easily when she shoves by with her spur-hardened elbows. She sees the mane of Jada-Mero's hair and catches a glimpse of the colored sash. She bores through the final yards separating them calling his name. "Jad!" she cries, but is cut off by a hard hand that grips her menacingly, stabbing a thumb into the vulnerable flesh inside her clavicle.

Fannoz-Kor has her, but when Yooza looks venomously at the exhorter her grip slackens. She can speak again, and again she cries for Jad. He's mere feet from her, walking away. He doesn't so much as perk up when she calls his name. He doesn't turn. She has no need to see his face to know the gleam has left his eyes.

Yooza screams his name again and again. Fannoz-Kor permits her to scream into incoherence, but does not let her follow the venerated man who was Jada-Mero. She props her pupil up, and waits for the mania of her grief to pass. The exhorter, at least, is still human.

END

by Luke Thomas

e: LukeRT33@gmail.com

p: 413-627-2883