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art by M.S. Corley

## While Memory Holds a Seat

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

**G**ive us your sky for two hours and we'll fill it with story-telling spectres! That's one of the pitches we use for our traveling troupe, Wide Sky Theater. We ride the skip nodes bringing cultcha to everybody, or so we tell ourselves and each other, and then we sometimes snicker, sometimes bicker, sometimes laugh loud and long, and our new cast members, they really believe it, those wonderful naifs.

Our ship was on the way to a fringe planet called Streak. All seven of the cast and crew had gathered in the central room for a strategy discussion.

We were all cast and crew both, and we all pitched in on styling our ship, Big Bertha, to suit our needs and personalities. Every other chamber in Bertha connected to the central room, which was foamed and carpeted on every surface. Most of its furniture consisted of cushions, some firm and many squashy, in jewel colors. If the ship's gravity shifted, which it had been known to do, capriciously, our furnishings pillow fought us instead of whacking us. This said nothing of what we did to one another. We had all learned how to land.

The scent of my daughter Verna's plum lamb casserole carried everywhere, roasted meat and sweet mingled. Verna, in lavender tunic and stained apron, leaned against the wall beside the open galley door. She had her father's dark beauty, a little softened by my generous body shape. It was almost suppertime, so this meeting would be short.

I sat against a wall near my cabin door, knitting long narrow leaves of Philloland spicebrush into a matrix of wooly cinnamon-colored yarn. I wasn't sure what would come from my fingers. A snood for Caliban, perhaps. Lately I had been surprising myself; the turquoise strands I had knitted with crackle nesting strips had turned into a strangle rope instead of the necklace I thought I'd been making for my granddaughter.

"Streak has been out of the trading mainstream for a couple of centuries," said Captain Mike, who that day was dressed like a fantasy pirate in a big-sleeved shirt, billowing pantaloons, and boots. We all borrowed from the costume closet anytime we pleased, which lent a welcome variety to our days. Mike's head sported wild waves of grizzled red hair; his bushy beard was a stripy mix of red and white. His face was wide across and short from chin to temple; he looked like a Japanese demon when he grinned and showed all his teeth. You saw that face above you in the sky, you could read every thought as it crossed his mind. Mike made a wonderful villain. "Nobody knows how far they've twisted away from galactic normal. We're going to want something basic. Universal."

"The hero's journey," said Tiller, the youngest and newest member of our company, a woodsy boy we'd found on a backwater world, anxious to rid himself of every speck of home planet dust.

I remembered that ancient urgency. I thought of the little wooden box of dirt I'd picked up last time we landed on Found. Sometimes I opened that box to stir the dirt and sniff it, catching the faintest whiff of my childhood, summer star-catching parties in the gather wallow, our hair plastered to our heads with fine warm mud as we slipped and slid amongst each other, streaking for falling bits of brightness catapulted from back porches by our parents.

Tiller longed to play heroes, but so far made do with sidekick parts.

"The time is out of joint," said Leandro, usually our male lead. Dark-skinned and bright-eyed, he slouched low in his chair, doing his usual imitation of a pre-rigor corpse. He wore a simple brown body stocking, being a man of great laziness when not on stage. You could pass him in a street or bazaar or spaceport bar and never look twice, such was his gift for disappearing when he was not using his other gifts. When he was on stage, he electrified, and counted it a bad night if he didn't get fifteen varied propositions after a play. "O, cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right."

"Not Hamlet again," said Priss. She was a square-jawed, strong-featured woman, olive-skinned and silver-haired, who could play queen or villain with equal grace. She was my granddaughter. And she was blackmailing me.

She stared across the room at me. "It's Rose's turn to take the lead," she said, in that sharp voice that always cut me a little. "I vote we do Beauty and the Beast. And Rose plays Belle."

I dropped three stitches and two long leaves.

"I second that," said Fasha, our strong and slender moon child. Androgynous, she could play almost anything. She was also our makeup artist, so skillful she could turn us into each other, and once did so to celebrate Mask Day on Gilliland. "Rose, it's been an age since you've played a lead."

Most of them could not remember the last time I'd played a lead. Verna had been a baby. Verna's father, Basim, had been one of us, a lead more charismatic than Leandro, and always, always beautiful, in private and in public. I had been so much younger then. I was never beautiful, but my face had character, I told myself. We were doing actual live theater on a portable stage back then, none of this throwing giant images of ourselves into the sky, where every tiny detail was visible, unless Fasha covered it with maquillage.

On stage, I could project, and people responded to my facial expressions. Mostly in those days I played happy women. I beamed in my toad-ugly way that was somehow endearing.

I felt happy. Basim had picked me, and I could barely believe it. Once in a while, in that tender corner of my secret self that believed I could be other people, I heard him when he called me his glorious fountain of earthly delights, his beautiful glimpse of paradise. Those tiny moments, stitched together, gave me the strength to play women I didn't believe I could ever be: the Beauties who tamed beasts, the shapeshifters who cast off their swan feathers to emerge princesses, the high-class girls who could trade witty lines with Basim's handsome lords and princes. We took our shows on a skip route that included twelve planets, and each time we returned where we had been before, our audiences grew.

Then I got pregnant with Jibril, and while I was too big to play and only acted as wardrobe mistress and makeup artist, Basim grew closer to our new ingenue, Cleo, and I lost my magic. After I gave birth to my boy

and lost the extra weight, Basim pretended to love only me again, or perhaps he truly did love me. He was an easy man to believe; he spoke so beautifully.

When I got pregnant with Verna, though, he left the ship on Hitherto and never came back. Captain Mike said he had been killed in one of the bars near the spaceport. I didn't let myself check the newsflow or the incident reports, or even Basim's datacache in the Interweb, where his life story was automatically updated anytime anyone mentioned him anywhere. I told myself I believed what Captain Mike had told me, and we moved on, and found other players, and I played aunts and nurses and dotty grandmothers and sidekicks and mothers, older sisters, and occasionally villains.

I flew our ship, and I maintained the costumes and cooked, and taught my daughter to cook, and here we were, waiting to eat her plum lamb casserole once we had settled on our next play.

"I couldn't possibly," I said, imagining my giant face across the sky, that rough-featured face playing Belle. I no longer really acted in anything, unless they needed someone in the background or I could wear a mask. I took Juvena so that my bones would stay elastic, and it kept my face relatively wrinkle-free, but I still had the same peasant features I had always believed saved me from beauty.

"You will," said Priss. She tapped her finger on her right temple, reminding me that she knew what I had never told anyone: that I was responsible for her Uncle Jibril's death.

Jibril grew up on the ship, every year more the image of his father. He had had no interest in play acting, and since he liked to work with his hands most, I had apprenticed him at sixteen to a jewelry maker on Diala, where they make the most marvelous and expensive show pieces. They train metal to follow the curves and curls of living plants, shape jewels to capture the essence of the elements, clear as water, brilliant as flame, dark as caves, fragile as bubbles.

He caught up with me on the skip route six years later. He had pinged me, and only me, on the Interweb, saying he wanted to see me alone. Bertha put in at Diala, where the atmosphere is thin and the night is dark and clear. The people live under clear-glassed skies, and the air always smells of incense from the many altars everywhere.

We were doing one of the more obscure Shakespeare plays. Verna had a big part in it, and I played no one, so I went off during the performance to find Jibril. I met him in the Viewport Restaurant.

My son stood at the rail in the dome that looked out over the shuttle dock, where little ships rode elevators into orbit. He looked so much like his father. He brought me a tiara he had crafted himself, a sinuous silver weave of vines with water-drop rounded jewels caught in their tendrils, and set it on my head, saying, "For my beautiful mother." His voice had matured, too, into that rich, deep tone his father had used, so mellow and musical he could convince you a moon's reflection was the moon.

"It's much too fine for me," I told my son. Such splendor belonged on a head more glorious than mine. I tried to take it off, but he stayed my hand.

"I made it for you," he said, "for you alone. This is what I see when I think of you."

He sounded so like his father it tore through the patches I had slapped on Basim's betrayal and opened again the crack in my heart. I pushed away from him, this loving image of my beloved, and watched, horrified, as my push sent him over the rail--so slowly I could have rushed forward and snatched him back, I knew I could, only I lunged for him and I, too, was caught in a sticky snag of time that slowed everything and gave me forever to see him fall to the inward curve of the dome's base, a hundred meters below.

My lunge took me to the rail, which cracked against my ribs. I embraced the rush of pain. All I wanted to do was slide over the rail into the endless open, find my own finish down there beside the crumpled body of my son, but others pulled me back.



Someone took me to a med facility, and they fastgrew my crackling bones back. Some witnesses told police it was deliberate and others said it was an accident. The viewcams showed that I had turned away while I pushed, that he had skidded as he reached for me, and my reluctant but compelled testimony under truthstim said it was an accident, so they let me go, even though I wanted to go nowhere.

I had nowhere else to go but back to Bertha. So there I ended up, in a walking zombie state, and Captain Mike put me to bed, asking no questions.

I spent the next three skips not stirring from my bed except to use the head. Verna and Captain Mike made me drink nourishment; I did not care enough to stop them. They thought I caught some Dialan parasite the ship's doc couldn't diagnose.

Eventually I had to let go of my grief or find a way to beat my head in. I let the details of the everyday lift me away from my memories, and Captain Mike never took us to Diala again.

I hadn't known what Mike and Verna did with the tiara Jibril had made me, not until a week ago, when Priss found it in a small compartment I didn't even remember my cabin contained. She looked at it and recognized Jibril's sigil; he had sent me some of his apprentice work earlier, and those I had kept with my other small personal pieces of jewelry. Priss always liked to play with them when she was a child, and she had begged Verna and me for stories about Basim and Jibril.

Somehow she knew the rest of this particular story once she saw the tiara. Perhaps she had done what Mike and Verna hadn't, checked his datacache on the Interweb and learned how and where he died. And now, hateful child, she was ready to force me into something that would break my heart again.

Belle. Beauty.

"I will play the Beast," I said.

"A reversal!" said Fasha. "Captain Mike can play Belle!"

We all looked at each other, and most of us laughed.

Mike and I stared at each other. Belle was the last lead I had played, before Jibril was a bump in my belly, while Basim was still with the company. To play Belle to Basim's Beast had left me bubbling with hidden mirth. I had crafted the mask that made him ugly; wearing it, he could roar and scare all the children in the audience.

Each time Basim transformed into a handsome prince at the end, I felt again my amazement that he had found me beautiful enough to love.

"Play Belle, Rose," said Leandro. "I've seen holos of your old productions. You were wonderful."

"Play Belle, Mother," said Verna. "I've never seen you sky act in a lead role."

"Play Belle," said Tiller. "I didn't even know you acted."

"Play Belle," Mike said. "Call back your lost selves. They've lived in those graves on other planets too long, Rosie."

Then I knew he had known about Jibril all along. In his eyes I saw no condemnation, only concern. I glanced at Priss. She couldn't threaten me with exposure anymore if Mike already knew.

I wanted to be Belle again. I took Jibril's last gift to me out of my yarn bag and stared down into the eyes of its jewels. "Yes."

## The End

This story was first published on Friday, June 21st, 2013