

## That Critical Absence

*Mark Eddy Smith*

Alef scanned the pitiless sky for any hint of cloud, strained her ears for the slightest drip of water, but heard only—she spun, stabbing something hairy and heaving it over her head. With desperate haste, she pounced upon the creature’s groin to catch the last few drops of piss. There wasn’t much, but the moisture would keep her sharp for a few more hours. She stood, assessing its pelt and meat, and wished only that it had put up a better fight.

It was big enough to have crushed her, yet its attack had been clumsy as a cub’s, and what kind of creature has cubs that size? She glanced around almost nervous—the swipe of her knife barely halted the monster’s charge. As the behemoth circled, one eyeball inches from the tip of her blade, Alef noted rows of swollen teats. Risking a glance at the corpse, its youth now unmistakable, she recognized the imminence of her own demise.

Her blade would not avail her, so she dropped it. The creature’s eyes narrowed.

Its hesitation made Alef wonder if it, too, longed for a worthier opponent. She considered the depth of a mother’s grief and rage and let her shoulders sag.

“Very well,” she said. “May our battle bring you peace.”

With a somersault, she retrieved her blade, lunged recklessly, retreated, fainted to one side, dodged the predictable—her braid yanked her backwards, so she sliced it off and tumbled into the brittle bracken.

While the monster spat and clawed at the leather-bound plait in its teeth, Alef sprinted forward. Stepping on its brow, she sprang upon its shoulders, stabbing repeatedly at its impervious pelt. It gyred onto its back, but she log-rolled it and leapt clear, dove as it lunged, and plunged her blade up under its chin.

It was all she could give: a scar to commemorate a mother’s vengeance. A flick of its neck wrenched Alef’s knife from her grasp, and a snap of its jaws removed her torso from between her shoulders and hips. Her spirit lingered just long enough to hear a triumphant bellow dissolve into a heartbreaking howl.

The taste of blood and bile turned bitter in Tav's throat. Her feckless child was avenged, but still as dead, and who would father more? She had slain her mate for threatening the last of their litter, but now her runt was gone where no threats dared. She turned to the assassin and sniffed the space between its shoulders and pelvis—that critical absence—and wondered what had inspired its doomed attack against impossible odds.

Her wounded chin stung like fire, like ice, but the deeper pain was in her gut, where festered the knowledge that she was the cause of her species' extinction. What else could she do but ferret out the aching remorse with her teeth? Once her purpose was fulfilled, she stretched upon the arid ground and offered her intestines to the sky.

The sky, appeased, sent rain.

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