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Abrum's Tale

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Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Abstract

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Keywords

Fiction; Abram's Tale; Susan Warner

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ABRUM'S TALE
By Susan Warner

a clear path. She followed the trail, sensing no progress, yet never growing tired.

Ahead, she heard a noise, distinct from her own rustling footsteps. It could only be the dragging gait of the wounded monster. When she stopped to listen, the sound stopped, too. When she tried to outrun it, the marks vanished and she stumbled. She had to follow the disembodied guide at its own slow pace.

At last she heard a new sound: the bubbling music of water. A short time later, the dusty smell was washed away by the fragrance of water and flowers. For the first time she felt real hope. Ferlinda dropped onto hands and knees to follow the hoof prints at a crawl. Before she realized what was happening, her hands were bathed up to the wrists in icy water. She splashed her face, then cupped hands to drink. The water danced in her veins like wine, but brightened rather than muddied her thoughts.

She looked down at her reflection, astonished at the light in her green eyes.

She could see again!

She heard a coughing growl at her elbow. Lifting her eyes from the spring, she found the reptile stretched beside her. Slime dripped from its mouth and the dagger wound. Though it made no move to attack, she feared what might happen if she dared touch it again. But the Star-singer's command had been clear and the rest of the oracle had proved true. Ferlinda glanced around the clearing. The rim of the fountain had once been paved with a mosaic of colored pebbles. Just beyond the spring stood a few stone blocks that must have formed part of a wall. Above the water hung the branches of a flowered tree bearing one golden fruit. The resemblance to her painting confirmed that this place must be her ancestors' lost home.

She filled her waterbag from the spring and bathed the creature's mouth and belly. It ceased growling and lay still. Then its breathing stopped.

Had she killed it after all?

The body collapsed upon itself. In its place appeared the shining being of the vision: Star-singer!

He sang in a voice at first inseparable from the rippling water and pulsing blue flame on his brow.

"You have done well," he said, "Take the fruit."

Ferlinda reached across to the laden bough and plucked the golden globe. At the touch of it, her numbed body woke to hunger and thirst.

The Star-singer added, "Eat. Your sickness will be forever vanquished. Plant the seeds in your garden. Return with your consort and restore life to this place."

Before she could gather herself to speak, he was gone. She looked around, almost expecting the forest to change from gray to green before her. That did not happen, but she could see clear sky above the enchanted tree.

Ahead opened a broad path toward home and Prince Toriel, who she married in her own good time.

It was dusk again, and the alien sun had been particularly scorching. Abrum had gone for a swim to cool off. Now he was thinking lazily of dinner. He began his slow movements along the lakeshore, alert for the small, fluttering lifeforms that had come to be the staple of his diet.

He had learned that it was only at night that he could move quietly around the shore of the lake, hunting. The primitive life was abundant and was refreshingly tasty after the months of bland food that the life-support fluid chamber had provided. Abrum was even beginning to think that the visit to this planet would not turn out all that badly.

Unfortunately, the visit had begun with a crash landing. It was supposed to have been a typical landing on a typical primitive planet circling an average class 7.3 star. He had placed the ship's entry controls on automatic, for the guidance system was run almost totally without his assistance. The ship began to slip through the atmosphere, then jolted hard. The drive centroid must have come out of alignment during the rise from subspace; nothing else could explain the crash, for it shouldn't have happened. Nevertheless, he had managed to rescue his auto-beacon and himself.

The automatic signal would bring a rescue party soon. But meanwhile at the edge of the lake, he lived in comfort.

Abrum floated lightly for a moment, slowly breathing the warm, humid air. It was dark on this side of the planet, but there was light being cast by the solitary moon just visible as it rose, fully reflective, over the low hills of the planet. The light showed him to be floating in a large lake.

Suppressing a sigh, Abrum turned on his back and began stroking slowly and evenly along the shore. Afterward, he blamed himself for being too relaxed, too ready to accept the alien planet as a non-hostile and comfortable world. He never saw the trap, but moved right into it, thinking of dinner.

*

"Gotcha!" the boy screamed, pulling the twine that triggered his primitive trap. The net rose into the air with a sharp snap as the young sapling, freed from its forced arch, sprung back into shape. The boy ran forward to where the net hung jerking with residual bounce, holding its captive entwined.

"Gawd Almighty!" swore the boy, looking at his catch. "I caught me the grand-daddy of all frogs!" He pulled out his knife and quickly cut the strings holding the net in the air and whipped the remaining ends of string around the corners of the net making an effective sack. Then, cradling the net and its contents carefully, the boy turned and ran up the hill from the lake.

*

Abrum felt extreme fear. The monster that had trapped him was horrendous and was holding him uncomfortably tight against its stomach, a stomach he feared would all too soon contain himself. He struggled in the bindings of the net. There was a loud gurgling sound, and with a sinking feeling, Abrum felt vibrations coming from the creature's stomach. He would have been less than reassured if he could have understood his captor's words.

*

"Gawd, I'm hungry! And them legs on you, ol' froggie, would surely be tasty tonight if Ma would cook 'em up." The boy patted his captive. "But I got plans for you, ol' froggie, and they sure ain't the fryin' pan. No, sir!" And he grinned, exposing a wide gap where one front tooth used to be. A slight stub of the tooth's replacement could just be seen.

The boy reached his house, and circled around to the back. He gently set the net sack into the large wooden box that he had converted into a cage. He released the string ties, and pulled the netting away from his captive, then set a lid securely on the box, weighting it down with a large piece of firewood. "Don't want you to get out, ol' froggie. No, sir. You and me goin' to be real champs. You jest wait!" He gave the makeshift lid a light pat, then turned and ran inside.

*

Abrum had tumbled out of the net, rolling end-over-end, until he came up against a hard, cool surface. He opened his eyes just in time to see his jailer place a heavy roof on his prison. And if that wasn't enough, Abrum thought sourly, the monster placed a portion of a tree on top of the roof.

He stood up, checking his arms and legs for damage, and was relieved to see he was still in one piece. The cool surface that he had collided with proved to be a small artificial pool of water. He dunked a hand in and, cupping the water, brought it to his face. He sniffed it cautiously. It was fresh. Greedily, Abrum splashed it over his body, easing the dryness that threatened to crack his skin. Then he drank long and deep and tried not to think.

Abrum's days settled into a pattern. He lived in constant terror and was tortured regularly by his captor. The torture took on a queer form. Abrum both welcomed it, for he had a chance to escape, and dreaded it for the humiliation and pain he had to endure.

Abrum could not understand why his captor would torture him on the one hand, yet on the other, take care to make his cell comfortable. The pool was cleaned daily, and its contents replaced with fresh, cool water and ample, if monotonous food, was provided for him. Every morning, his captor would remove him from his cell, wrapping gigantic fingers around his rib-cage and holding him so tightly that breathing was difficult. Then the giant would place him in the open and urge him to escape. Each time Abrum tried a different tactic, and each time he was caught violently and painfully, and set to try again. Abrum knew it was some cruel,

sadistic game that amused the monstrous giant that held him, for the creature would make loud noises each time he raced to escape. Then the giant would make equally loud noises as it pounced horribly on top of him. This would go on for some time, then at last it would be over for another day. Abrum would be dropped roughly back into his cell. He began to sink into self-pitying despair. He'd never be able to escape, and sooner or later the monster was going to kill him, he knew. Already the giant had nearly crushed his arm once.

Then one day, Abrum was removed from his cell to the accompaniment of a great many voices, and with a deep dread, he knew that he was going to be sacrificed. He remembered grimly that he had always envied other space travelers who had spun tall tales (which here-to-fore he had not really believed) about alien worlds, and the sometimes awful rites of the primitives on those worlds. Now he knew that some of the tales were true.

Abrum's terror rose as he was placed in a small, stifling trap, all white inside, and filled with moist, aromatic leaves. The significance of the whiteness and the pungent incense of the leaves did not escape him. All the strange tales he had heard about sacrifices on alien worlds had been full of details on how the sacrifices were attended with eerie rites. He curled up in one corner of the small, white room, and began to pray.

*

The boy carried his shoe box carefully on his lap as they drove into town. Inside, his frog had been carefully set on a bed of damp eucalyptus leaves. The boy had heard that eucalyptus leaves made frogs itchy and inclined to jump better, so he thought he'd try it.

"Now, I got twenny dollars ridin' on that critter, boy. He better do fine today, or he'll be fried by night, I swear!"

"You jest wait! He'll win! He's the biggest frog I ever seen, and you know he can jump. You seen him jump before. Don't talk about cookin' him. It might put him off . . ." the boy said sharply, stroking the lid of his shoe box.

"Frogs ain't smart enough to know what's said around 'em boy. You jest make sure I don't lose my twenny dollars."

"You won't, Pa," the boy said confidently.

*

Abrum had made his way through three of the prayers of the dying when he knew he was being carried again, for the giant had a jolting walk, and each step jostled him on his strange bed of incense. He could hear a loud roar around him, through the walls of his small white cell, and he knew it was a crowd of giants, all talking. Excited, he thought bitterly, about my death. He began the fourth prayer of the dying.

He had reached the seventh prayer, when suddenly the roof was removed from his cell, and before he could think to leap away, the giant had grasped him around his rib cage, and was holding

him tightly. There was a sudden hush, and all the giants around him grew silent. This was it, he knew. He could already feel his heart being wrenched from his chest, for that was how he had read sacrifices were accomplished on alien worlds. He closed his eyes, and began the seventh prayer, although breathing was becoming increasingly difficult due to the giant's harsh grip.

*

"Sit him down, now. Sit him down, and get him ready! Don't keep aholding him like that, you'll break his bones, boy, and then he won't hop an inch! That's it ..."

*

Abrum felt cool grass under him, and the giant's hands relaxed around him. He drew in a deep lungful of air, and opened his eyes. He was on the ground, and behind him and ranged in rows on either side of him, for as far as he could see, were giants. And they were all staring at him. Abrum tightened his jaw. Let them stare! He suddenly became aware that he wasn't alone. Next to him, in fact, on both sides of him, were others being held captive by giants. These others looked somewhat similar to himself, he noted curiously, but he could see by their black, unreadable eyes that they had too long been held captive by the giants. No sign of communication reached out to him from their vacant eyes. He felt suddenly sad, to die with all of these fellow creatures, who were too far broken by their captors to receive the eighth and final prayer of absolution. None-the-less, he began it, for himself, and all those with him.

There was an incredible explosion of noise as all of the giants suddenly began to scream, Abrum felt, with their bloodlust. Despite himself, Abrum's fear drove him, and he leapt in terror as far from his captors as he could. He wouldn't give up easily to these devils! He struggled again, trying to leap to freedom, but huge hands wrapped around him, and he felt himself start to be crushed alive.

*

"Did you see that? Did you! I don't believe I saw it myself! That's wild! He broke the record! Your Gawd-damned frog broke the Gawd-damned record, boy! Look at that! That's two feet, or more past the record! By Gawd, it's nearly three feet past the record! Where's my money? You seen that piker McDonald? He's got my winnin's, damn him ... you get that there frog, boy ... and take him up to the stand ... Go on, now. I got to get my winnin's ... You get up there!"

*

Abrum felt himself passed from hand-to-hand, until his bruised ribs ached fiercely. He almost welcomed the familiar feel of his original captor's fingers when they closed at last around him. He was carried into the bright light, and placed on a smooth, hot alter. While he waited for the final blow to fall, Abrum became aware that someone had hung a necklace of fragrant flowers around his neck. Classy, he thought drily, and waited for his blood to be spilled at last, his terror gone,

replaced by calm acceptance.

After awhile, Abrum began to think he was hallucinating. He wasn't killed, and although he was handled brutally until every square centimeter of his body was sore, not one giant tried to wrench out his heart. It seemed forever, but eventually Abrum was dropped into his white cell once again, and transported back to his familiar prison, where he immediately immersed himself in the small pool of water, and fought to regain his sanity.

What next transpired made Abrum later think that the whole episode had been one strange hallucinogenic experience. He was still sitting in his small pool, dazed and aching, when his captor reached into his cell, pulled him from the water, and lifted him out into the bright moonlight.

*

"Pa wants to have you stuffed, froggie, but that don't seem right to me. You jumped the best of any frog I ever seen, and I don't think you oughta die for that. No sir. You're the best frog in all of Calaveras County, and I think you oughta live and maybe let me catch one of your kids some day. So I'm gonna let you go back at the lake, froggie, even if I get whupped for it. C'mon."

*

Abrum could hardly believe his luck when the giant carried him back to the alien lake and set him down by its shore. He didn't stop to consider the giant's reasons and could hardly know he was starting a legend. All Abrum could think of was to leap with all his might into the cool, concealing waters, and swim away. He jumped, plunging into the lake water and disappeared.

Abrum began to hope strongly that the automatic transmitter would bring a rescue party soon. For now, all Abrum wanted to do was swim in freedom, catch flutterers for his dinner, and try to forget about the horrible experience he'd had. Each day, swimming in the warm water of the lake, the nightmare of his captivity receded, and as his sore body healed, Abrum began to think it had all been a dream. But just in case, he moved his camp, finding a small isolated island in the middle of the lake. From the vantage of the tiny island, he could easily keep watch on the skies. He would be ready when his rescuers arrived.

But more importantly, there was not a single willow sapling on the entire island that could be used to spring a trap. Abrum knew he had the tallest of tales to tell his friends when he was rescued, and he intended to live to tell it.

