

The View from Endless Scarp

by Marta Randall

The last ship nosed up through the thin clouds. It was still in sight when Markowitz sprinted from the boulders and leaped about the landing field, throwing her arms in the air, screaming, weeping, begging the ship to return. By the time it disappeared she lay exhausted on the hot black setdown, fingers scrabbling, muttering to herself. The departure hadn't gone as she'd planned but the results were the same, and Markowitz, wretched in the dirt, remained perhaps the only human being on planet.

A Peri scuttled down the hill. It stopped at the edge of the field, hesitated, and flung a rock at her. She cursed but didn't move. The Peri lifted its narrow snout and produced the irritating whine that was the Peri giggle; the others tumbled past her down the hill and poured through the abandoned settlement, grabbing and screaming and fighting over what remained of the colony. Within an hour the town had disappeared, save for the shattered foundations of the houses. These, too, would find their way to the Peri villages. Markowitz didn't care. After a while the Peri left, dragging the last of their loot behind them.

The sun moved overhead. She turned her face from it and remembered Thompson. That absurd hysteria on the landing field: she was no better than the rest of them. She turned her head again, both ashamed and relieved, and stood amid a burned landscape in which nothing moved except her shadow across the cracked earth. She foraged a meal of unripe berries and bitter roots; the Peri hadn't dismantled the well pump, so she sat beside it, sipping gritty water and gnawing at the roots. She filled her wooden canteen. In mid-afternoon she left the ruins and walked to the brink of Endless Scarp, where she sat under a dead tree, her feet dangling over the immense drop, and waited for night to fall.

The view from Endless Scarp had once, briefly, been a view of paradise. The Terrans had engineered rain in a place of drought, had made rivers and lakes, had caused the earth to flower and bear fruit. Within a Peri

generation they changed the face of the world, and the Peri had changed with it. No need to move with the migrating game, now that game stayed year-long on the plateau, held by the abundance of food. No need to store grains or beans, which flourished in the broad valley. No need to sow even the minimal crops the Peri had planted during their migrations, seeding the slapdash fields one season and returning to harvest crops the next.

Fat clouds slipped eastward from the sea, up the high slopes of the continent, to drop rain on the angles of the Scarp and into the wide plain. Rivers widened and deepened, the desert turned green. The small, slender Peri added weight under their silvery coats. Terrans went to the new Peri villages and cured the sick, set up schools, listened to Peri music and made music of their own. The Peri laughed and capered and accepted Terran teachings, and the Terrans smiled, knowing that in two generations, or perhaps four, the Peri would become small, alien versions of their benefactors. The Terrans had been given a desert world to colonize and succeeded in making a piece of it green. They were fruitful and multiplied. They benefited the natives. They prospered. They were very proud of themselves.

The sky deepened from blue to rose, and the shadow of the Scarp cast long, red fingers across the scorched plain. Not even meka trees grew there now; they had died of prosperity and had not returned with the return of drought. Markowitz stared into the increasing darkness, hoping as always for a distant glimmer of light. Day fell into night and no fires glowed; if Thompson built a signal fire, he built it beyond the curve of the horizon. She felt a sudden, powerful longing, not for the safety of the departed ships, but for the circle of Thompson's arms. She shook her head and looked across the desert. The rose tints of the plain darkened to purple. The air chilled.

She put on her jacket and her reed hat and walked from cave to cave, prying up boulders and extracting the things she had hidden. Some of the Peri followed at a distance, curious, but didn't approach her. She ignored them. They would not steal her belongings as long as she carried them.

She built a fire in front of the last cave, for warmth and as a signal across the dark, for Thompson. In its flickering light she loaded her supplies into the carrying pack, strapped the knives to her belt, and ate a handful of berries. She wet her lips from the canteen, and, after stringing vines and gourds across the cave's entrance as an alarm, she lay with her head on the pack and stared at the patch of night behind the rocks. Eventually she slept.

Twenty years of prosperity; then the engines of change broke down. An arctic storm jammed the unjammable metering station at the pole: Hohbach, their chief of science, thought that a defective casing on the self-repair devices cracked and the equipment froze. The wrong circuit activated the wrong relay in the delicate sensing and transmitting mechanism in the monitors' cores. The wrong signal beamed up to the great engines that had nudged the moon into a new course, and the engines exploded. The moon, its path so cautiously modified to modify the tides of air and water, twisted in the sky and stabilized into a new orbit; the earth heaved and groaned; the winds shrieked. Hundreds of Terrans and thousands of Peri died. The ocean currents changed, and the rains fell far out to sea. Within a season the broad, ripe plain withered; the rivers and lakes shrank to mud and baked away in the fierce sunlight.

The northern and western oceans were unnavigable, and the southern desert extended as far as scouts could walk and canteens last. The Peri spoke of a verdant land they said lay to the east, but few of them left. In the second year, the springs failed. For a short time the colony depended on the distilling stations along the boulder-strewn ocean shore, as they had done during the initial terraforming years. They carted water across the coastal hills to the village on the Scarp and the fertile land around it, but the stations broke down, or were vandalized by the Peri, or taken in storms, and the supply of brackish water stopped. Their generators cracked and stopped. They expended the last of their dwindling power to drill the well deeper, rationed water at a cup a day, and in the fifth year they sent out calls for help.

Help came four years after that. The colony had dwindled from five thousand to less than four hundred. They died of lack of water, lack of food, lack of hope. The Peri, too, died, in numbers so great the parched Terrans could not reckon them. The Peri sowed neither the new seeds of rains nor the old seeds of drought; they lived in their villages until the houses rotted around them, then moved on to others less decayed. Rituals fell away from them: of marriage, of death, of the seasons, of life. Instead, they laughed, sitting starving in the harsh daylight; laughed and shuffled in terrible parody of their dances and watched each other and the Terrans die with high good humor, cackling and rocking and plucking vermin

from their dull, unhealthy coats. Their children disappeared. The colonists noticed, and looked at one another uneasily, and turned away.

"We did better than the Peri" Markowitz said in her dream. The words woke her. The Peri had lost everything: their food, their water, their culture, even their desire to help each other, their sense of themselves as fellows of the same creation. They stole food and water from the dying; they played practical jokes of fatal consequence. They gathered at the outskirts of the Terran settlement and giggled as their erstwhile benefactors struggled to survive, apportioning food and water, aiding the ill, whispering words of encouragement in the dense sunlight or the cold night. Markowitz's mother moved from house to house, bringing rations of food and water, talking of the rescue ships that would arrive at any hour now, any day. She pleaded, humored, and bullied people to live, and when she died, most of them died with her. She died because, alone one blazing afternoon, she fell and broke her leg and could not crawl to safety. The Peri thought her death quite funny. By the time Markowitz found her, it was too late.

Markowitz hissed in the blackness of the cave and flung a rock. It clattered and banged against the gourds. Outside, Peri voices laughed and shouted. Markowitz cursed and turned toward sleep again.

She woke to the pale dawn. The Peri were still laughing. She shouldered her pack and climbed down the face of Endless Scarp. About a dozen Peri walked with her. Most of them dropped away during the morning, but one, hardier than the others, continued tailing her. When she reached the plain and stopped to rest out the hottest part of the day, he dropped to a squat beside her in the shelter of an outcrop.

"Give me food," he said without much hope. When she refused, he remained beside her, staring across the baking plain. After a time he stood and ambled away, returning as she began to walk again.

"Where are you going?" he said as he fell into step beside her.

"East."

"There is nothing to the east," he said. She lengthened her step. He scurried to keep up; although he was soon panting, he did not fall behind. She slowed through fatigue, not sympathy. Their shadows stretched across the hardpan before them, gaunt and sharp-edged in the late sunlight. Beyond the bobbing rim of her broad hat, the plain's horizon disappeared into suspended dust. A few dying trees and stumps broke the flatness. The silence was absolute.

After a long time, "My name is Kre'e," the Peri said.

"Kre'e," she replied with automatic politeness. He grinned. "Kre'e, go home. I don't want your company."

"I'm only walking in the same direction, " he said, insulted.

"Walk on a different path."

"There's only one path going east."

She looked over the unbroken plain, on which any route would serve. He followed her glance and giggled again, and dropped a pace behind but did not leave. They walked in silence into the night.

She made camp that evening on the bank of a dead river, and while she dug through the mud in search of water, Kre'e found some shriveled roots. He ate them all and came to her where she built her signal fire. The air chilled rapidly.

"Give me water."

"Get your own," she said.

"You have extra water in your pouch; you have enough for both of us."

"I have just enough for me. I'll need it tomorrow. Get your own water."

"Why are you saving it? Let's drink it now; there will be more water tomorrow."

"Where?"

"Oh, there is always water."

"But you don't know," she said. "You would rather be lazy today and thirst tomorrow."

"Today's work is tomorrow's bounty," he said, parroting the lessons taught at Peri schools in paradise. She stared at him. "We must share in all things," he said.

"Find your own."

He shrugged, snickered, and ambled down the bed of the river. She watched him in the light of the fire. He was just entering his prime, perhaps seven or eight years old. Old enough to have attended and remembered the colony's native schools, to have lived through the months of terror and change. To know what it was like to be civilized. She looked away from him, wrapped her arms around her knees, and stared into the fire.

Kre'e returned and hunched so close to the fire that she demanded he move back. He sat just beyond the scorching point and tucked his small,

dark hands between his thighs.

"You didn't go with the others, " he said. "Why not? They were going to a land of fat rains." When she was silent, he said, "Perhaps you were not allowed to go. Perhaps you did a thing for which they banished you."

She wondered what the lying, thieving, merciless Peri would consider a banishable crime. The fire burned lower.

"There's a man with a ship," she said after a time, almost talking to herself. "Somewhere to the east, there's a man with a ship who's still waiting for us. He shouldn't be left there; he shouldn't have to wait alone."

"To the east there is nothing, and then there is the valley," Kre'e said. "Perhaps. But the valley is nothing, is foolish, as foolish as giving up rain for a man in a broken ship."

"You know about him!"

"Of course. You just told me."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why didn't you die with the other children? Why are you still alive?"

In answer, he grinned and slapped at his genitals. "Because I am strong," he said. In response to his slap, his penis appeared briefly through his matted fur. "Because I was already adult."

She looked away, disgusted. His hand moved toward her pack, but she saw and swung the pack away from him. He giggled and lay on his side while she gathered her things out of his reach. Passports to Thompson, she thought as she touched her knives, her canteen.

"Ah," said Kre'e, with an air of sudden understanding. "You did not leave with the others because you have no family to claim passage right for you."

It was a Peri custom, and it enraged her. "How did you know that? Where did you hear that?"

"Your parent died near the village—"

"Did you see it? Were you there? Did you watch my mother die?"

"Why are you shouting? She was old and sick and not useful anymore."

"Get out," she screamed. She leaped over the fire, grabbed his small body, and threw him into the darkness. "Get out! Don't come back! Go away!" She crawled around the fire, gathering all her belongings into a heap, and lay atop them. After a time she cried herself to sleep.

The colony had a shuttle, a sturdy, spaceworthy little ship used for transport around their world. Hohbach, their chief of science, took it out just after the calamity, with replacement parts for the arctic metering station, and never returned. In the eighth year after the catastrophe, Thompson told her that he had calculated the ship's flight and thought he knew where to find it, that it wasn't far. It wasn't large enough to carry the original colony, but sufficient, he thought, to take the survivors from their dying home. They whispered about it, lying in each other's arms in their crumbling house; he convinced her with sketches, with charts scratched in the dirt, with hope.

And so, one bright morning, fifteen people set out from the settlement, following Thompson and his optimistic calculations. She watched them from Endless Scarp as they trudged east across the plain and faded into the dust. She stayed behind to monitor the weak broadcasts of their remaining radio, to lead the survivors to the ship when the signal came. For two months she listened each night at the prearranged time, hearing the empty scratching of the radio; in the tenth week she heard Thompson's voice, broadcasting from the shuttle itself. They had found it. It could be repaired. In another four months, or perhaps five, the ship would be ready. The colony gathered nightly to hear Thompson's reports and whisper of faith and salvation. Then Thompson's voice changed; they were dying, far to the east. Thirst and hard work, heat and hunger, recalcitrant materials and dangerous makeshift tools. The colonists encouraged them through the weakening radio link, then the link broke, and a month later the rescue ship arrived. We are saved, said the people. We are saved, we are saved. And the rescuers said, he is surely dead. We come from a cargo vessel, we have a schedule to keep, we can't spend time or fuel looking for a corpse, our instruments show nothing except this colony, nothing except you. He is dead, Markowitz. He is surely, surely dead.

The fire became embers and the embers became ash. She stood amid her gear and looked to the east. The darkness was unbroken save, above, for the mindless dance of stars.

The next day Kre'e kept his distance, marching parallel to her and about fifty meters behind. Once, when she found a surviving patch of tae-fruit in a hollow and stopped to gather them, he came closer, but she thought of her mother and drove him off with rocks and curses.

In the evening she entered what had been a fledgling forest. She broke apart dead saplings to build that night's fire. A small breeze rose from the east, bringing with it a smell of dryness and thick, choking dust. She muffled her nose and mouth in her thin jacket, pulled the reed hat down over her eyes, and sat in a double solitude of cloth and dust. The ache in her feet became a distant throb; her eyes hurt. She listened in her sleep for the noise of Kre'e's stealthy, thieving approach. He should have died with the other Peri children. Perhaps he helped kill them. The colonists whispered of that, in the darkness of their homes, horrified that they had unwittingly tried to civilize child-killers.

She woke to smoke and heat, and ripped her jacket from her face. The fire had leaped its dirt walls; the dead copse was in flames. She grabbed her pack. The wooden canteen was already burning. She snatched it up and slapped it against her pants as she ran. Her hands burned. She dashed onto the plain and the canteen burst, the flames sizzled and died, and her water rushed into the dry earth. Kre'e capered a few meters away, ecstatic with the force of his high, derisive Peri laughter. He glanced at her burned hands and broken canteen and laughed harder. Fire reflected bright red on his silver coat.

"Give me water!" he shouted and rolled on the ground in merriment. She rushed to him and kicked him. He gasped and choked with laughter, rolling with her kicks until she stumbled and fell exhausted to the ground. He jumped up and grabbed her abandoned pack and took it with him into the darkness.

"Give me food!" he cried, laughing until he was out of earshot.

She stood up at dawn. Her hands were raw and aching, her muscles and bones hurt. A few small banners of smoke rose from dull embers. She had her clothing, her hat, the beltful of knives, and her boots. She turned in place; the view was the same in all directions save for the fuzz of Endless Scarp on the far western horizon. She turned her back on it and trudged east.

Those first years they were full of strength and hope. They were, after all, the cream of galactic civilization, of the same stock that had conquered the stars, a colony of people smart enough to forge their own destiny and wily enough to be able to afford it. Of course they would survive and make their colonial home a paradise again. All they had to do was persevere.

Jema, her youngest, came running to tell her that the Peri were leaving. Soon a number of Terrans entered the Peri village, prepared with encouraging speeches about the need to follow the herds, at least until the Terrans had their weather-machines going again. Household goods lay piled in the narrow alleys between the huts; roof beams had been lashed together to form travois. Kore'ah, the elder, sat atop his house as he directed the preparations.

"There is a valley far away," Kore'ah declaimed when asked. "The rains fall in season and there is much game. There, on the far side of the plain." He waved eastward. The Peri trailed out across the desert, about fifty of them, all ages, the children scampering about the feet of the adults, the adults shouting conflicting orders at each other. The Peri from neighboring villages came to watch. One of them, squatting beside Markowitz, made a gesture of derision.

"Kore'ah is an idiot," the Peri said. "There is no valley. My mother's father's brother told me so, and he was there once."

"But if he was there, then there must be a valley."

"Is there? Yes, of course there is. Of course there is a valley," the Peri said. "I meant that they will have difficulty reaching it."

"But if the valley exists, why don't you all go?"

"We're not fools, like Kore'ah."

"You think that he will not reach the valley?"

"What valley?"

Jema, tired with excitement, fell asleep, and Thompson carried her home in his arms. Kore'ah did not return, but over the next half-year seven or eight of his tribe straggled back to the Scarp. All were vague

about the journey and the fate of their companions. The Terrans shrugged, said "Peri" wisely, and thought of more important things.

Her father died, her daughters died. Another Peri village decamped and was followed for weeks, until it became apparent that they were going in circles, with great seriousness, even trying not to laugh when one of them collapsed on the trail. The Peri were playing an elaborate practical joke, and once again the story of the valley fell into dispute.

Years later, a little after Thompson's departure, Markowitz idly asked a visiting Peri, "Have you come from the valley?" The Peri danced on the dead field. "We have our valley, you have your ship," she said and ran away. Markowitz shrugged and bent to the earth again, to pour ten precious drops of water on a skinny plant.

All that day Kre'e moved just in sight ahead of her, dwarfed by the large pack. She found a hollow where faran roots grew, but Kre'e had been there first, eaten his fill, and ground the remaining roots into the dirt. She chewed on dried canes to moisten her mouth a little. She followed him across a desiccated lake bed; although he trampled the remaining waterhole, she managed a sip or two before the mud choked her. He waited on the far shore until she stood again.

He built a small fire and ignored her while she crouched shivering just beyond the zone of light. No laughter that night; his face was impassive as he ate a handful of insects he had collected during the day's march. She watched, repulsed and hungry, as he finished the last one, kicked the fire under, and curled down to sleep. When she tried to creep closer to the fire circle, he drove her off with rocks. She wondered where he had found the bugs.

"They should have killed you with the other children," she muttered.

"Nobody killed children," Kre'e said in the darkness. "There is no need to kill. The world does it for you." He giggled. "We are lazy creatures," he said. "Peri are lazy, lazy creatures."

"You let your children die," she said.

Kre'e didn't answer for a while. When he did, his voice was sleepy.

"Adults die and children must die. Children die, adults can make more. It is foolish to think otherwise." Then he was silent for the rest of the night.

The next morning Endless Scarp fell below the horizon. The world seemed flat, but by midday they entered a land of ravines, steep and cloaked in brambles or treacherous under layers of sliding stones. None of them ran to the east. Imitating Kre'e, she slid sitting down each slope and used the brambles to pull herself up the other side. In a tiny pocket of shade, she found a plant he had missed, and she ate it and dug up its roots and sucked at them, and at the dirt they grew in, until she had extracted every bit of moisture. The mud she had packed on her burned fingers yesterday dried and flaked away. Her hands stung. She grew dizzy with heat and thirst; it took longer to slide down and push up again, but Kre'e was always one ravine ahead. She often found him sitting on her pack, waiting for her before he entered the next small gorge. When she stumbled and fell she heard his giggle; it always made her rise and move again.

She wanted to kill him. She thought about it while clawing dirt and pebbles from her mouth, ignoring the pain of her hands. She would keep going until nightfall. She would avoid his camp until he was asleep. She would find a sharp stone and bash his head to splinters. Then she would stay near his corpse until a carrion bird landed, and she would kill the bird and eat it. She liked this part of the plan best, and during the day she contemplated the best way to kill the bird, whether she would kill it before or after it started eating Kre'e's corpse, whether, if it had eaten him, she would or would not eat the bird's stomach. Whether she could make a water sack from its skin. Or from Kre'e's. Whether the skin would need tanning first, or whether it would hold water now. And she realized that she'd been lying still for a very long time, that she could not get up. She sprawled at the top of a ravine, in full sunlight. The slim shade of a boulder lay not a meter from her limp fingers, but she could not summon the energy to crawl that far.

In the distance, Kre'e began to sing a simple melodic line, repeated over and over, gathering undertones. She moved her head to look at him. His distorted image wavered in the lines of heat rising from the far ravine, spectral, like the mythical peri for which his people had been named. She hadn't heard a Peri sing in years, but she recognized the mourning song in Kre'e's half-heard tones and understood that he was singing the death song for her. She levered herself onto elbows and knees, then all the way up. Kre'e's song dissolved into a riff of sweet, weak laughter as she stumbled toward him.

An hour later she found him at the bottom of a slope, eating a small

perimouse whose blood still flowed. He warned her off with a few well-aimed stones, and when he had eaten three-quarters of the mouse, he stood and left the remains lying on the rocks. He scrambled up the far bank of the ravine and dropped out of sight. For a Peri, it was a gesture of unprecedented charity. She gnawed until nothing remained but a small pile of hollowed bones, and, still greedy, fell asleep over them.

The shuttle from the rescue ship descended in a cloud of flames and dust. No one cheered as the crew stepped out; the survivors stared, apathetic, at the rounded bodies and firm flesh, the clean skins and bright eyes. The rescuers, too, stared. The ship's doctor began to cry.

They cared for the survivors, fed them, strengthened them. They were twice as alien as the Peri as they moved around the Scarp with long, elastic steps and loud voices. They opened pouches of food and threw away the wrappings without licking every bit clean, and shouted at the survivors for scavenging their garbage. They set up large showers and bathed the colonists, letting water run into the ground while the Peri hooted with laughter. The Peri were vastly entertained by the rescue, the fattening of the emaciated and the recuperation of the ill. Above all, they found the burial of the dead hilarious and would gather in groups of three or five above the graveyard to watch the crews dig holes, make speeches, and shovel dirt over the bodies. The Peri howled and the crews rushed through their tasks, anxious to fulfill their chartered obligation to rescue distressed colonists, unload the survivors on Solon or Gates or some other medical planet, and get on to more profitable undertakings. Markowitz went from one to the other, begging for the life of her lover.

"I've lost my father, my mother, my children, my brothers. Must I lose Thompson, too? Because you cannot spare the time?"

The crew turned away from her, muttering, "He's dead, woman. We have no time for this. Let it go. Give him up. He's dead."

So she hid during the bustle of departure, and woke, bent over the remains of an alien mouse, to a world of more ghosts than she could comprehend. Kre'e lay at the top of the ravine, and she went up toward him. He rose well before she reached him and another day began.

That day she found a waterhole before he did. She drank her fill, plastered her burns with mud, and trampled the hole to churned dirt. Kre'e didn't stop her. They stumbled together but separate through the violent terrain. Far ahead, hazy on the eastern horizon, a chain of mountains lurked above the desert.

"Where are you going?" he called from the top of a ravine.

"East."

"There is nothing to the east."

"Where are you going?" she called back.

"East."

"What is there to the east?"

"Nothing."

Nightfall, and the land of ravines fell away behind them. Morning, and the desert stretched over the curve of the world until it melted into the far mountains.

"Why do you walk?"

"Why do you walk?"

The day after, he stumbled and fell partway down a ravine, rolling end over end, bumping over the pack, which bumped over him. She laughed so hard she had to sit down. He lay still, his leg twisted under him.

"You are a Peri," Kre'e said. She stopped laughing.

"No."

"You are a Peri."

His words lifted her to a plateau of clarity, from which she saw her progress since Endless Scarp, journey, fire, waterholes, food, hatred, laughter, each event outlined with shocking distinctiveness. Shaken, she looked down at him. He lay in a slight hollow, in the sunlight, and his leg was broken. His leg was broken.

She took the pack from him, took cleansers and salves from it, and

rubbed them over her burned hands. When she straightened and splinted his leg, he grunted a little. She shouldered the pack and strapped it on before lifting Kre'e in her arms. He weighed very little, but she staggered and searched for balance.

"You are being stupid," he said.

"Shut up."

"Two will die where one could live."

"Shut up."

"I wouldn't do this for you."

"I am not a Peri."

By evening, both were crawling. Twenty kilometers of desert -- it took them twelve days. They crawled without looking ahead save to gauge their direction, without stopping save for the occasional muddy waterhole. He dragged his splinted leg; when the blisters on her hands opened she thought to suck the fluid, but didn't. Once she caught a lizard; more often they ate bugs. She didn't know when they reached the foothills, or when the ground beneath her began to slope. But she put her hand on something strange and coarse, and saw that it was grass, and fell into it forever .

She woke because Kre'e was hitting her. He was hitting her to wake her. He was waking her to give her water. She looked from the dirty water to Kre'e's dirty face.

"You are a Terran," she said finally, and took the water. Kre'e snatched it back, took a mouthful, and spat it into the dust, the most contemptuous gesture a Peri could make. Then he gave her back the cup.

Two days past that waterhole, they found a circle of stones filled with ashes, and in the fold of land beyond that the remains of the ship. Bones littered the small valley. She could not tell whose were Thompson's; perhaps the fingers scattered near the dead radio. She brushed the bones aside and turned the radio knobs. Click. Click. Click. Kre'e watched her, then went about the camp, pushing the bones into a mound by the ship. When he had done that, he sat beside them and fed the bones into the ship's port. She watched without moving. He closed the door of the ship and pushed himself upright along its side, and lifted his arms.

"Ashes to ashes, " he said after some hesitation. "Um, mud to mud, with a little water. Sun to moon to, um, something."

She looked at him in bewilderment. He looked back at her gravely, leaning against the ship, most of his body hair fallen out or rubbed away, his splint ruddy with desert sand, the tatters of her jacket tied over his head like a scarf. He raised his snout. "And so on," he said.

She giggled, then laughed, then rolled about the camp howling amid the broken tools and shreds of supplies and the finger bones that Kre'e had missed. When the laughter petered out, she stood, hit him as hard as she could, and trudged away from the camp. After a while, he followed.

A day higher into the mountains they found a small valley, no more than a forgotten tuck of land amid the dryness. Some fruit-bearing bushes, some plants with edible roots. A small spring which produced a scant liter of water twice a day. They remained for two months. Her hands healed. His leg knit, but with a permanent twist to it.

Came the day when she caught a snake and brought some of it back to Kre'e. Came the day when she slipped and twisted her foot, and he didn't laugh but helped her back to camp. Came the day when, instead of devouring berries or perimice as soon as they found or caught them, they saved enough water, started a fire, and made stew.

Came the day when she said, "Where are you going?"

"To the valley," Kre'e said.

"What valley?"

"Over the mountains. The way is hard."

"Water? Fruits? Game?"

He shrugged, and nodded, and shrugged again. She thought about the graves on Endless Scarp and grew angry, but Kre'e said, "There are many ways to starve. You can starve sitting or walking. Silent or laughing."

She started to object, then remembered her own laughter.

Four days later, halfway up the mountains, they sat on a ledge and watched the last rays of sun sweep the plain. She looked at the desert, remembering ravines and ridges, hollows, mud holes, the dry clatter of insects and the way they tasted, small plants clinging to the shade of rocks, the immensity of detail that seemed, from this height, to sum to nothing, and yet was so much more. She leaned back against the sun-warmed rock. The view from here was much better than the view from Endless Scarp.

Author Biography and Bibliography

Marta Randall was born in 1948 in Mexico City, Mexico, and grew up in Berkeley, California. She has published seven novels and numerous short stories, and was the editor of two volumes of the *New Dimensions* science fiction anthology series and an edition of *Nebula Awards Stories*. Her first novel, *Islands*, was nominated for a Nebula Award, as was her novella "Dangerous Games." She has taught science fiction writing at Clarion East and Clarion West, the University of California (Berkeley) Extension, Portland State University, and in private workshops. From 1981 through 1984, she served first as Vice-President and then as President of the Science Fiction Writers of America.

She lives in Northern California and currently teaches online writing workshops in science fiction for Gotham Writers Workshop and Barnes & Nobel University.

Novels

Growing Light (as Martha Conley), 1993

Those Who Favor Fire, 1984

The Sword of Winter, 1983

Dangerous Games, 1980

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A City in the North, 1976

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